

# Peer Challenge Feedback Report

## 1. Introduction

Gravesham Borough Council received an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge in October 2019. The purpose of the Follow-Up Review in March 2021 was to help the Council take stock of progress made against the areas of improvement identified in October 2019. This report provides a written summary of the key observations made by the peer team during the Follow-Up Review and recommends further actions.

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and lockdown began in March 2020, the Local Government Association (LGA) suspended the physical delivery of all peer challenge and independent review work. To continue to support councils during this unprecedented period, the LGA rapidly refocused support and adopted a new remote approach. Therefore, this Corporate Peer Challenge Follow-up Review for Gravesham Borough Council was conducted remotely.

The council's response to COVID-19 and the pandemic will have impacted on its ability to deliver some of the recommendations in the original corporate peer challenge, this report should be read with this context in mind.

## 2. Follow-up Review approach

Peer challenges are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet individual council's needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus.

The peers used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read. The team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants, or inspectors.

Peers reviewed a range of information to ensure we were familiar with the council, the challenges it is facing and its plans for the future.

The review team spent one day conducting interviews and focus groups during which they:

- Spoke to more than 40 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders;
- Gathered information and views from 14 meetings and
- Read over 30 documents, reports and plans and reviewed relevant statistics.

### Follow-up Review team

- Chief Executive Peer: Neil Taylor, Chief Executive, Bassetlaw District Council
- Member Peer: Michael Payne, Deputy Leader of Gedling District Council
- Senior Officer Peer: Patsy Dell, Director Hertfordshire Growth
- LGA Review Manager: Angela Kawa, LGA Programme Manager
- LGA Support Officer: Rachel Stevens

Three members of the Follow-up Review team were also part of the Corporate Peer Challenge team in October 2019: Neil Taylor, Cllr Michael Payne, and Angela Kawa.

### 3. Scope and focus

Gravesham Borough Council asked the review team to focus on progress against the key recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge 2019, which were:

1. Embed regular Cabinet and Management Team joint working by creating time and space for discussion on strategy, expectations, and key issues. For example, more joint meetings and away days.
2. Introduce a clear improvement plan for Planning, which is jointly developed and owned by Cabinet and Management Team, to establish clear targets and deadlines for improvement. This should include member training about their role in Planning, inviting in the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and improving processes and procedures.
3. Develop greater partnership working. Gravesham has been very self-sufficient, but to tackle some of the bigger issues it needs to develop greater partnership working to deliver on key priorities such as housing.
4. Seize on the cross-party consensus on the need for the Council to be proactive in relation to housing delivery in Gravesham, including putting its argument strongly to government.
5. Be a spokesperson for the area. The Council should put itself at the forefront of telling the story of Gravesham's proud history, vibrant and varied heritage – creating a local 'brand' to unlock development opportunities and investments.
6. Develop an induction programme for the new Chief Executive, which includes joint sessions delivered by the Leader and Chief Executive to cascade key information and expectations from the Corporate Plan to staff.
7. Review council policy for flexible working arrangements and ensure consistency of implementation. A synchronisation of the policies with the investment in the equipment to make this happen.
8. A more diverse workforce. The Council has a strong programme of engagement initiatives with its diverse community but there is a need for the Council to reflect that diversity within its workforce.
9. Communicate success more effectively. Utilise expertise of the new Communications Team to develop a corporate approach to communications that enables the Council to sell its success to the public, partners, and staff more effectively.
10. Review risk management. Risk management should be reviewed to include issues such as the property investment strategy and non-delivery of key developments.

### 4. Executive Summary

At the time of the Corporate Peer Challenge in October 2019, the Chief Executive was about to stand down and a new Chief Executive appointed. Since the peer challenge in 2019 Stuart Bobby was appointed as the new Chief Executive and is now established in his role. The review team found that he is well-respected by council staff, members, and partners. The Leader of the Council is also well-respected, and the Council is seen as a good partner. The review team spoke to front-line and senior staff at the Council and found that staff are proud to work at Gravesham and are committed to doing their best for local residents. The team found that the Council did good work throughout the pandemic. In interviews partners stated that on business grants the Council had delivered

“nothing short of exceptional work.”

Whilst working remotely Council staff have managed to maintain business as usual despite significant phone problems and outdated IT systems. The review team conducted focus groups with front-line staff and managers, and it was clear that the IT and phone problems had a significant impact on staff and their ability to do their jobs. It is to their credit that despite this, staff found ways to continue to deliver services by using personal mobile phones with their number withheld and by organising teams in the office to cover landlines which could not be diverted. Office 365 and Teams has not been rolled out to staff which has made working remotely more difficult too. However, staff valued the flexibility that working remotely brings and were keen to see agile/flexible working continue after the pandemic ends. One staff member summed this up by stating: “trust your staff to get the job done and give them the resources to do it.”

Remote and flexible working will be key to the recruitment and retention of staff and help to combat the lure of higher wages in London. The review team believe that the Council’s flexible/agile working policy needs to be developed and implemented swiftly and IT systems must be improved to facilitate this. This is also a matter of organisational resilience for the Council, as future crises may necessitate mass remote working again.

Public sector organisations are increasingly being targeted by hackers and criminals with the National Cyber Security Centre issuing alerts following attacks on Hackney Council and threats to educational institutions. The PSN Code of Connection (CoCo) IT Health Check demonstrates that the Council takes cyber-security seriously but if under-investment in IT continues there will be an increased risk for the Council.

The review team found that good progress has been made by the communications team on the issues identified in the Corporate Peer Challenge. There is still more work to be done but the communications team have a clear plan on how to tackle the remaining issues.

The review team found that there have been improvements to the processing of planning applications, with good feedback from partners. The Cabinet Member is clearly respected and keen to build on the success. However, the improvement plan needs to be finalised and acted upon soon. The Council has not identified a five-year land supply and has missed its Housing Delivery Target and has therefore been subject to the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

Delays to the local plan under various administrations have left the Council in a difficult position, the local plan is now more than six years old. The Council must proceed with the new local plan urgently or expect further Government intervention. A new local plan is a key component of Gravesham’s vision for the local place.

## 5. Progress on recommendations Embed regular cabinet and management Team joint working

Some steps forward with regular meetings being held with Cabinet Members and senior officers. Now that the emergency response phase to COVID-19 is beginning to end, joint meetings would provide a strategic space for Cabinet and Senior Officers to

consider the Local Plan and other key issues. Introduce a clear improvement plan for Planning

Some progress has been made, there have been improvements in the processing of applications. But more needs to be done on the improvement plan. The Local Plan, Housing Delivery Test and five-year land supply must be on the corporate risk register. If the situation continues there are substantial risks which could throw the Council's ambitious plans for regeneration off track, damaging the Council's reputation with Government, investors, and developers. The review team urge the Council to be more strategic and deal with the issue now and make it everybody's responsibility in the Senior Management Team and Cabinet. Develop greater partnership working

There was positive feedback from all the partners the review team spoke to. Partners spoke very highly of the Council and said the Council understands the local community. However, partners did not know the Council's strategic priorities and long-term plans. Now relationships have been deepened, we encourage the Council to focus engagement with partners on key corporate priorities. Seize on the cross-party consensus on the need for the Council to be pro-active in relation to housing delivery in Gravesham

The review team believe that the Council could include a broader group of members in the discussions on the local plan. The review team suggests that the Council consider creating a strategic planning forum with the Leader, Cabinet Member, Opposition Leader and Chief Executive. Be a spokesperson for the area

Good progress on this recommendation. Partners view the Council as an advocate for North Kent, and say the Council speaks up for their area. However, partners believe you could be more confident in your arguments. The review team suggests that the Council could build on the work being done on history, culture, and tourism in the local area to boost the economy during the recovery period. Develop an induction programme for the new Chief Executive

The review team found that the induction of the new Chief Executive went well. The new Chief Executive has quickly established himself in the role and is respected by partners, officers, and senior Councillors. Review council policy for flexible working arrangements and ensure consistency of implementation

The review team are of the view that this need to be improved urgently. Staff and members do not feel supported to do their roles. Some members had no access to email for months during the initial phase of the pandemic, staff had to use personal mobiles to contact members of the public due to the IT and phone issues working

from home. This is an organisation resilience problem and creates issues for recruitment and retention of staff. Getting this right can combat the lure of London wages. A more diverse workforce

The review team found there was some good work being done on the Armed Forces Covenant and apprenticeships. Gravesham is one of the most diverse areas in Kent but that is not reflected in the organisation. HR are pushing for more data on the workforce, they need corporate support on this and on the recruitment and retention of diverse staff. Communicate success more effectively

The review team found that the communications team is respected and making good progress communicating success to partners and the public. A forward plan is in place and recruitment of more staff is due shortly. The LGA communications Review found that the communications strategy can be strengthened by adding measurable outcomes, we echo that recommendation. The regular emails and SMS from the Chief Executive were praised by staff. Internal communications could be strengthened further by closer working with HR and IT. There could also be a clearer feedback loop so that information from the front-line reaches the senior management. Review risk management

The issues the original peer challenge team raised have been added to the corporate risk register. The review team have considered the information supplied by the Council and has found that thus far the Council's investments have not been too adversely affected. The Local Plan, Housing Delivery Test and five-year land supply must be added to the corporate risk register. The IT and phone issues that occurred during the pandemic have not been fully resolved and Office 365 has still not been rolled out. Consequently, IT services and infrastructure must be added to the corporate risk register, particularly given the recent cyber-attacks against councils.

## 6. Recommended follow-up actions

The review team recommend the following actions are undertaken by the Council (it should be noted that it is up to the Council's Leadership to decide how to respond to the recommendations and implement any changes):

1. Must add the Local Plan, five-year land supply and Housing Delivery Test to the corporate risk register
2. Urgently proceed with a Gateway Review of the Local Plan and with the development of the new Local Plan
3. All members need to be briefed and understand the risks on the Local Plan, five-year land supply and Housing Delivery Test.
4. Create a Strategic Planning Forum
5. Must roll out Office 365 and improve the phone system as soon as possible, communicating this to staff
6. IT services and infrastructure must be added to the corporate risk register
7. A new agile working policy is being developed, this needs to be done quickly and staff engaged in the process.

6.Next steps The LGA would like to thank Gravesham Borough Council for undertaking the Follow-up Review, particularly as this was the first Corporate Peer Challenge Follow-up Review to be conducted remotely. The review team appreciate that senior officers and political leaders will want to reflect on the findings within this report to determine how the Council wishes to take things forward.

The review team have identified recommended actions. We suggest that the Council's response to these recommendations includes the development of an action plan which is sent to stakeholders and published on the council's website. We would be happy to provide a follow-up visit to examine the council's progress.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an ongoing offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice, and guidance for development and improvement.

Will Brooks (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA).