


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Broxbourne Borough Council

6 – 8 December 2021

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

Broxbourne Borough Council is a small and ambitious council looking to deliver the best for residents and its communities. The peer team found the borough to be a varied and interesting place. Bordering onto London, Essex and Hertfordshire, it has a real mix of challenges and opportunities. The council clearly wants to make the most of its position and connections to grow the local economy and create employment opportunities for all. The next few years are going to be very exciting for the borough.

Politically it is a stable council having had a conservative administration since 1974 and a number of senior staff in place for over 10 years. The Chief Executive has been in place for eight years (working at the council for 14 years in total) and the leader has been in place for 2.5 years. Both have a good understanding of their communities and the peer team could see the joint aspiration they had for the development of the borough and the creation of a new centre for the borough at Brookfield.

Many of the staff tend to live within the borough; they came across as loyal and committed, and enjoy working for the council. Staff have a good understanding of the communities they serve and are keen to make a difference to the lives of residents. They are however showing signs of fatigue and stress due to workloads and capacity issues that have increased with the Covid response. Some further thought needs to be given to staff wellbeing and capacity as their goodwill and dedication is being tested.

The peer team felt that a stronger narrative about the place and the organisation was needed. Broxbourne has a great story to tell and having this would help the council to articulate its plans and promote/articulate Broxbourne's opportunities and vision for the future to residents, partners and stakeholders. Building on this further is the need to have supporting plans and processes in place that are visible, owned, monitored and managed at the appropriate levels throughout the organisation. At present there is a lack of clarity and consistency around the management of plans and projects which leads to confusion and potentially affects delivery.

The council has some good partnerships in place and partners were willing to

support the council with their plans e.g. Hertford Regional College, the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority and Hertfordshire County Council. The peer team felt that some elements of the partnerships could be deepened and formalised to ensure greater support in delivering the priorities for the council.

Staff recruitment and retention is a challenge for the council, both with professional services, for example, planning, legal services and environmental health but also bordering onto a London borough which can pay higher salaries. It was apparent that some staff had now seen higher salaries advertised for vacancies at neighbouring district authorities. Due to changes in working practices since Covid, there is a potential threat that some staff would leave and work for an authority they wouldn't have considered before due to the commute, as they could now work from home. The council has started a benchmarking exercise for some salaries. It is important that this is prioritised and completed to satisfy staff feelings and to plan for future delivery of the council's objectives going forward.

The peer team found Broxbourne Borough Council's finances to be sound despite their relative complexity. A theme that ran through the council was reliance on the top team for planning and ways of working. Going forward, as with a number of areas in the council the peer team felt there was a need to empower staff, delegate responsibilities and ownership and create more resilience amongst staff.

The council has taken a more cautious approach to risk over the past few years. This has to be considered in terms of the strategic options for the future which are more limited in terms of cutting expenditure and raising revenue. The peer team feel that there is an opportunity for the council to revisit its appetite for risk especially with the council-owned company Badger and the Brookfield programme.

The council has made progress on its transformation programme which continued through the pandemic. The peer team felt that the next stage of transformation was to create resilience within the council and focus on how it could further enhance the customer's experience.

The additional area that the council asked the peer team to look at was economic development. The council has some big and exciting schemes planned and is working closely with partners to deliver these. Through these projects the council is hoping to raise their aspirations of local people and provide opportunities for them to

develop skills that will equip them for an exciting future. The council needs to ensure that it takes an active lead in developing skills to maximise opportunities for local people. The Broxbourne Local Plan was adopted in June 2020 and proposes between 5,000 and 6,000 net additional jobs by 2033, with the possibility of significantly more in the long term. To be able to deliver on all of the plans, the council needs to ensure that it has the right capacity in place, that resources are aligned, and plans are monitored and managed.

The key recommendations from the peer team are as follows:

- 1.1. Co-create and embed values and behaviours for staff and members.** It was clear that corporate priorities were known and understood, but that there were no known values or behaviours in place.
- 1.2. Develop a narrative for place that is owned and understood by all.** This will enable officers and members to talk about the Borough and its future vision in a succinct and shared way.
- 1.3. Capture the benefits of the new senior appointment through clear and defined roles and responsibilities.** The council will benefit from having clear leads for key programmes and projects with robust plans underneath.
- 1.4. Develop a narrative around the next stage of organisational change (OD, service design, culture).** Staff were unclear about what was next now the pandemic was lessening and would appreciate some clear communication around organisation change.
- 1.5. Implement a programme management approach across the council.** A more formal approach to programme management across the council would support key programmes, ensure appropriate resources, create more clarity about accountabilities and delegations, and provide consistency.
- 1.6. Consider the appetite for risk, opportunities for joint ventures and accelerating the programme, and making better use of the council's investment vehicle Badger.**

- 1.7. **Keep up the momentum on shared services partnerships.** The shared services partnerships have been working well and this is something the peer team believe should be kept going.
- 1.8. **Develop the council's role as a valued strategic partner.**
- 1.9. **Take an active lead in developing skills locally to maximise the opportunities arising from regeneration projects.**

2. Summary of the peer challenge approach

2.1. The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- **Lead Member Peer** - Cllr Sam Chapman- Allen, Leader of Breckland Council
- **Lead Officer Peer** – Alan Goodrum, LGA Associate
- **Senior Officer Peer** – Anne Brinkhoff, LGA Associate
- **Senior Officer Peer** - Giuseppina Valenza – Head of Communications & Customer Experience – Tandridge
- **Officer Peer** - Ed Groome, Executive Officer to the CEX and Leader, Cambridgeshire CC
- **LGA Peer Challenge Manager** - Ami Beeton
- **LGA Programme Support Officer** - Simisola Rasheed

2.2. Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?

2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to provide feedback on your approach to Economic Development.

2.3. The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team 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 peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days *onsite* at Broxbourne Borough Council during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 70 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

3. Feedback

3.1. Local priorities and outcomes

Broxbourne Borough Council is one of 10 district, borough and city councils in Hertfordshire and comprises the main settlements of Hoddesdon, Cheshunt, and Waltham Cross. The borough has a population of 98,000 and the population is expected to increase by 3% between 2020 and 2025. The 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation ranked Broxbourne Borough as 153rd most deprived of 317 English local authority areas.

The council has a good knowledge and understanding of the needs of the area and plays a clear role in communicating and advocating for these interests. Key challenges are recognised by the council (e.g. number of households living in temporary accommodation) and plans are in place to address this. Under the current leader the council has been clear about its economic development and skills plans for the borough. The peer team felt that the council could make better use of collecting and analysing data to enhance and target its approach to customers. The council should revisit its approach to using data to support more informed decision making and to support the council's strategic focus.

There are some exciting projects taking place in the Borough and the peer team found evidence of clear ambitions for regeneration. The council is viewed as being pro-growth and was actively working with developers to shape applications that benefitted the community. The Local Plan was adopted in June 2020 and provides the framework for future growth, jobs and housing for the Borough.

The peer team found that the council needs to be clearer about its overall vision for the area that ties together the ambitions and many projects that the council is working on. The peer team were not able to find anyone who could articulate the vision for the place succinctly. Developing a clear narrative and vision is a key recommendation for the council, as the development of it will aid staff and members when talking to partners and stakeholders about joint working and support for projects. It will also help when articulating what the council is about internally and help project a clear statement of purpose to key partners regionally, for example its strategic position in the UK Innovation Corridor or the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority.

The council effectively led a strong and sustained local COVID -19 response which

has been recognised by partners and residents. For example the council played a key role on the Health Protection Board ensuring a coordinated response; and it piloted a 'Safe to Trade' accreditation scheme for local businesses which was rolled out successfully across Broxbourne. There is an opportunity for the council to harness and build on community-led action and continue to encourage individuals and civil society groups to connect communities and develop self-managed local action. Until now community engagement has been carried out well by some staff and members, but this is currently ad hoc and is typically based around particular projects or schemes led by officers within the Planning, Community Development and the Communications teams. The peer team recommends the council considers a more strategic approach for the future. It was noted that local residents had been invited to join the citizens' panel which was seen as a positive step.

Climate change is a key priority for the Leader and the council. The leader was proud of the sustainability work that had been carried out by the council and was clear that this needed to be realistic and appropriate for the borough. Works so far included tree planting, electric vehicle charging points, and resourcing environmental projects. To take this to the next stage the peer team suggest a clear narrative is written that describes Broxbourne's vision around climate change and the outcomes it wants to achieve. This would help staff and members to embed the approach within their work and articulate it to residents and partners.

During the pandemic some aspects of the performance management framework, e.g. service planning, team meetings and staff appraisals were postponed due to the inevitable focus of the council in supporting community and business resilience. However some staff were unaware that this decision had been made. The council now needed to reinstate these aspects to give clarity and consistency to staff and for the managing and monitoring delivery of projects. Some staff mentioned the move to objective setting meetings which they appreciated, but it was clear that there was inconsistency in the approach to these. The lack of a golden thread made it difficult for some staff to understand not just the priorities of the organisation, but also the operating model for delivery.

3.2. Organisational and place leadership

The leader has a high profile within the borough and he had strong visibility during the pandemic, during which he was able to communicate via different channels to the public to ensure he reached as many people as possible. He is well respected by his cabinet and they feel comfortable to challenge him and that he will listen to their views. One member stated that they trusted him implicitly.

The chief executive has a less high profile with the public and the peer team believe that there is an opportunity for the chief executive and leader to jointly represent the council in some areas and raise the chief executive's profile. The chief executive was well known and visible with partners. The chief executive was described as open and accessible by staff and that they knew if they had something to discuss they could knock on his door and he would make time for them.

Partnership working at Broxbourne is seen as constructive and collegiate. Partners reported seeing the council as less introspective than it had been in the past and with greater vision and ability to engage in arrangements that are important for the longer-term good of all involved. The council has good working relationships with those partners that will be critical to deliver its ambition for inclusive growth. They include the UK Innovation Corridor/Innovation Core, a grouping of local authorities at the heart of the London – Stansted – Cambridge Corridor, the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, and the Chamber of Commerce. Regional partners in particular welcome the engagement of the Chief Executive and political leadership in shaping the narrative about the corridor and its potential for high value inward investment, recognising the inevitable pressures that come with its size, and yet the decision to invest in collaboration that might not bring immediate benefits but will be important for the longer term.

The peer team also found evidence of a council-wide approach to support businesses during the pandemic alongside partners, including the efficient administration of business grants, and the Covid-secure high street measures which included introducing a 'Safe to Trade' accreditation scheme for Broxbourne businesses. This demonstrated agility, foresight, and care for the borough's

established businesses.

The partnership with the Police was seen as another positive example of joint working especially during Covid where the Police and the council worked closely together. There is regular communication with the chief executive who is seen as responsive and accessible. This was echoed by several partners who said that the chief executive was available when needed and that there were generally positive relationships and mutual support around key issues. The council had developed a solid partnership with Welwyn & Hatfield Council with its Shared Services and its relationship with the County Council whilst not perfect was seen as positive for the future. Some partners expressed their desire for more formal and regular conversations though appreciated the ease with which current relationships ran. The peer team felt that in light of the conversations, the council should formalize some of its partnerships and develop its role as a valued strategic partner, even when the issues discussed did not always directly benefit the council.

The peer team believe that there are opportunities for the council to strengthen partnership working on shared priorities, for example the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority would welcome the chance to discuss what could be done around healthy communities and climate change.

The peer team heard that staff found the Corporate Management Team (CMT) are approachable and accessible. For example, it was noted that the chief executive had an open door policy which was welcomed by staff. The chief executive and the leader demonstrated a strong commitment to Economic Development. This was shown through the recent appointment of the Director of Place, who has been brought into provide visible leadership on Economic Development and the skills agenda for the borough.

In 2020 the council adopted the Local Plan and published its corporate plan for 2020 – 2024. The corporate plan sets out the priorities and objectives for the borough and the delivery plan then falls from this. The peer team heard that not all staff felt engaged in the service planning process and didn't feel that they could link their role to the council's priorities. Ensuring consistency throughout the organisation on the service planning process would provide clarity to staff and members. Developing an

organisational narrative and reintroducing the golden thread will help staff to understand their contribution to delivering corporate priorities and provide solid links between the corporate plan and individual members of staff and their roles.

The peer team did not get a clear sense of the council's plans for the 'new normal' post pandemic. The council had started its transformation programme and had rolled out new laptops and IT equipment prior to the start of the pandemic. The staff were keen to see results of the refurbished building and were keen to talk about returning to the office and what this would look like. Consideration needs to be given as to what the next steps are; whether this is organisational development or design, member development or transformation. Some clear communication is needed to give staff and members clarity on the internal organisational priorities.

3.3. Governance and culture

Officer and member relationships within the council are good with mutual respect and clear roles and responsibilities. It was noted that respectful relationships had helped the organisation move forward. The Monitoring Officer had a shared role with Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) which worked well although it was clear that the current positive relationships supported this approach. The council used the EFDC Independent Person when needed although did advise the peer team that they were planning to appoint their own Independent Person, which the peer team welcomed.

A single point of contact protocol was implemented to formalise the communications between some members and officers when members had a query or request for information. This process was seen as positive by new members but may need to be further embedded with longer standing members. Some members did report that they found this process slow and frustrating, but others noted that a more structured process has led to better relationships between officers and members and has resulted in a more efficient way of dealing with member queries.

There was a clear recognition from the council that the scrutiny function needed to develop a more forward looking and strategic approach focussing on corporate priorities and moving away from operational concerns. Broader themes are being identified and the committee was now to focus on these. The LGA is able to offer some member development sessions to further support the council if they want to

access these along with some suitable training on risk with a focus on Audit and the Cabinet.

Staff are committed to delivering good services and were described as loyal, hardworking, passionate and having a strong work ethic. The team also heard that there was a lot of reliance on goodwill through the pandemic and that this was continuing. There was a real concern from officers that they would lose experienced and dedicated officers due to burn out, low pay and lack of opportunities for progression. Some staff reported that there were opportunities to develop, but that there wasn't always support or the time to apply for them. Equally we heard from some managers that they did not have the time needed to go through the processes to recruit new staff which often needed sign off from the CMT, or to train them. As a result in some departments there is an over-reliance on agency staff which has had greater cost implications in the long run, though some, but not all of these posts were for hard-to-recruit roles where there is a national shortage e.g. planners. Corporate inductions had also been put on hold during the pandemic despite a number of new starters. The peer team consider that these must be re-introduced so that new staff members feel valued from day one and understand the roles and responsibilities of the different departments and teams across the council.

When asked about the values of the organisation the peer team found that a number of staff talked about corporate priorities and the customer promise. The peer team feel that, alongside a new internal narrative for the organisation mentioned above, there is an opportunity to co-create and then embed values and behaviours for staff and members. The peer team were advised that this process had started but there seemed to be a lack of engagement from staff who spoke to the peer team and they were unaware that this was happening. There is a real opportunity with some renewed internal focus on staff to create a culture of empowerment and aid staff to feel valued. A review of internal control mechanisms would also support this as the decision making process was seen as complex and taking up senior capacity, as well as leading to a feeling of mistrust by staff, who felt that the control levels prevented them from making quick and simple decisions.

Whilst there appear to be some mechanisms for staff voices e.g. Staff Forum and the new Senior Managers Group there didn't appear to be a consistent approach to corporate comms messaging. There is a weekly newsletter which is e-mailed to staff

which is in a document style format. It might be better to move to an e-newsletter format (e.g. Mailchimp) to make it easier to design, issue and read. Not all staff were aware the peer review was taking place and it was not referred to in the staff newsletters provided.

In addition, with so much going on, regular blogs and hybrid (in person and online) all staff briefings from senior management or project leads would help staff understand the council's ambitions and priorities and the key role they play in delivering them. Developing a more strategic and consistent approach to communications, using a broader range of channels to deliver messages whether to staff or externally, will help with engagement and understanding.

A consistent approach to team meetings, with some set agenda items, could also help ensure messages are cascaded and information fed back to senior management. The new Director of Place has brought a different approach to communications. She has held staff briefings with her teams and set up other team meetings, which has been welcomed by staff.

Carrying out an internal communications survey could identify where the gaps are in staff communications and the preferred channels staff want to use. It was described by some that CMT communicate when they need to rather than as a matter of course and that messaging was not always consistent. The peer team felt that the council had a well-resourced communication team and that resources could be realigned to enable more staff engagement rather than broadcasting, with regular staff briefings and discussions, an upgraded intranet and a refresh of the digital offer for staff.

With so much activity across the council in terms of economic development delivery, as well as other corporate priorities and a new internal focus on organisational development, transformation, and member development, the council would benefit from a more visible and transparent programme management approach across the council that is properly resourced and regularly monitored. This would help with service planning, allocation of resources, accountability and understanding future capacity needs which is going to be vital if the council is to deliver on its ambitious growth agenda.

3.4. Financial planning and management

The council has a prudent Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) that demonstrates a robust approach to closing the council's financial gap. There was a recognition from the council of the pressures it was facing and what needed to be tackled. However when pressed it was clear that not all members or officers could explain the budget narrative and they did not feel they owned the financial strategy. Rather this was seen as being owned by senior finance leads for example the S151 officer and the Cabinet lead for finance. Some work needs to be carried out to ensure that all appropriate staff and members are aware of and understand the financial strategy in relation to their services.

There was a feeling amongst some of the stakeholders that 'there is no more room to cut in this council'. The view of the peer team is that the council has been cautious with its financial management and in some respects risk averse. It now had to look to other solutions to support future projects and funding. There needs to be some clarity on the investment strategy that is required going forward and a focus on invest to save to be able to achieve the council's transformation plans. The narrative around financial planning and savings needs to be communicated to staff appropriately. They are keen to understand and hear the context behind proposed restructures, the wider context of transformation and in what direction the council was moving in.

The council has some longer term risks around business rates and minimum revenue positions. A more consistent culture of savings and budget management in the council would support staff and members to understand the financial position and their individual roles and responsibilities.

The peer team heard that the council had developed a new Capital Strategy, along with a £4m regeneration investment fund to pump prime investment into regeneration schemes. The peer team felt that the council could have more clarity about why it was investing and plan and articulate this more i.e. is it for returns or regeneration or both? The peer team believe that the availability of the council's reserves put the council in a position where it can flex how it approaches the market. Alongside this the peer team felt that there was an opportunity for the council to revisit its risk appetite and to look more in depth at joint ventures as an option to drive forward the next stage of development and make better use of the council's investment vehicle

Badger. Although apparently conceived as a way of turning capital into revenue streams, its purpose should be reviewed with potentially making greater use of either its regeneration or income generating potential, for example through participation in some of the major development projects.

As already mentioned, there are a lot of exciting regeneration projects planned for Broxbourne and the peer team described the council as having a virtuous circle of new developments e.g. Brookfield Riverside. The capital programme and asset management strategy are linked to the budget strategy and it is now key that this strategy is turned into action.

One of the themes that cropped up throughout the review was staff resilience and capacity which has been touched on above and will be looked at in more detail in the next section however the peer team noted that there was a feeling amongst staff that resilience was being tested due to two factors - a lack of capacity and that the Finance Directorate were seen as being responsible for a number of key programmes, as well as service delivery e.g. transformation programme. The peer team felt that the appointment of the new Director of Place would help with capacity at a senior level within the organisation.

The location of the authority in the outer south-east/innovation corridor gives the area a clear commercial edge that needs to be capitalised on. The council works well with existing partners and should use existing success to build and attract new partnerships. The council is not always quick to shout about its achievements but looking outwards and using its position could be beneficial for current developments and schemes.

3.5. Capacity for improvement

As mentioned previously the council has made significant progress on its transformation journey with some projects continuing throughout Covid e.g. roll out of laptops, development of the office, refresh of the website and the technology to facilitate hybrid meetings. There has also been investment in IT systems (Section106 monitoring, and new HR Systems). The peer team believes that the

programme does need to be revisited to look at capacity to ensure that there are enough resources allocated to deliver what needs to happen next. The programme would also benefit from a narrative or golden thread so staff and members fully understand the plans, timescales and impact of the programme that links up all the work that is going on and how it will tackle future issues the council will face. Creating a strategic approach for the next stage of the whole council transformation programme will provide reassurance and help with buy in.

The peer team advise that the council should capture the benefits of the new senior appointment through clear and defined roles and responsibilities. Having clear leads for key programmes and projects with robust plans underneath will provide the council with some certainty and a strategic focus. Staff and members are positive about the creation of the role and appointment that had been made.

As mentioned above the peer team picked up a strong view from some staff that there is no time to recruit and then train new staff. Some managers felt that they didn't have the capacity to manage the processes around recruitment e.g. writing job descriptions and reported that Personnel were also too stretched to be able to support the recruitment that was needed. All of this had resulted in either a reliance on agency staff or managers had taken on the extra work themselves as an easier option which had overloaded them further. Some departments in the council reported examples of career progression and staff development opportunities, but this was not consistent. A more strategic approach to addressing the future human resources needs of the council is required, particularly given difficulties in recruitment and the council's ambitious agenda. This strategy should encompass the development of capacity within the Personnel team, and across the council, including staff recruitment and development, and career progression.

Further capacity and resilience issues were raised by staff who described the frontline as feeling fragile and that a number of middle managers did not want to burden CMT, but were having difficulties juggling and managing their workloads. The peer team felt that there was a reliance on the goodwill of staff to go above and beyond to keep services running. It was also reported that there were a lot of projects to deliver across the council and under resourced and pressured teams to manage them. The commitment to the council and the community from staff was evident, but there was a risk that the council would lose some of these staff to burnout or to other

local authorities. There is an opportunity now to build some resilience at all levels across the organisation.

Some issues were reported to the peer team on the salaries paid by the council compared to those of similar authorities. Benchmarking has taken place for the majority of roles within the council and some, but not all, staff were aware that this had happened or what the outcomes are going to be despite allocation being made in the budget. Communications need to be strengthened on this issue to provide some reassurance and to demonstrate that the council is looking into this issue. The peer team felt that some salaries were low and needed to be addressed as a priority. There was a risk that this could become a bigger issue now that many organisations had taken a hybrid approach to working which would open more potential opportunities further afield for staff.

The peer team heard some good examples of the council's shared service approach to building control, the Monitoring Officer, Information Technology, Audit and Revenues and Benefits. It was reported that these partnerships were in general, working well though some of them, for example IT and revenues and benefits were coming up to decision points this year. The partnerships were reported to be sufficiently robust to accommodate any necessary changes. The council was advised to keep this momentum up and look for further opportunities to create resilience and efficiencies through shared services.

3.6. Economic Development

The council has a strong ambition for the Borough to be a place of economic opportunity, business growth and jobs for all. This ambition is clearly and well-articulated in the Corporate Plan and the Economic Development Strategy. It includes a focus on delivering major regeneration sites, raising aspirations and skills levels of residents to provide a skilled workforce ready to benefit from new job opportunities, and support to businesses already located in Broxbourne and the major town centres. The council's political and managerial leadership are very clear about economic development being a priority, and it is well understood by staff at all levels in the organisation. Partners commend the council for its level of ambition, its focus on inclusive growth and some say that Broxbourne is the most ambitious and

business-focused District in Hertfordshire. It is important to be clear and explicit in discussing expectations, including those the council holds of partners, and also when it is necessary to shift resources to enable delivery in the long term.

The council adopted its Local Plan in June 2020, making provision for five high value employment sites amounting to approximately £1 billion of investment in the Borough. Having an adopted Local Plan is a key enabler as it provides clarity for developers. Whilst the plan provides for around 7,700 homes by 2033, including Brookfield Riverside and Garden Village, it also contains the provision for large employment sites and infrastructure developments that will have a huge impact on the local economy and prosperity.

The council is enabling and managing a significant range of regeneration and economic development projects, investing its own capital, s106 receipts and working with partners, in particular the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), to fund projects that enable economic growth. Examples are the regeneration of Waltham Cross Town Centre through infrastructure and public realm improvements such as the Queen Eleanor Square, and a mix of public realm enhancement and the development of key sites in Hoddesdon Town Centre. These included a gateway development, north of the town centre, the Ambition Broxbourne Business Centre. This successful business centre, part funded by the provides 68 workshops and offices and a training space.; The council is using a mix of LEP funding and s106 receipts to build a new Business and Technology Centre next to the A10 in the south of the Borough. This shows a balanced approach of supporting new businesses and industries through specialist facilities while creating the conditions for existing businesses to thrive.

The new business development sites provide massive opportunities for inward investment and job creation. The purchase of Park Plaza West by an American company planning to build a large film studio (Sunset Studios Waltham Cross) has captured the imagination of everyone the team spoke with. It is the mix of creative and film studio related jobs, but also the likely impact on the supply chain with a considerable mix of skilled and semi-skilled jobs which is exciting and offers such potential for local companies.

Planning will be essential to ensure that opportunities will be available for local firms

and residents and the LEP and its sector-specific infrastructure is likely to play a key role in bringing about dialogue with the sector and coordinating and managing the local response.

Other developments include Park Plaza North and the new Theobalds Business Park on the A10 south of Cheshunt which will accommodate new business space, the relocation of businesses from regeneration sites and the construction of the business and technology centre to be run by the council. Planning permission has been granted for a hyperscale data centre. Brookfield Riverside, on the A10 in the centre of the borough will provide 2,000 new jobs in office, retail, and leisure. These developments are immense and offer a real opportunity to break the cycle of the borough having significantly lower skills levels in its workforce compared to Hertfordshire. The peer team recommend that the council takes an active lead in developing skills locally to maximise the opportunities arising from regeneration projects.

The Economic Development team is well respected and delivers many projects and initiatives across the district. For example, the team:

- delivers training sessions for SMEs on several topics
- distributes innovation vouchers linking Broxbourne Businesses to specialists
- produces regular e-newsletters
- organises 'Ambition Conferences', showcasing local talent and innovation.

Creating additional capacity in economic development and regeneration, as well as development management will be crucial to ensure that the council is able to realise its ambition. The recent appointment of a new Director of Place with expertise and passion for employment has sent out a message across the council and to partners that the council is prepared to invest in realising its ambition. Capacity in the development management team is stretched, following an expected increase in planning applications since the adoption of the Local Plan and the readiness shown the council to work with developers to shape and improve planning applications. The council has started to use planning performance agreements to increase resources which is welcomed by developers, and this might provide additional resources across some of the other development sites too.

However, a national shortage of planners will require exploring creative and pragmatic approaches, including the use of flexible approaches, such as home working to tap into the national pool of candidates, investing in upskilling existing staff and having discussions with local education providers about creating a supply of technical planning staff. Our discussion with officers highlights that the council is exploring a range of options to address capacity issues. It is also investing in the right technology and systems to improve productivity, for example in managing s106 agreements.

The council's 'Ambition Broxbourne' economic development partnership is not maximising its potential and its remit needs to be reconsidered in light of other Boards that are being developed. It was established to oversee the delivery of the Economic Development strategy and its detailed action plan. Partners value it but consider that it now needs to move from a forum to receive updates to leading and overseeing the required changes, holding partners to account for their delivery. The economic ambition will only be realised if partners deliver their commitments for the benefit of the place as a whole. This may require some development work with partners to 'take stock', and reconfirm the ambition, actions and rules of engagement, notably moving from receiving updates to ensuring delivery at pace.

There are high levels of disparities in wealth, skills and health and wellbeing between Waltham Cross (and in particular Holdbrook) and most of the rest of the Borough. The complexity and interdependency of what makes people well and healthy, the fragmented service responsibilities between district council, county council, education (particularly where schools are academies) and the importance of civil society and VCS organisations, requires a collaborative approach. The opportunities that will arise from the major regeneration sites in close proximity to Waltham Cross may be a good lever for the borough to engage with partners in creating a Waltham Cross centred strategy and plan to improve the skills and health of this community. Interviews with partners highlight interest, in particular from health. The public health team at Hertfordshire County Council will be a key ally in this work, and the council may wish to consider whether it has developed the strengths of relations with the Integrated Care System and GPs that might generate investments to support this local community.

Another step to take would be to better promote the council's economic development

work so that it is seen and heard by the business community, using all the resources available. Partners told us that there are opportunities for officers to develop more direct relationships with businesses, acting as ambassadors for the council. There were a number of specific comments around more use of LinkedIn as a social media platform, the use of more visuals and podcasts as opposed to written communication. There was also a comment about the council's telephony to include an option of 'I have a question about business support', as well as more regular updates of the council's business related webpages.

The physical regeneration provides a significant opportunity to rebalance the skills level of some of the population in Broxbourne. Skills development is difficult and requires early and on-going dialogue between businesses, regulators, and skills providers, involving a range of organisations such as the Hertfordshire Skills Board. The council is working in a complex system that is constantly evolving and it must work through influence with a preparedness to work differently and use networks effectively. There will be a need for the council to provide strong local leadership, advocating for its local communities and particularly for those who need their ambitions to be raised and wider support, and tenacity to make this happen. It will require some dedicated resource with a local mandate and leadership and management support in pursuing this with focus and dedication.

4. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a six-month check-in meeting. This will be a short, facilitated session which creates space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, Rachel Litherland, Principal Adviser for East of England, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Rachel Litherland and Ami Beeton are available to discuss any further support the council



requires at rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk and ami.beeton@local.gov.uk.