


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Gedling Borough Council

21st – 23rd June 2022

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

Gedling Borough Council (GBC) is a well-regarded authority in one of the more urban areas of Nottinghamshire. Councillors are hardworking and clearly dedicated to local residents. There are several examples of good and successful projects, although co-ordinating these needs some improvements. There is significant and valuable performance monitoring, but it is not yet fully used to drive service improvements.

GBC had to undergo recent staff changes and reductions, in order to balance the books after significant funding reductions. This has resulted in a workforce that is limited in its capacity to be flexible and respond to sudden and unexpected changes. The workforce is highly enthusiastic and committed to delivery for the borough. Although capacity is a major issue, it is not currently running through the corporate planning and risk management process.

GBC handled Covid well and is moving through the recovery phase. It planned ahead and was able to actively support its residents during much of the most active phase of the pandemic. It has been intentionally operationally focused on its recovery phase, to support staff delivering the many projects that are under way, and now needs to focus more on its strategic elements.

GBC has not yet realised the opportunities it could have when bidding for funds from central government. Cross-organisational strategic thinking, planning and learning could be improved.

The peer team encourage GBC to look forward several years and consider what it wants to achieve, and how it wants to achieve that. It is important to work towards key decision points, such as around transforming services or considering savings issues. How are all members involved in looking to GBC's future? What is the route map for making necessary savings and delivering services in a different way? The new Gedling Plan, post 2023 elections, is an ideal opportunity to do this, but the team encourage the council to be considering those issues, particularly in relation to financial savings, or transforming the way the council operates, in the meantime.

Key recommendations

There are several observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

1.1. Reset Gedling Borough Council's ways of working

Learn from how people worked during the pandemic. Many people have demonstrated increased productivity and morale by being able to work in a more agile fashion, sometimes from home, and sometimes from the office. Consider how GBC can maximise this experience to encourage a wide range of people to work for the council, in a flexible manner.

1.2. Establish a clear strategy for income generation and cost recovery alongside funding bids

Councils are expected to be largely self-sufficient. Consider how GBC might increase the council's income generation and cost recovery mechanisms in order to reduce the effects of reducing grants from central government. The sector is increasingly dependent on successful funding bids to individual pots of money, and it is important to invest in the skills and knowledge to improve the council's success on funding bids.

1.3. Consider comprehensive customer centred approach to transforming service delivery, and what resources and technology are needed

Like all councils, GBC has experienced significant cuts in funding. Until now, it has managed to do more with less, through cuts to staffing and restructures. However, the team suggest that the council considers transformation to service delivery. Focusing more on a customer centred approach, GBC may well find that it can deliver services in different ways, so long as there is the technological investment to increase effectiveness and efficiency.

1.4. Invest to save; good IT systems improve efficiency

The team heard about multiple IT systems in the council, which are not integrated, and do not allow analysis of complaints and other customer feedback to improve service delivery. Investing in appropriate customer service technology, linking all services, would enable the organisation to be acting more effectively and efficiently.

1.5. Consider imaginative ways to increase capacity

GBC's capacity is extremely stretched. Explore with nearby councils how GBC could share staff, perhaps on a temporary basis.

1.6. Build up programme and project management capacity

This will enable the council to transform service delivery and management. The peer team suggest that the council explores how other councils have established transformation teams whose focus is on developing funding bids and identifying opportunities for further financial council efficiencies. Programmes and projects should have clear timescales and be linked directly to delivering council priorities.

1.7. Widen member engagement, particularly through scrutiny

The team recommend that the council establishes a Member Development Working group which includes Democratic Services officers and councillors from all parties. This group would ensure councillors are kept abreast of ongoing changes to local government and provide other support which assist councillors in being effective in their ever-changing role. The Member Induction programme in 2023 provides an opportunity to re-set Member development as part of a wider programme ensuring that Scrutiny arrangements involve a wide range of backbench councillors in working groups and project work.

1.8. Use strategic risks and the Corporate Risk register as part of the Corporate planning process

Ensure that strategic corporate risks are understood by senior Members and Officers and relevant service managers and that these are used to inform service planning and council priorities. Establish a clear route map for the major decisions that need to be taken, based on these strategic risks.

1.9. Widen partnership engagement to include businesses, LEP and Combined Authority discussions

To ensure that Gedling maximises the benefits of the LEP and the Combined Authority, it is important that it is involved in strategic sub-regional discussions. This will also help the business communities in Gedling.

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:

- Councillor Phil Bialyk: Leader, Exeter City Council
- Alan Goodrum: LGA Associate, former Chief Executive, Chiltern and South Buckinghamshire Councils
- Helen Kemp: Director of Business and Skills, Tees Valley Combined Authority
- Damilola Bastos: Head of Finance, East Suffolk Council

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?

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 in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days both virtually and onsite at Gedling, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 30 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke almost 100 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, recognising that the peer challenge took place at a moment in time, and that the council will have started to address the feedback as soon as the peer challenge took place.

3. Feedback

3.1. Local priorities and outcomes

Councillors and officers meet with the public through a programme called The Gedling Conversation. This is part of a proactive programme of meetings and events which are enabling the council to learn the public's views and opinions on priorities and on local needs.

The council is clear about what it wants to achieve however there is more to do in clearly identifying the specific outcomes it wants to achieve. It will be important for GBC to ensure it has a shared understanding of what success involves and that members are focused on delivering the council's higher level strategic objectives with clear activity that contributes to achieving them. An example is GBC's declaration of a climate emergency and the need to now identify clearer deliverables such as establishing recycling points in the civic centre and around the borough underpinned by recycling targets to be achieved within specific timescales.

There are small practical steps which may not be much in terms of finances but are a visible demonstration of the council's commitment to its Climate Emergency Declaration. For example, the council's catering arrangements (such as removing coffee machines in meeting rooms), and efficiency policies (for example continuing to reduce the amount of printing when sharing information with councillors). These may be small examples, but they are a visible commitment to the Climate Emergency declaration. The team recommends that the council considers further what GBC has direct responsibility for delivering and where it may collaborate with other organisations to achieve timely and trackable outcomes.

Major decisions will soon need to be taken in relation to the council's future strategy on the delivery of the borough's leisure services. There would be benefit in GBC taking its thinking forward as a priority and doing so in a timely fashion.

3.2. Organisational and place leadership

Councillors care about their community and demonstrated knowledge about residents and residents' needs. They are generally active with their constituents, including specific activities such as the Gedling Conversation every two years. Much of this engagement was planned and undertaken prior to the pandemic; technological developments offer an opportunity to evolve, increasing participation through online engagement as well as other forms of listening and talking. The peer team encourage Gedling's councillors to re-start this engagement as soon as possible and in a fashion which reflects the post-pandemic public health environment in which all councils are now operating.

Gedling council's communications functions are regarded as positive as evidenced by GBC's informative and engaging council magazine. Many staff live within the borough and are great ambassadors for the council.

The peer team spoke to several public and voluntary sector partners who all spoke highly of Gedling BC. The team encourage the council to explore how it might replicate these good relationships with others who have a stake in the future economy of the borough, for example more direct engagement with local businesses. The Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and Combined Authority plans did not feature in many of the conversations during the peer challenge. The team encourages GBC to maximise its influence in these discussions in order that Gedling

is well placed to maximise the benefits of devolution for its residents and businesses.

There is an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategy, action plan and objectives in place. This represents a good foundation on which good ideas and thinking can become properly embedded with services identifying explicitly how they contribute to the strategy and achieving the council's equality objectives.

The council conducted a consultation on the strategy however the response to this was not as positive as GBC might have hoped. In future work on reviewing its EDI strategy, the peer challenge team encourage the council to proactively involve its partners. For example, this could be done by jointly setting objectives that address inequalities for the local communities, with a clearer focus on how the council can achieve these objectives in partnership with other agencies and sectors.

3.3. Governance and culture

The Leader and Deputy Leader have significant levels of responsibility for key corporate areas. Whilst their strong leadership in these areas is positive, the council may wish to ensure a wider cohort of responsibility for some of these corporate functions which extends beyond these two individuals. This would provide greater resilience of leadership and reduce risks associated with either of them not being available for any reason.

One way in which wider resilience might be achieved is for a wider cohort of cabinet members to take on more responsibilities. There may also be some value in non-executive members being more directly involved in policy-making processes at an early stage, through robust scrutiny arrangements.

Overview and Scrutiny arrangements offer a wide range of options to increase Member engagement in the decision-making processes without slowing it down. This could be through task and finish groups and select committees, as well involving non-executive members in working with partners to scrutinise future plans to enhance policy development. Members did not talk about recent examples (review of waste collection, flooding and sewage discharge); implying that these options are not currently being maximised. The Peer Challenge team encourage GBC to explore ways to involve non-executive Members more widely in these areas of the council's business. This could include cabinet members taking a greater lead in consulting

with fellow councillors, taking a greater lead in working with Scrutiny and engaging with the public in their areas of responsibility. Scrutiny arrangements can also provide an opportunity to examine the budget and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy in detail.

A significant number of senior officers are new. They are aware of recent changes in the sector, particularly regards to finances and legal responsibilities, but there have been reports that their professional expertise has been questioned by long-standing members. It is important that all Gedling's members fully understand the changed nature of local government, particularly with respect to finance and governance. This is a challenge, particularly if councillors have been in role for many years and may be reluctant to attend briefings or development sessions. However, it is important in order to ensure that the council maximises the new opportunities that are available to local government, particularly with regards to scrutiny arrangements and funding.

Members are generally aware of forthcoming changes to the council make-up, due to various reasons. However, little thought appears to have been given to member succession planning. Increasing the involvement of backbenchers in decision-making and expanding the responsibilities of cabinet members will help. One suggestion is to establish a small member reference group for each Cabinet Member (known at other councils as a Policy Advisory Committee). This will help to improve wider Member engagement and broaden responsibilities.

The risk register is well organised, but it is not widely shared or used to drive corporate planning. The peer team recommend that GBC use the risk register as the basis for a specific planning session, with senior councillors and senior officers, and subsequently with the wider management team. More emphasis on strategic, rather than operational risks is needed. A specific planning session or away day could include strategic risks in its focus. This would help embed the register in the priorities of the council and service delivery plans.

3.4. Financial planning and management

The peer team was unable to speak to the portfolio holder for Finance due to illness. This section is therefore based on the evidence that was available, and the peer team recognise this limitation in the feedback.

All appropriate financial systems are in place, and officers give appropriate and good advice. The Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is clear and straightforward. There are clean reports from both internal and external audit.

However, not all councillors appear to be fully aware of the shift in local government finance. The team recommend that the council looks at how GBC becomes more self-sufficient through fees and charges, such as green waste, planning fees, and car parking.

All councils need be smart about bidding for funds, and the team recommends that Gedling increases its knowledge about bidding rounds and improves the expertise and skills in-house for funding bids. For example, the UKSPF funds: every council has an allocation, but there still needs to be a successful investment plan on how those funds are going to be used. There appeared to be little progress being made to develop the investment plan when the team were on site. Lead Local Authorities were asked to complete an investment plan that was developed with local stakeholders, and to detail how they intended to use and deliver the funding to address the key themes of Community and Place, Supporting Local Businesses, and People and Skills. It was not mentioned by either GBC or its strategic partners as an opportunity to work strategically by engaging with partners to ensure they would submit an adequate investment plan. It appears to be a high risk that GBC may not get its allocation without changing its approach to funding bids. There has been no confirmation from central government than any monies could be rolled forward, and experience from other councils shows that the investment plans go through several iterations before being agreed. In addition, there is a risk of losing certain employment skills and business support services which had been funded by the EU, and which the UKSPF is intended to replace. Although these are county council services, they will have an impact on the residents in the borough and the UKSPF Investment Plan could help to bridge the subsequent gap.

The team were concerned that not all members really understand the seriousness of the financial situation. The basics, the nuts and bolts of finances are good, the team questioned if councillors recognise that bidding for funding pots is the norm, and there is a need to be both more efficient and more commercial. Councils need to try to be self-sufficient and not rely on central government grants. The peer team recommend that councillors consider how fees, charges and generating income

helps GBC to maintain good service delivery to meet the needs of its residents, and how service users can contribute to cost recovery. Then if the Fair Funding Review bears fruit, GBC can use that money to help community activity and services. Setting out a prioritised list of savings, and how to achieve them, would be another useful exercise for a corporate away day, with all Members. At the moment, GBC does this as part of the Cabinet Budget Awayday; the team recommend expanding this to include all Members.

3.5. Capacity for improvement

The council is operating with very limited capacity. Capacity is being stretched and there are some areas where expertise and knowledge need to be developed, for example funding bids. The good relations between Unison and senior staff helps towards staff generally having good morale.

There are good resources in performance, complaints and compliments but this information is not being used to drive improvement and service delivery or linked into corporate risk. Complaints and compliments offer an ideal starting point for service transformation and redesign. They are a great way to cement a customer focused approach. Although there is a system for managing and reporting complaints and compliments through Directors, they are not being used as part of a transformational process. This is probably due to the lack of programme management capacity, and skills not being developed in-house. Improving programme management, and corporate oversight, alongside transforming service delivery will help to drive efficiencies. Programmes and projects need clearer timescales, objectives and outcomes. Project, as well as programme management could be improved.

The Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) infrastructure is not efficient. There are reportedly seven different systems which cannot talk to each other and no single customer relations management (CRM) system to collect and manage customer service data. ICT can be an enabler, transforming services making them much more efficient, for example through online transactional activity and improved customer experience when all contact can be traced. The peer team recommend that GBC redesigns services, rather than review them. The ICT systems can then be commissioned to support that redesign. In the past, GBC has focused on changes to structure and cuts to staffing rather than transformation. The peer team recommend

that the council changes this approach.

The council is doing more with less and has been delivering the budget through cuts. However, the limited capacity that GBC has could be more effective if the council invests in ICT infrastructure to improve efficiency. This will build resilience as well as make necessary savings. Capacity could also be gained by working with others who also lack capacity in similar areas.

Officers are attending local and regional networks, but more could be done to maximise the support mechanisms those networks provide. East Midlands Councils, networks of Nottinghamshire councils (for both councillors and officers) offer opportunities for learning and potentially shared capacity.

There is a comprehensive service planning process, but services lack the flexibility for mid-year shocks and opportunities that present themselves. Gedling BC needs to develop the flexibility to be able to change direction if resources, circumstances and engagement demand. One partner recommended that the council should: *“Be ruthless about priorities”*.

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 session, which provides space for the council’s senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser for East Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber and the Northeast Regions, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Mark is available to discuss any further support the council requires. He can be reached on email: mark.edgell@local.gov.uk or by telephone on 07747 636910.



6. Appendix 1 – Signposting

Charnwood DC – recent investment in customer service technology. This helps to manage and link complaints, compliments and other feedback directly to service delivery

East Suffolk DC – improved internal skills by sharing staff on a temporary basis with another council, and actively encouraging permanent staff to learn from them.

East Suffolk DC – Work on UKSPF Investment Plan with strategic partners