

# Corporate Peer Challenge **Gravesham Council**

15th-17th October 2019

Feedback Report

## 1. Executive Summary

The peer team found Gravesham to be a well-run Council with a proactive approach to dealing with the financial challenges of the last decade. The Council has sound finances and is well placed to deal with the challenges ahead.

Gravesham has a strong and well respected political and managerial leadership. Partners, Officers and Members, praised the leadership of the Council and had confidence in them. The peer team found both the Leader and Chief Executive had a good awareness of the council's strengths and weaknesses, with a willingness to take onboard feedback and seize opportunities for improvements. There is good internal organisational self-awareness and identification of things that need to be done.

The current, well-respected, Chief Executive, has announced his impending retirement. The appointment and induction of the new Chief Executive provides an opportunity to embed greater joint working between the Cabinet and Management Team. The peer team found that currently, there is not a great deal of time and space, for joint discussion on strategy and longer-term priorities.

Officers and Members are clearly passionate about their work and the local area. The peer team found a committed workforce, and Members who were proud to represent their community. There is a positive 'Gravesham Way' with a significant staff loyalty dividend. Officers sometimes found it difficult to articulate the 'Gravesham Way' but it is clear to the peer team that the organisation has a good working culture and that staff are valued and given opportunities to develop. The peer team felt there was some work to be done on formalising these opportunities to develop.

Member-officer working relationships at Gravesham are strong and based upon 'strong mutual respect'. Members repeatedly praised Officers and welcomed the support they provide. Likewise, Officers clearly respect Members and their role. In order to maintain this, the Council should be mindful that tackling some of the long-term priorities such as housing and planning may strain relations, so they should continue to work on this.

Gravesham has a great history and heritage, which the Council should be capitalising on. Many Members spoke of this history with pride, however the peer team found that the Council corporately could be more proactive in telling the story of Gravesham's maritime heritage and could make more of the links to Charles Dickens.

The peer team believe that a key task for the Council and its leadership, is the advocacy of place. Members and Officers are clearly proud of Gravesham and speak with passion about the work they are doing for the local communities, but we found that the Council is not seizing enough of the opportunities to advocate for Gravesham at a national and regional level. The Council should consider which key partners and national bodies they need to influence in order to achieve the outcomes they want for Gravesham.

This will be particularly important as the council needs to get on the front foot in relation to housing delivery in Gravesham. If Gravesham Council do not proactively articulate their vision for Gravesham and where they believe are the appropriate places for housing development, there is a danger that the Council will become boxed-in as nearby large housing developments and infrastructure projects gather pace.

The current Chief Executive is very well respected and was universally praised by Officers, Members and partners. He has made significant a contribution to organisational development, and his impending departure is a key moment for the council.

## 2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions. In addition, the conversations onsite provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

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 pro-active 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.

### 3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

#### The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise, and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Gravesham Borough Council were:

- Neil Taylor, Chief Executive, Bassetlaw District Council
- Cllr, Michael Payne, Deputy Leader of Gedling District Council
- Tracy Harvey, Head of Planning and Building Control, St Albans City Council
- Peer Challenge Manager - Angela Kawa, Programme Manager, LGA London & SE
- LGA Shadow – Dan Mould

#### Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges. These are the areas we believe are critical to councils' performance and improvement:

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the Council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of Place: Does the Council provide effective leadership of place through its elected Members, Officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?
4. Financial planning and viability: Does the Council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
5. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the Council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to provide feedback on:

1. Housing and the Housing Delivery Test
2. The Planning Service

## The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. 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 current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge every 4 to 5 years. Gravesham Borough Council had a Corporate Peer Challenge in 2013. Where relevant to do so, findings from that previous peer challenge have been referenced in this report.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge 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 3 days onsite at Gravesham Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 58 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 28 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 145 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 4 weeks in Gravesham.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (17<sup>th</sup> October 2019). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government Officers and Members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

Members and Officers provide nuanced and sensitive leadership for the district and are very much stakeholders in the area and the success of the Council. Both Members and Officers are proud of the organisation and also clearly have a good understanding of, and a strong pride, in the place.

There is a positive “Gravesham way” of doing things and there are numerous plus points for the Council in terms of good staff morale and the willingness to do their best for local people. Members of all political standpoints are also good advocates for their area and the wider district.

There is clear evidence of a strong loyalty amongst Members and staff to Gravesham (the place). The Council should utilise this more as Gravesham has a lot to be proud of- the heritage quarter, its Georgian architecture, notable public links with Dickens and Pocahontas, and historical features of interest such as the Town Pier and the Three Daws. There is a major opportunity to develop Gravesham’s night-time economy and the Council may wish to engage the community on the best way of developing this offer.

The priorities for place improvement need to be clearly defined and articulated to staff, the public and partners. The peer team found that staff and partners were clearly aware that place improvements were a priority for the organisation. However, there was far less clarity about what the key priorities for place improvement were. In one focus group the response to what do you think the key priority is was ‘we think its housing driven but we don’t know’. The political and managerial leadership should consider articulating the key priorities more clearly to staff, partners and the public.

A number of interviewees expressed their concern that the council ‘needs to be more of an advocate, promoting the place’. There is an opportunity to pull together the proud history, vibrant and varied heritage into a cohesive place narrative to promote the borough. The peer team recommends that the Council takes this opportunity to produce a narrative that Officers and Members can use to promote Gravesham and advocate for it. This narrative could then be used to encourage investment and appropriate development. This is a particularly opportune moment for the development of this narrative with a recently strengthened communications team.

### 4.2 Leadership of Place

The Leadership and Cabinet are ambitious for the place and have many good ideas that need to be evaluated and prioritised as part of the new Council’s Corporate Plan’s implementation.

The Council is self-aware, particularly in its identification of housing delivery and the planning service performance. Given the impact of the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation and any development of their sites, which are in addition to Gravesham's own targets; plus the 20% buffer target imposed upon the Council, it is unlikely to meet the targets it is being set by Central Government in the short-term. The Council therefore needs to make national comment about the position in which it has been placed and the community tensions that arise because of the potential impact on the Green Belt. There are too many constraints for it to negotiate, and therefore it needs to proactively make the case to Ministers about the position the area is facing as a result of things beyond its control.

In terms of planning, whilst some progress is being made, the action plan for improvement would benefit from some external support from the Planning Advisory Service (PAS). PAS can strengthen the arrangements and provide a fresh and objective approach to the thorough nature of the improvements the Council needs to make for this important local service.

The peer team found clear evidence of advocacy for Gravesham across the organisation but a need for everyone to 'sing from the same page'. Several interviewees expressed frustration that the Council 'Doesn't sell its success' and 'They do not promote what they have got', for example, there is some promotion of the council's home building programme but this is quite limited. Members, Officers and the Council Leadership are clearly very proud of their area but there needs to be more consistency with a clearly defined message. This message should include more promotion of what Gravesham has, including successes, location, heritage, green spaces and the river frontage.

There was consensus on the need for town centre regeneration but the placemaking vision for this needs to be clarified and communicated. The Council should consider ways in which their vision for the town centre can be communicated to Members, Officers, the public and staff, making it clear what they see the future of the town centre being.

The town centre development also provides an opportunity for more creative and innovative place shaping, including developing the night-time economy. Working with the County Council to improve street lighting, working with local development agencies to attract new business and provide a varied night-time economy, should be considered.

Gravesham is well thought of by its partners and has constructive relations. The Council was described as a 'positive and strong partner'. However, partners felt that there were some opportunities for joint working that were not being taken up and that the council could be more pro-active in bidding for funds. The peer team are of the view that there is an opportunity for the organisation to use its good standing with partners to develop greater partnership working and bid for more grants and



funds. The council may wish to consider creating a dedicated grants/bidding resource.

### 4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

Gravesham has a strong Leader and strong Chief Executive, well respected and liked. In fact, the leadership of the organisation was described by a partner as having 'strong leadership at all levels CEX, Directors and Leader'. The peer team found that Directors are accessible and visible leaders with staff saying that they appreciate the open-door policy Directors have.

The Leader and Chief Executive demonstrably work well together, but with the impending retirement of the current Chief Executive this close relationship will change and a new direction forged with the new postholder. This event should be used to change the management dynamic for both the Cabinet and Senior Management Team's decision making and include more participants and focus on the wider aspects of the new Council Plan and new topics such as the recommendation to develop a historic "brand" for Gravesham. These could be strengthened by joint Cabinet/CMT away days or half days to focus on future strategies and delivery.

The Peer Team found that staff were not always clear on the vision for the area and the key priorities for the Council. The Council could improve the cascading of key messages down from management to staff, particularly around the vision and priorities of the council.

Whilst the concept of a "commercial committee/cabinet" is sound, as is the spread of different types of property investments, this area of activity should be included in the Council's formal risk register, which in-turn should be comprehensively reviewed.

Staff feel proud to be part of the workforce, proud of the Council and valued as Members of staff. This came through very clearly in a number of interviews and focus groups with staff.

The Peer Review Team recommends strengthening the presence of HR in external recruitment processes as it is clear that the Council's staffing profile does not fully reflect the diverse nature of the community and this is exacerbated by its tendency to promote and develop from within. This is admirable for team morale, but has other connotations for the organisation. Therefore, there needs to be a more consistent approach to internal promotion, appointments and staff development at every level, underpinned by HR support.

There are clearly strong Member-Officer relationships and good cross-party Member relationships. Members said that 'Officers have always been very approachable' and that 'we all respect each other'. Both Members and officers identified this as a strength of the organisation and it is particularly impressive given

that the Council changes control frequently. The Council also manages political change well and takes a pro-active approach to new Member induction, the induction was widely praised by Members.

#### 4.4 Financial planning and viability

The Council has a good track record of delivering on financial sustainability/efficiency savings. The organisation has invested a lot of time and effort to respond to the austerity agenda with its Service Review Process which has been both thorough and proactive. Via this process every service has been examined and Gravesham used it to modernise its processes and service delivery. This has included the use of shared services and Gravesham is a respected partner in these shared arrangements.

The modelling of the Council's 10-year cash-flow forecasting has allowed the Council to segment its resources between the long, medium and short-term and allowed it to invest in its wider property portfolio. This has generated significant additional income which has prevented the need for cuts elsewhere in Gravesham's services. This is an innovative investment strategy but it is not highlighted in the corporate risk register. The peer team recommends that this is added to the risk register.

The Council has good levels of reserves and has identified a number of risks in the medium term. The council has a Medium Term Financial Strategy in place until 2019/20, supported by a 10-year Medium Term Financial Plan and a 30-year HRA Business Plan which provides numerical representation of the council's strategic ambitions. A new Medium Term Financial Strategy will be implemented from April 2020, with this being reviewed and adjusted as necessary following the outcomes of the Spending Review and Fair Funding Review expected to take place during 2020/21.

The council had significant revenue under-spending in 2018/19 and 2019/20 as a result of to the Bridging the Gap and Service Review activities undertaken, as well as the council completing a pro-active 'consistent underspend' exercise. This was especially in the areas of salaries, communities, corporate services and environment. The council may wish to consider how many of these are one-off underspends, or may in fact require changes to the base budget for these areas. The peer team noted that a number of capital projects have underspent as well. The Council should ensure this continues to be monitored, in order to ensure key capital projects do not drift too much and are not in danger of being delivered significantly later than intended.

Gravesham Council is viable, has flex in its budgets to respond to future changes, whilst continuing to invest in the place. There is an opportunity to consider the potential use of the lifted 'borrowing cap' and the resources of the housing revenue account to invest further in housing. The council has a new Administration which has a significant and ambitious approach to housing delivery and standards and as

such, these need to be considered and accommodated within the 30-year HRA Business Plan.

After a prolonged period of austerity and savings, there is now a need to focus on the Corporate Plan priorities.

#### **4.5 Capacity to deliver**

The Council has weathered the challenge of austerity and is in good corporate health. It is ahead of its milestones for 'bridging the gap' and this sound financial platform has enabled the Council to remain stable. There has been a prudent approach to reviewing posts. However, the Council is now at a crossroads and recognises the need to become more outwardly focussed after expending its capacity, downsizing significantly in the last decade. For example, the Council may wish to consider creating a dedicated resource for grant/fund bidding.

There is a positive staff culture with interdisciplinary group working, which may not be necessary for some smaller issues, but this could be of great benefit in terms of flexible/mobile working and putting the Council's existing policies into practice, as the Council's current technology offer is limited in some areas. This could also be an important factor in any future location where the Council could accommodate all of its existing operations in a smaller physical space, to save money operationally and also enable other services if necessary, to use any future council site. There is an opportunity for a corporate strategy for digital transformation to address some of these issues.

The council operates a staff suggestion scheme but the peer team are of the view that this could be promoted more effectively and improved. Staff expressed some frustration that when they did make suggestions, they did not get feedback.

Given the 'London effect' of the district's geographical area, short train times to the capital and the advent of the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation which also needs similar staff to Gravesham, there is an opportunity for the Council to do more to grow their own leaders of tomorrow. Various staffing pathways such as NGDP, trainee schemes and apprenticeships are all recommended to be examined as part of the response to this.

The Peer Team found that the workforce could be more reflective of the local population's diversity. Data on staff diversity could be strengthened and more consideration given to ways in which underrepresented communities within the organisation could be developed. The Council may also wish to consider what opportunities there are, identifying ambassadors to assist with recruitment of a more diverse workforce.

The retirement of the current, well-respected, Chief Executive will present a challenge for the organisation. We recommend that the induction plan for the new

Chief Executive includes joint sessions delivered by the Leader and Chief Executive to cascade key information and expectations from the Corporate Plan to staff.

#### **4.6 Housing and the Housing Delivery Test**

Members across the political groups expressed a clear concern about the lack of affordable housing and the need for the Council to tackle this issue. Members also reported that this was a key concern for their residents, who are worried about being priced out of the area and the potential for over-development of the villages surrounding Gravesham.

Across the Council there is a good understanding of the difficulties of delivering housing to meet the needs of the local community in an area with good links to London and constraints of heritage and Green Belt. The tension is recognised between protecting the Green Belt and the special heritage character of the area whilst meeting, affordable housing need. There is an opportunity with cross-party consensus on housing being a priority to open the conversation, including the local community, on how to balance these tensions. Time could be taken to explore the opportunities to deliver now, perhaps capitalising on the key infrastructure developments, with political buy-in.

Using these conversations, seizing on the cross-party consensus and the change in leadership, the Council could take charge of the situation in relation to housing delivery in Gravesham, including putting its argument strongly to Government. Building on the passion and commitment the elected Members have for the borough, the message on housing delivery could be translated in a proactive and positive way for the borough at a national level.

There are good examples of working towards housing delivery. The Planning Service are working proactively on stalled housing sites to bring these forward for occupation. New affordable Council housing is being built within the borough. The Council is building new housing as part of its town centre proposals. However, these areas need to be supported across the whole Council as there is unlikely to be a single solution to the high levels of housing delivery needed. The Council may also wish to consider how key infrastructure projects and Ebbsfleet presents both challenges and opportunities for housing and development in Gravesham.

The Council's new Head of Communications has the opportunity to look afresh at steps that can be taken to promote the Council's successes and be more proactive in telling the public that new affordable homes are being built.

#### **4.7 The Planning Service**

In addition to Gravesham's own housing targets, the 20% buffer target has been imposed upon the Council, meaning it is unlikely to meet the targets being set by Central Government in the short-term. The Planning Service has a vital role to

play in delivering the Council's placemaking vision and meeting the housing challenge.

The Council recognises that the Planning Service needs to be strengthened and its performance is not as strong as it should be. For Minor Developments in quarter 3 of 2017/18, only 50% of applications were determined in time. This improved in quarter 2 of 2019/20 to some 79% of applications determined in time (a drop from the previous quarter performance of 87%). Clearly the Planning Service is on an improvement journey towards prioritising delivery of development and is making good progress. There are further steps which are planned within an Improvement Plan.

This Improvement Plan needs to be jointly owned and developed with Cabinet and the Management Team. The plan could be enhanced by identifying priorities, outcomes and timescales, recognising the difficulties in implementing change when recruitment for planners is a challenge. The amended Improvement Plan could then be integrated into the outcome / performance objectives, including reducing response times for Pre-Application enquiries.

To help establish the priorities, planning staff need a clear understanding of the placemaking vision and priorities of the Cabinet. Planning Committee Members could benefit from a similar understanding, with the potential of support and training on their role and how these priorities could be translated into day-to-day decision making on planning and heritage applications. Members would also benefit from a further review of the length and complexity of reports to Planning Committee.

The Planning Advisory Service could provide some independent advice and support to assist the Council with these changes.

The Planning Service are continuing to review their processes and procedures. This could be further enhanced by a review of how improvements could be made to the IT system to ensure Planning can monitor delivery, what is 'in the system' and to help all staff manage the process and individual applications.

## **5. Next steps**

### **Immediate next steps**

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Will Brooks, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). His contact details are: [William.Brooks@local.gov.uk](mailto:William.Brooks@local.gov.uk)

In the meantime, we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

### **Follow up visit**

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the Council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all Members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the Council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 2 years.

### **Next Corporate Peer Challenge**

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the Council will commission their next Peer Challenge before 2024.

### **Examples of good practice**

Gravesham's Member induction process was universally praised by councillors on all sides of the council chamber. The process was also described as thorough and extremely useful by councillors. The peer team believe the induction process could make a good LGA case study. Gravesham's experience as a council which regularly changes political control, would make this case study of particular interest to councils who have recently changed control, or who have many new Members who were elected for the first time.