

Gravesham Borough Council – Self Assessment - DLUHC guidance for addressing cultural and governance failings in local authorities

Indicators of cultural or governance issues	Position Statement	Opportunities to develop current arrangements
<p>Is there a lack of effective political and/or corporate leadership, including an overreliance on interim statutory officers?</p>	<p>All three statutory officer roles (Head of Paid Service, s151 Officer and Monitoring Officer) are filled on a permanent basis by officers with extensive experience of working in local government.</p> <p>Whilst the Monitoring Officer role is fulfilled through a shared arrangement with Medway Council, resilience is provided through the Deputy Monitoring Officer.</p> <p>All three statutory officers are members of the council's Management Team and attend Full Council and Cabinet Meetings/Briefings.</p> <p>The political landscape of Gravesham has meant that no one political party has held office for more than one term prior to the May 2023 elections. This has assisted in ensuring robust overview and scrutiny mechanisms are in place for decisions taken by the Cabinet.</p> <p>There has been a balance of turnover of Elected Members at each Local Election, with the council retaining long-standing, experienced Members as well as new Members joining the political groups. The Chief Executive and Leader meet formally at least twice each week, with each Director meeting with the Chief Executive and Leader on a monthly basis. The council's Management Team and Cabinet meet monthly in private.</p>	<p>Whilst the intention was to implement Cabinet Away Days on a six-month basis, this has not been fulfilled and therefore, there is a need to revisit this and re-commence the Away Day process.</p>

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Is there a lack of effective political and/or corporate leadership, including an overreliance on interim statutory officers? (cont.)	Following the LGA Peer Review in October 2019, and the subsequent follow-up review in March 2021, a programme of Cabinet Away days were implemented with the first taking place on 21 October 2021 and a second in February 2022. At the first Away Day it was agreed to have future follow-up away days geared around specific topic areas. The first in February 2022 focussed on Housing Services.	
Is there a lack of corporate capacity, resulting in a lack of strategic vision and direction, and inadequate internal processes?	<p>The council keeps its resources under constant review. Where resources and skills cannot be found in-house, principally due to the technical or specialist nature of the skills or knowledge required, these will be obtained from external experts and professional bodies.</p> <p>The council is committed to developing staff and improving their skills and experience through formal and informal training, offering qualification training, CPD and enabling staff to take part in project and working groups for corporate projects.</p> <p>Like many public sector bodies, the council is experiencing challenges in recruiting and retaining quality, experienced staff in key areas. In response to this, the council has implemented arrangements that provide the opportunity to work from home, depending on the needs of the service and is reviewing its staff benefits package and recruitment processes.</p>	There is a need to keep the recruitment and retention tools utilised by the council under review and to ensure there is recognition where external support and assistance is required in supporting decision-making.

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Is there a lack of corporate capacity, resulting in a lack of strategic vision and direction, and inadequate internal processes? (cont.)	<p>The council monitors staff sickness on a monthly basis at a Directorate level so that action can be taken if increased sickness and stress levels start to emerge.</p> <p>All decision reports to be presented to Members are considered by the council's management team so that governance and financial considerations can be discussed and agreed. Officer decisions are also approved or shared with the MT where such decisions are delegated to single or designated officers.</p>	
Is there poor and inappropriate councillor conduct?	Member-generated Member Conduct complaints have historically been low in numbers. In addition, cross-party Member training sessions are held to promote relationships and shared learning, and the recent new Member induction programme included sessions on the Code of Conduct and Equalities and Cohesion.	The council will continue to review Member training programmes and meeting attendance and monitor Member conduct complaints.

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Is there conflict and distrust among and between councillors and senior officers?	<p>There is a shared vision of what the council will achieve for the Borough which is expressed through the Corporate Plan. Both officers and Members are held to account on delivery of the Corporate Plan through the Performance Management systems and reporting adopted by the council.</p> <p>The LGA Peer Challenge undertaken in October 2019, and followed up in March 2021, found that member-officer relationships are strong and based on “...<i>strong mutual respect. Members repeatedly praised Officers and welcomed the support they provide. Likewise, Officers clearly respect Members and their role.</i>” The review also stated that there are “...<i>good cross-party Member relationships.</i>”</p>	The council will continue to monitor councillor and senior officer relationships.
Is there an absence of effective scrutiny, transparency, and public consultation, including inadequate protections for whistle-blowers?	<p>The Overview Scrutiny Committee is chaired by the Leader of the Opposition Group. Both Members and Officers can be called to attend meetings to explain decisions made.</p> <p>Reports for decision are presented in Part A and Part B of Agendas to provide transparency in decision-making while ensuring access to exempt information is adequately controlled. Exempt information is available to all members of the council.</p>	<p>The council will implement the planned public consultation programme.</p> <p>The council will investigate opportunities to provide support and training to all Members on the role of Scrutiny, with a view to providing specific scrutiny training for Overview Scrutiny Committee members to ensure they have the skills and independent mindset to hold the Cabinet to account.</p>

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<p>Is there an absence of effective scrutiny, transparency, and public consultation, including inadequate protections for whistle-blowers? (cont.)</p>	<p>Through the annual review of its Governance arrangements, the council has recognised that it needs to increase the level of public consultation it undertakes. A new branded consultation programme, published annually, will provide opportunities for positively shaping council policy and accessible service design, especially important at a time of challenging financial projections, whilst also exploring reflective feedback in terms of resident satisfaction with council services.</p> <p>The council has also recognised that it needs to conduct a full review of its Constitution to ensure that it remains up to date and fit for purpose, in terms of council protocols and procedures around decision-making.</p> <p>Members and Senior Officers of the council actively engage with their Peers, professional bodies, and external subject experts to maintain their knowledge and seek advice. A key strength identified through the Peer Challenge was the council's work with partners, with the review report stating "...there was positive feedback from all the partners the review team spoke to. Partners spoke very highly of the Council and said the Council understands the local community."</p>	<p>The council will complete its review of the Constitution.</p> <p>The council will continue to monitor complaints and use these to identify trends or patterns in complaints for further investigation and action.</p>

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<p>Is there an absence of effective scrutiny, transparency, and public consultation, including inadequate protections for whistle-blowers? (cont.)</p>	<p>The Peer Challenge recognised there was a need to continue to ensure partners were fully informed of council priorities and projects and in response to this the Executive and Leader have put in place a number of periodic meetings/ discussions with strategic partners of the Council to ensure that those partners are aligned with the Council's own priorities, opportunities are maximised to promote the work being undertaken by the Council and support is sought where that is required to help move projects forward. Notable examples of such strategic partners are Homes England, Lower Thames Crossing, and key developers within the Borough.</p> <p>The culture of the council enables Officers and Members to raise concerns or risks. The council's Whistleblowing Policy is available on the staff Intranet and the council website.</p> <p>The council has an efficient formal complaint handing process, demonstrated by the number of complaints that are escalated and upheld by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.</p> <p>The Peer Challenge recognised that "...<i>The Council has a strong programme of engagement initiatives with its diverse community.</i>" This is being further developed through a detailed Community Engagement Plan.</p>	

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<p>Is there a lack of awareness and acceptance of the need for improvement; and insufficient capacity to achieve the change required?</p>	<p>The Chief Executive has been part of the LGA Peer Review Team at other authorities and is an advocate of other senior officers also supporting the LGA Peer Review process.</p> <p>In October 2019, the council underwent a Corporate Peer Challenge undertaken by the LGA. This review was welcomed and embraced with officers across the council being involved as well as members and partners. The findings from the review were shared not only with senior management but across the council. Following this review, the council actively sought to have a follow-up review in March 2021 and were the first authority to go through a ‘virtual follow-up’ following COVID. Plans are already in place to reach out to the LGA early 2024 to arrange the next Peer Challenge in late 2024.</p> <p>The Peer Challenge report recognised that the council’s approach to the challenge of austerity had been robust and the approach to posts and recruitment had been prudent. It also recognised that this was an area for the council to further consider moving forward and in responding to this, the council has introduced a Hybrid Working Policy to encourage flexibility and support staff.</p>	<p>Continuation of the council’s active engagement in the Peer Review process.</p>

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<p>Is there a lack of awareness and acceptance of the need for improvement; and insufficient capacity to achieve the change required? (cont.)</p>	<p>The internal audit function of the council reports to a member of the council's Management Team and is recognised by the council as a key part of its governance arrangements. The Head of Internal Audit has direct access to the Chief Executive and the Chair of the Finance & Audit Committee and the work of Internal Audit, including the status of recommendations to strengthen or address weaknesses in the council's internal control arrangements, is reported to both the council's Management Team and Finance & Audit Committee.</p> <p>The council has a proven track record of recognising and implementing change, particularly as a means to managing its financial position, with the Bridging the Gap programme which was commenced in 2016 and delivered in 2019, and the more recent Balancing the Budget programme, intended to deliver £4.3m of base budget reduction. In both programmes, both officers and members played their part in considering changes to council services as a means of promoting efficiency and continuous improvement through the Service Improvement Workstream, and the current Corporate Improvement Team programme of reviews.</p>	