


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Blaby District Council

Tuesday 22 to Friday 25 March 2022

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

Blaby District Council (DC) is a well-run local authority; it has a sound financial position, strong leadership, particularly through its Leader and Chief Executive, and committed staff. There is real ownership by members and officers, and everyone wants to do their best for Blaby as a council, place and for its communities.

The council has continued to deliver well, particularly through the Covid-19 pandemic, eg by responding to vulnerable residents' and other customers' needs, and responding to the landfill gas issues at Huncote Leisure Centre, following the discovery of elevated levels during routine maintenance works in November 2021.

Blaby DC is highly respected and trusted by partners and residents – both as an equal and leading district council partner within the Leicestershire county area.

Blaby DC is self-aware and open to challenge, as evidenced by the council's invite to the Local Government Association (LGA) to undertake this Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC), the subsequent scoping and work towards this CPC, its acceptance of the peer team's findings and recommendations, and willingness to address them.

The lack of a corporate performance management and measurement framework since before the pandemic however is holding back Blaby DC's ability to drive change and improvement throughout the council. Blaby DC had already alerted the peer team to this in advance, enabling the peer team to explore this issue further.

Blaby DC also recognises the need to clarify its definition and approach to 'commerciality' and transformation to drive its priorities, work and budget forward.

The council should also focus on its internal enabling functions, eg human resources (HR) and organisational development (OD), information and communication technology (ICT) and communications, to ensure the whole council works as effectively as possible. These are all well-established functions in their own right but further developing these will help build additionally capacity, and support members and officers to deliver even better services and ambitions for Blaby's residents, businesses and visitors.

2. Key recommendations

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

- 2.1. Develop and lead a long-term vision for Blaby as a place/district with partners** – the council's corporate plan, the Blaby District Plan 2021-24, outlines its priorities and contribution to the district but there is no wider long-term district vision beyond strategic growth. The council has a clear opportunity to lead such a vision to align council resources and projects with partners.
- 2.2. Review the council's corporate plan to drive the council and its priorities forward, post pandemic** – the current plan runs from 2021 to 2024 but many external factors have already changed, eg in terms of the pandemic and the cost of living. Alongside the Chief Executive settling into her role since joining the council in November, now is a timely opportunity to review the plan to drive the council's work further forward.
- 2.3. Develop a corporate performance management framework, including service plans and personal appraisals** – Blaby DC has not had such a framework since before the pandemic. Various council teams therefore do not reliably know how they have performed, to time or target, as part of a clear 'golden thread' - from corporate, service to individual staff priorities. This is holding back the council's ability to drive change and improvement and needs addressing as soon as possible. This will ensure the council's resources are best focused to deliver the corporate plan's priorities.
- 2.4. Develop an overall delivery/business plan, including targets, building on your Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and other plans, to address local government financial challenges** – the council is undertaking various financial work strands. Developing such an overall delivery/business plan will ensure these different work strands complement each other and avoid duplication, overlap and conflicts. It will also help address the wider local government financial challenges affecting the council.

- 2.5. Define what transformation means to the council and any consequent organisational change required** - the council is developing an approach to transformation and already recognises the need to clarify what it means. This will need owning and driving by cabinet and the Senior Leadership team with service teams and other members to ensure everyone fully understands, supports and delivers the plan to best progress the council's work. As part of this, the council should focus on its enabling services, eg HR, OD, ICT and communications, to ensure sufficient focus and capacity towards transformation.
- 2.6. Define what commerciality will mean for the council, and challenge members' and officers' appetite for risk** - there is currently a lack of clarity of what commerciality is and how ambitious the council should be in this respect. There is similarly no common agreement of commercial risk appetite within the council. Blaby DC therefore needs to reconcile these different views to form a clear agreement, on which to base its overall approach.
- 2.7. Use communications to full effect throughout the council, eg to best engage with customers, promote your achievements and services, etc** - there is much potential within this function if it can deploy external support. Such opportunities include: more consultation with stakeholders to inform decision making, non-digital communications to help those with limited access to digital services, and more one to one access to services through council buildings and enhanced telephone services for those with specific questions or needs. The LGA's communications support offer can help review the communications approach to assist all this.
- 2.8. Review and refresh the scrutiny function** - the Scrutiny Commission is not as effective as it could be. The council should therefore thoroughly review its scrutiny function to explore and address its strengths and areas to improve so that it works to full effect. The LGA and Centre for Public Scrutiny can assist with this in various ways.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1. 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:

- Jack Hegarty, former Joint Chief Executive of Malvern Hills and Wychavon District Councils
- Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen, Leader of the Council, Breckland Council
- Karen Sly, Finance Director, Great Yarmouth Borough Council
- Heather Greenan, Director of Policy, Insight and Communications - Derby City Council
- Lucy Darragh, National Management Trainee, Sheffield City Council
- Vicki Goddard, Peer Challenge Manager, LGA
- Daniella Howell, Project Support Officer, LGA.

3.2. Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all CPCs. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement, and were further tailored for Blaby DC:

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 and achieving improved outcomes for all its communities? Are the council's priorities, under the banners of "live", "work" and "visit," clear and realistic? Are the council's performance management framework and external communications and engagement strategy fit for purpose, eg to ensure effective communications, engagement and consultation with residents?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities? What are working relationships like with the

Leicestershire county, borough and district councils and with other stakeholders within the wider region, especially in light of the developing county deal?

3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of respect, challenge and scrutiny? Is the senior management structure enabling it to work as effectively as possible?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a clear understanding of its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a clear plan to address its financial challenges? Is the council fully responding to the recommendations of the LGA's financial health check?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve? Is the council adequately supporting its members and staff – and how, particularly in terms of their mental health? Are the council's internal transformation agenda and internal communications strategy fit for purpose? How siloed are council services as a result working at home throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, and what can be done to enhance collaborative working within the council?

3.3. 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 and a half days onsite at Blaby DC, during which they:

- gathered information and views from 46 meetings, in addition to further research and reading

- spoke to more than 80 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.

4. Feedback

4.1. Local priorities and outcomes

The council has delivered significant achievements recently, which align with the priorities in Blaby DC's corporate plan. These achievements include community services' individual, timely support to the district's most vulnerable residents throughout the pandemic to ensure their health, wellbeing and safety. This support has been informed by services' good understanding of their local residents and how they should best respond to their needs, eg through their joint Lightbulb home improvement and Hospital Housing Enablement Teams with other Leicestershire councils and health partners. The peer team were also impressed with Blaby DC's multi-disciplinary planning and strategic growth team, which has led notable development of the Everards Meadows brewery, restaurant and shop site, and expansion of the retail Fosse Park and the New Lubbesthorpe Sustainable Urban Extension.

Other positive performance examples from Blaby DC's [LG \(local government\) Inform Headline Report](#) include its: percentage of vacant dwellings, its rate of new enterprises – 66.6 per 10,000 compared to the regional district average of 48.2, and its council tax, business rates, household waste and recycling collection.

The headline report also highlights other areas relating to this CPC where performance had been reducing. Blaby DC for example built 19 fewer affordable homes in 2020/21 than it did in 2019/20ⁱ. Such construction work across the country was significantly impacted by lockdowns and pandemic restrictions, which saw very notable periods of downtime. Momentum increased however as those restrictions eased, with the council building 77 new affordable homes in 2021/22. Additionally, Blaby DC's percentage of active over 16 year olds in 2020 stood at 57.7 per cent compared to East Midlands district councils mean of 60.9 per centⁱⁱ. This again

however was at a time when leisure and other related council services across the country were similarly impacted by pandemic restrictions. The council therefore needs to address issues like these if its existing work programmes are not already progressing these.

Satisfaction with various council services is in any case high, as evidenced through annual survey results. At least 79 per cent of residents for example are satisfied with refuse and recycling collection, as were the residents from the council's newly formed Customer Focus Group whom the peer team spoke to. Blaby DC additionally undertakes consultation exercises to inform its corporate plan, the Local Plan and individual services.

Blaby DC is very good at responding to the needs of its residents in more reactive and individual ways. The peer team heard little however about how the council proactively uses district demographic profiles, either of protected characteristics or otherwise, for example to understand the needs of diverse communities, or groups affected by poverty or digital connectivity/skills levels, to improve existing or consider future services. The district however has a minority ethnic population of 11.5 per cent as per the 2011 Census; most notably 6.1 per cent of the population are of Asian ethnicity. Residents suggested that providing information in various languages including Polish may help residents of those languages better understand and engage with services and the council. The council's refuse service has already produced leaflets in other languages to deal with low recycling rates in parts of the district, which is practice the council can build on through its other services. Blaby DC's latest residents survey also highlighted that 28 per cent of respondents said they had a disability or long-term health problem. Such examples could influence and improve service delivery and engagement with Blaby's residents from minority groups, which the council should explore further through existing and future equality, diversity and inclusion data and intelligence relating to protected and other key demographic characteristics. This particularly includes the Census 2021 data expected shortly. The council would not need to start from scratch. The peer team heard about many examples within the council's health improvement work, eg involving Polish, Punjabi, Gipsy and Traveller communities, which other service teams can learn from and build on.

Residents and front-line staff also raised the need for the council to open its

reception and services more to the public. Not all customers can access services online, many residents have become isolated during the pandemic, or can have specific queries that cannot be answered via standard or automated ways. The council therefore not only needs to open its reception and services more but communicate how and when those services are available, so customers have maximum opportunity to engage with the council. This will help ensure customers' needs are best met and provide the council with valuable information about its customers and communities to inform service and corporate planning.

The lack of a corporate performance management and measurement framework since before the pandemic, including intelligence, insight and data, is holding back Blaby DC's ability to drive change and improvement throughout the council. This includes the lack of consistent service planning and staff appraisals across the council's teams. All this means that various teams do not reliably know or can evidence whether they have performed well, where their strengths and weaknesses lie, or how to time or target their projects are being delivered. There is also the potential for staff not to be fully aware of how they contribute to the council's corporate plan at individual and service level, through the 'golden thread' that links each individual's and team's contribution to that plan. There is therefore the potential that work may deviate from those corporate priorities as a result of that lack of clarity; the peer team did not see any evidence of this but the possibility nevertheless remains. Blaby DC therefore needs to rapidly build on its work to re-establish its corporate performance and measurement framework, fully utilise its re-contracted performance management software, develop service plans and progress staff appraisals consistently across its teams. This will ensure all council resources are best focused to deliver on the corporate plan's priorities. A number of services already plan and performance manage their work rigorously, eg those of a mandatory and/or regulatory nature, which others can learn from. As part of this, the council should review how the council undertakes service reviews and organisational design to ensure cabinet members best own and are part of the process. Any reports or presentations on service reviews and organisational design should similarly be presented to the relevant committee, including overview and scrutiny, for their consideration, to ensure they also best own and are part of the process.

Blaby DC has been developing a strong corporate commitment to its green agenda

over the last two years, which is being led by the council's Green Officer based in its Environmental Services team. The work includes the council's climate change strategy, carbon neutral action plan, related working groups and members' keenness for the council to lead by example. Blaby DC will need to strengthen and promote this work within its refreshed corporate plan, once reviewed, to ensure its most effective continuation. Service teams also need to take more responsibility for the green agenda by building it into their service planning to ensure maximum positive changes are made. Carbon literacy training across the council has initiated this process, which now needs embedding within all teams so the council's positive corporate narrative on its green agenda becomes a reality throughout the council.

4.2. Organisational and place leadership

Blaby DC is very strong in terms of partnership working and is highly respected internally and externally in this regard. All the Leicestershire councils and partners for example who spoke to the peer team outlined their positive work and relationships with Blaby DC. These councils and other partners also highlighted that they look to Blaby DC to lead, drive and influence work where appropriate, as well as participate as an equal partner. The council should therefore make the most of this positive reputation to further enhance the council's positioning within partnerships and its work on behalf of the district. Blaby DC undertakes such partnership work well, as evidenced through strong frontline deliverables such as building control, the Lightbulb and the Hospital Housing Enablement Teams outlined above, and its Covid-19 initiated community hub to address urgent needs of its more vulnerable residents, the work of which continues today to help address current cost of living issues. Blaby DC service teams also works well with other Leicestershire councils and partners, eg via working groups on affordable housing, land charges, joint strategic planning and community safety, tourism and members advisory groups. Officer to officer relationships and work with Leicestershire County Council are healthy and productive at operational level. These should be used to full effect as part of Blaby DC's political and strategic approach to and involvement in any devolution deal with Leicestershire County Council and other partners. The peer team heard from various sources that Leicestershire district and borough councils have only been able to play a very limited role so far. Making the most of Blaby DC's relationships with the county council will therefore help avoid the potential for missed opportunities for Blaby

district residents to fully benefit from such a county-wide deal.

Leadership is also very strong within Blaby DC itself. The peer team heard from others, and for itself, the council Leader's genuine passion and success in making a difference to the lives of individuals and whole communities through the council's services, and how he works well with his cabinet and other members including those from different political groups to do so. Similarly, the peer team witnessed how the Chief Executive is already highly regarded through her work and proactive, understanding and supportive approach since taking up her role in November 2021. A key example of this was her leading the council's prompt and honest response to the Huncote Leisure Centre incident mentioned previously, two days into her role, which residents also spoke well of.

The council is additionally planning a significant strategic growth agenda, which is already successfully delivering and exploring major projects throughout the district. This is through its multi-disciplinary planning and strategic growth team, which has led notable development of the Everards Meadows brewery, restaurant and shop site, and expansion of the retail Fosse Park and the New Lubbethorpe Sustainable Urban Extension, which will eventually include 4,250 homes. The team is also exploring two potential strategic sites in the south of the district. These sites could be developed into garden villages or equivalents as part of the Strategic Growth Plan for Leicestershire.

The long-term vision for Blaby as a whole place/district does however need developing beyond strategic growth, which the council should lead on with its partners, given its good reputation amongst them. Blaby DC's corporate plan outlines its own priorities and contribution to the district through its services but the peer team found no clear long-term vision for the wider district with partners. Opportunities are therefore being missed to align council resources and projects with partners so that their combined contributions are greater than the sum of their parts. The LGA has supported various councils with such work, from setting the vision to developing place narratives and branding. The LGA is therefore well placed to support Blaby DC with developing this place-based vision with its partners.

Blaby DC is undertaking a lot of partnership work but it sometimes develops on an ad hoc basis, which would benefit from more strategic oversight by its Senior Leadership

Team. There is for example no one single council contact to co-ordinate relationships with local businesses, and the council could enable/facilitate more meetings with its local voluntary, community, faith and wider health sectors. Senior strategic oversight would help ensure such partnership work contributes to the council's and partners' corporate priorities.

The council also needs to review its proposed pipeline of plans to ensure they are best managed, aligned and timetabled. Financial, transformation, service, and learning and development plans are proposed to be developed in 2022, alongside a new corporate and service level performance framework and a mental health support review. These proposals are laudable, especially post-pandemic and looking to the future, but there is notable potential for confusion, duplication and overlap across these plans. The plans' ambitions could also spread the council's capacity too thin – there may not be enough staff to deliver what is required, instead of focusing on what is key. Blaby DC should therefore review the need, timetabling and detail required for all these plans. This will help ensure they fully align with one another in the most manageable and beneficial ways to best drive the council's work forward.

A key factor in reviewing this pipeline of plans is Blaby DC's corporate plan. Whilst the latter runs from 2021 to 2024, many external factors have already changed since its publication, eg in terms of the pandemic, the cost of living, the on-going implications of Brexit and the Ukrainian crisis. With all this considered, alongside the Chief Executive settling into her role, now is a timely opportunity to review the plan to drive the council and its priorities further forward.

An additional part of these plans is ensuring that the council's Senior Leadership Team structure remains fit for purpose in years to come, as the wider local government landscape evolves, and the council develops its priorities and requirements further; this includes commerciality, transformation, ICT and flexible working. The Chief Executive is therefore reviewing this structure, alongside the current vacancies at Senior Leadership Team level, and was due to present a proposed structure to service managers the week after this CPC. From what the peer team saw of these proposals, it was not always clear who is responsible for what services/functions. Clarity and accountability of these roles is therefore paramount, as well as the distinction between group and strategic managers within the current structure arrangements. The Chief Executive will therefore need to consider and lead

on these issues further with the Senior Leadership Team, group and service managers at pace to share and agree clear reasoning and collective understanding and support for the structure. Its implementation may need to be evolutionary, eg to respond to any reviewed/emerging priorities. As part of this, the council should consider reviewing the Joint Appointments Panel to ensure cabinet members own and are part of the process. Any related reports or presentations should be put to the relevant committee, including overview and scrutiny, for their consideration, to ensure they also own and are part of the process.

4.3. Governance and culture

Staff and members spoke positively about the “Blaby Way” with the peer team throughout its visit. It can mean different things to different people but is basically understood and supported by staff. It is ultimately a set of principles summarising the council’s positive, friendly and supportive organisational staff culture and aspirations to deliver council priorities through service plans. The council is developing a summary paper of what these principles are and mean, to clarify and enable them to be embedded within all teams to further strengthen positive ways of working. The Blaby Way will also be promoted through recruitment opportunities, to attract potential external candidates through the council’s positive working culture.

Key outcomes of the Blaby Way include good working relationships and trust between members, the Senior Leadership Team and staff, which all these cohorts referred to throughout the peer team’s visit. Through such positive relationships, the whole council is committed to delivering the best services for its residents, businesses and other customers. The cabinet also feels comfortable to challenge the Leader as required, enhancing its decision making.

The Scrutiny Commission however is currently not as effective as it could be. The function has been strong and award winning in the past but the pandemic made it initially difficult for the commission to even meet, as it did for any council. The lack of a corporate performance management framework has also made it difficult for the commission to properly focus on the council’s live, work and visit priorities, scrutinise service delivery throughout the council and recommend improvement changes. The commission has therefore often relied on anecdotal evidence, eg photos of fly-tipping and other incidents, to investigate service delivery. Such examples may explain why

the commission has sometimes asked for information and raised questions on a more ad hoc, rather than strategic basis that could be better focused on issues it can most influence. These examples may in turn be impacting on the commission's ability to more robustly challenge policy development. The peer team also heard how call-in procedures and the commission's chair could play a stronger role. Task and finish groups have worked well however, as has financial scrutiny in some instances.

The peer team heard mixed views about the commission, both positive and otherwise, but there is a willingness to review and improve the scrutiny function. The council should therefore make the most of this willingness to thoroughly review its scrutiny function to identify and address its strengths and areas to improve, bringing it back to its former effectiveness to drive the council's priorities forward in the most informed way. The LGA and Centre for Public Scrutiny can assist with this in various ways, eg from facilitating the review to delivering member training as required.

Post the Covid-19 pandemic, reviewing Blaby DC's scheme of delegation would be good governance, as it would be for any council. This would help ensure that Blaby DC's political and managerial leadership continues to make decisions at the most appropriate level, given the national context of ever-changing expectations and ways of working across the country. Leadership commitment within the council to a planned review of the scheme of delegation would therefore contribute to such good governance.

The council is also developing an approach to transformation as part of its pipeline of plans and recognises the need to clarify what transformation means for Blaby DC, eg technology, agile/hybrid working, other organisational and/or additional changes. This approach needs to be owned and driven by cabinet and the Senior Leadership team so they can engage with service teams and other members to create capacity, support and mechanisms to encourage and make the most of their ideas and innovation. All this will ensure that everyone fully understands, supports and delivers the plan and knows what they can expect from it to best drive the council's priorities, work and budget forward.

The pandemic brought about initial, inevitable silo working, as members and staff worked remotely with fewer opportunities to work together, which the council has addressed in various ways. Technology for example has enabled regular lively Blaby

Matters online Zoom calls, typically engaging over 150 staff participants, and a wide range of regular, productive online managerial, political and service group and team meetings. There are also more opportunities to work together in council buildings, which senior leadership is keen on, eg to enhance collaborative working, engage more with communities and support member and staff wellbeing. The council's offices remain the default place of work for all contractual and administrative purposes, and Blaby DC has allocated expenditure to refurbish such office space accordingly. This will create more collaborative work spaces for teams to work in person whilst also accommodating more agile, hybrid and other effective ways of working through technology, both remotely and in the office, which are being explored by the Blaby Way We Work project. This will help staff to continue delivering excellent services, enhance their work-life balance, and reduce environmental impacts from work related travel as part of the council's green agenda.

Some silo working still remains, eg siloed communications between the housing, and revenues and benefits teams, and changes to business support not being communicated to the customer contact centre. Some of this is understandably due to required remote and hybrid working throughout the pandemic, fewer people working in council buildings than normal, and possibly the lack of consistent service planning across the council. The latter could be contributing to staff not necessarily being fully aware how other colleagues' work relates to theirs and therefore possibly missing opportunities to join their work up. Managers therefore need to work with their own and across teams to consider, agree and address how best to work together to enhance team working, service delivery and wellbeing.

4.4. Financial planning and management

The council has a robust and trusted financial function, and the finance team are highly respected by members and officers, who spoke very well of the finance team in their meetings with the peer team. Particular examples of good work mentioned included that on the budget including pre-scrutiny work and the right level of detail, which helped gain members' trust and confidence in the finance function.

There is good understanding and management of the council's finances. Blaby DC has robust budget setting and monitoring procedures and has consistently spent within its budget, including through the pandemic. This not only sets the council in

good, current steady but enables it to best respond to any potential financial challenges in future. The Scrutiny Commission values the right level and transparency of financial detail presented to them, for example through their meeting papers.

Blaby DC has continued to deliver underspends annually against the agreed budget. Whilst this provides additional year end resources to be allocated to reserves, a more fundamental review of the reasons for the continued underspends could inform a review of base budgets as part of the annual budget setting process. Reported surpluses for the two most recent financial years (2019/20 and 2020/21) were in the region of £800,000 to £850,000. The current year is on track to deliver a further underspend for 2021/22 (as reported in the latest financial monitoring report), therefore not relying on the use of reserves as originally budgeted for in 2021/22.

An analysis of the council's reserves highlights that a number of more significant earmarked reserves are held to cushion the impact of changes to the council's financial position. The general fund reserve and the general fund are the reserves used to smooth out the impacts and potentially invest in spend to save activities. The national non domestic rate reserve is used to smooth out the impact of fluctuations in income from business rates. There is also scope to fund initial 'invest to save' proposals that will then deliver future efficiencies.

There could be reluctance to review savings and additional income opportunities due to the previous annual underspends being delivered against the agreed budget. Having a suite of options for cabinet to consider at an early stage of the budget setting cycle however does present opportunities. Aligning these against Blaby DC's priorities with the commercial and transformation agenda will put the council in a stronger position if difficult budget setting decisions are needed in the medium-term.

There are also opportunities to reduce the council's future financial budget gap of £4.5 million by 2026/27. These include for example reviewing the council's approach and opportunities around fees and charges, possible bidding for further external income, and previous, consistent underspends as part of its base budget. Blaby DC may also want to revisit its reserves levels, which currently remain stable but may need reviewing if they are used to fund future financial gaps.

The council has also been proactive in identifying and progressing savings and

additional income opportunities, especially through partnerships, for example on land charges and building control. These partnerships can also add resilience, such as by working together and strengthening their work generally beyond savings and income generation. These opportunities have sometimes however been developed on an ad hoc rather than strategic basis. There are therefore opportunities to formally align these savings and income opportunities with the council's corporate and financial plans to ensure they contribute as effectively as possible to those corporate priorities.

Members and officers have good, creative, financial ideas that are supported and considered. The peer team heard throughout its visit that members in particular have big ambitions to make the most of the council's and district's assets for income generation. As part of this, members want the council and district themselves to benefit from such income and economic growth, rather than just the local businesses and other partners they are supporting. This will ensure strong, local value and reasoning for Blaby DC's investment in such approaches.

There is however a lack of clarity as to what commerciality is and how ambitious the council should be in this respect. This is despite the council having a commercial strategy, which was referred to by members, managers and staff throughout the peer team's visit. The peer team also found no internal common agreement of commercial risk appetite. Members have more appetite than officers who are more cautious, as evidenced for example through the former's big ambitions to generate local income and the latter's robust financial management. The peer team also found different views amongst members and officers alike. Blaby DC therefore needs to reconcile these different views to form a clear agreement on what commerciality is and the level of risk the council is prepared to take, on which to base its overall approach.

Blaby DC has made some progress in implementing the recommendations from the LGA's financial health check, for example the publication of the multi-year MTFs. Future funding for local government continues to be uncertain however, eg from awaiting the outcome of the Fair Funding Review to the resetting of business rates. This presents financial planning challenges for Blaby DC, as it does any council. Blaby DC is acutely aware of the potential significant risks regarding the reset of the business rates baseline, from the successful previous growth and scenarios on the impact, to the funding position included in its MTFs. A longer-term view of potential funding challenges would assist the council's strategic financial planning for the

district and support decision making at an early stage. The ambitions of the commercial and transformation strategies need to be made clear as these will be key to delivering future efficiencies and can also support wider growth opportunities.

To ensure these different strands of work complement each other and avoid duplication, overlap and conflicts, Blaby DC should develop and progress an overall delivery/business plan as soon as possible. This should strategically build on the council's MTFs and other plans, including targets. It is not sufficient for example to arbitrarily cut each services' budget by a similar amount, ie 'salami slice'. Such decisions must be based on the council's priorities, identify where spend is needed as well as where reductions need to be made, to best respond to local need. All this will also help address local government financial challenges affecting the council.

4.5. Capacity for improvement

Blaby DC has a good reputation as an employer and as a place to work. Many staff have worked at the council for a long time because it is such a good place to work. Others joined from other local authorities, in part due to the council's positive reputation. Staff also spoke generally well about the council providing the facilities, equipment, flexibility and other support for them to work well.

It was clear to the peer team through various meetings that members and managers trust, respect and support their staff's judgement. As well as through successful and committed service delivery by staff, this also includes for example members constructively challenging managers with questions and alternative ideas, managers responding equally constructively, with members ultimately agreeing with and taking on board staff's judgements and advice to inform their decision making.

The peer team found that managers are in turn very supportive of their staff as individuals and teams. Examples of this include service managers enabling specific flexible working arrangements in response to individual's home circumstances, particularly during the pandemic, and working with their whole teams to explore, agree and execute the best ways for them to deliver their services.

Staff also told the peer team that managers support their personal development, eg through training courses, formal qualification syllabuses, networking, mentoring and group support. Apprenticeships in the planning team help to 'grow your own', which

could be usefully expanded elsewhere in the council. All these approaches are helping the council succession plan all the way up to senior managerial level.

Managers themselves at strategic, group and service level, as well as aspiring managers, have identified the need to re-introduce managerial and leadership development and support, as proactive and committed employees, to assist and progress their current roles, teams and future career paths. The peer team also heard from staff that managers should sometimes take more responsibility to address issues within their teams and as part of service planning rather than saying 'HR says', ie using standard corporate lines from the HR team per se, instead of using them as a starting point to address specific issues within their teams. In doing so, service managers would also strengthen corporate management across the council. Training and development may help address these issues.

Such training and development opportunities come with the risk however that staff at all levels could leave to further their careers elsewhere if there are not sufficient opportunities internally to do so. Blaby DC should therefore consider how with its Leicestershire council partners it can create job opportunities to at least share and retain their skills within the county, as well as within the council.

The peer team also heard that staff appraisals and one to one meetings are being undertaken and measured on an ad hoc basis. Opportunities are therefore being missed to manage and make the most of everyone's potential to best contribute to the corporate plan's priorities, which the council needs to address consistently across all service teams to do so.

The biggest issue however for staff is the council's ICT, which is negatively impacting on their work daily and wasting significant, cumulative time across the council. Staff cited for example regular problems with: all the council's main online platforms including MS Teams and email, response to ticket times through the ICT support service, especially where those tickets mean staff cannot work on anything else until they are resolved, and learning to live with problems rather than having them resolved. Democratic services are also spending ever more time dealing with hybrid technology queries as a result of their work in this area. Staff understand that ICT support provision is being brought in-house and will need its own support and time to settle down. Such issues nevertheless continue on a daily basis and need

addressing as soon as possible. The service will also need to support future organisational change once defined, to drive the council and all its work forward, which will also need factoring in.

Senior members and officers need to additionally clarify and confirm the council's hybrid working policy, including where it can be adapted at service level, to address ambiguities. The peer team heard for example how when to wear masks and socially distance could have been clarified sooner so that all staff could act accordingly. Staff have to strictly leave the main council building by 5.30 pm, even if they are still talking to customers and legally required through their work to respond the same day, meaning staff having to continue such calls once they get home. It is also unclear when to use what communication tool, when to work and where from, and other common issues. Service teams are potentially interpreting the policy differently, and making their own decisions on such matters as required, but are not confident that they have corporate backing to do so. Clear corporate policy and guidance on hybrid working will therefore help address such ambiguities.

In summary, ICT provision and policy needs to be fit for purpose, especially with regard to officers and members working as effectively as possible in flexible, hybrid and remote ways as required – both within and outside council buildings. This includes making the most of existing facilities and opportunities, for example through refurbishment/re-purposing of council buildings, or through any future new locations. It also includes exploring creative ways to improve and further invest in artificial intelligence and physical/digital equipment for payments and processing with finance, revenues and benefits and the council's reception services. There are also opportunities to ensure software used in different departments communicate and share data with each other to drive performance, time efficiencies and savings.

A real opportunity for Blaby DC generally is to focus on its internal 'enablers', which includes its ICT support as outlined above but also its HR, OD and communications functions. This will help ensure officers and members work as effectively as possible. The pipeline of proposed plans and broader transformation will require a range of changes, which these functions will need to support. They themselves will therefore need to be ready to provide that support, and the council may need to invest to improve capacity, skills and infrastructure. The council should therefore use the immediate opportunity ahead of these plans' review and development to ensure

these functions can best support officers and members to drive these plans forward.

There is particular potential for the communications function, with some external support, to enhance their delivery internally and externally. The peer team heard throughout its visit that the communications team is undertaking a range of good work. The peer team felt however that this work could evolve and become more proactive, with many opportunities to proactively promote what the council is doing on a more regular basis. Residents also spoke well of the council's website and telephone service but identified a range of opportunities to enhance communications and engagement with customers to access and shape services. These included more genuine consultation opportunities with residents and other local stakeholders to inform decision making, non-digital communications to help those with limited access to digital services - possibly in more community languages if required - to use key services, and more one to one access to services through council buildings and enhanced telephone services for those with specific questions or needs. Once the council has a long-term vision for Blaby as a place/district, there will be opportunities to promote that vision. There are also opportunities to regularly promote clear policy positions, activities and other good work the council is doing to achieve its priorities and ambitions, which residents do not always know about. There are additional opportunities internally for the communications team to support the Leader and Chief Executive with delivering all staff briefings and other internal communications, as the peer team heard throughout its visit. The [LGA's communications support offer](#) can help review the communications function to assist all this.

To best support all its members and staff through the transformational and organisational change planned, the council should also review its HR and OD provision to ensure sufficient capacity and resilience to deliver what will be required.

Blaby DC does however provide a good wellbeing and mental health offer to staff, eg through training mental health first aiders, managers and staff, enabling referrals to counselling and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy through occupational health, and through the general Blaby Way approach. Whilst staff know about the offer as referenced throughout the peer team's visit, they are not necessarily taking it up as much as they could. This is at a time when staff are generally tired as a result of the pandemic's various impacts on them – both professionally and personally – and their on-going commitment, to deliver the best services to the people of the district. Staff

are currently coping but their wellbeing needs monitoring by their managers to ensure it does not decline. There is also no capacity for staff to think beyond their day to day work, to think through and implement possible improvements to services and future service shaping. Staff should therefore be regularly reminded of and encouraged to take up the council's wellbeing offer to help prevent the decline of their wellbeing in the first place. The council should also consider ways to create space for staff to think about, improve and shape future services. The council could additionally extend its existing wellbeing and mental health support to members to make the most of its potential, given that the pandemic has impacted on their workloads and home lives too.

5. 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 the East Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the North East, is the main contact between your authority and the LGA. Mark is available to discuss any further support the council requires at mark.edgell@local.gov.uk or by telephone via 07747 636910.

ⁱ From Blaby's [LG \(local government\) Inform Headline Report – number of affordable homes delivered \(gross\) as per Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities data](#)

ⁱⁱ From Blaby's [LG \(local government\) Inform Headline Report](#)