

Richard Carr
Central Bedfordshire Council
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15 March 2019

Dear Richard,

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge follow up visit 26-27 November 2018

At the invitation of Central Bedfordshire Council, the Local Government Association undertook a corporate peer challenge at CBC in May 2017. At that time, the council asked the peer team to plan make a follow up visit approximately 12-18 months later to help review and assess progress and developments in response to the peer challenge feedback and recommendations.

The follow up visit took place in November and this letter summarises the main observations of the peer team. The peers 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 during their visit to Central Bedfordshire Council on 26-27 November 2018.

Process and peer team

Peer challenge is one of the key tools to support sector-led improvement. It is tailored to meet individual councils' needs, and designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. The peer team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.

The peer team taking part in the follow up visit was:

- Rob Tinlin, LGA Associate
- Cllr David Renard, Leader, Swindon Borough Council
- Lorraine O'Donnell, Director of Transformation and Partnerships, Durham County Council
- David Palmer, former Detective Superintendent, Metropolitan Police
- James Kingston, Head of Assurance, MHCLG
- James Mehmed, Programme Manager, LGA
- Kate Herbert, Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

In May 2017, the peer team left Central Bedfordshire Council with a set of recommendations¹ which it thought would help the council address its main challenges. This feedback letter reflects on progress made in implementing the recommendations over the last year.

To inform their work the peer team spent two days on site at Central Bedfordshire Council, during which they spoke to around 50 people, including a range of council officers, councillors and external partners.

Key messages and observations

The peer team found that Central Bedfordshire Council remains an organisation that is financially sound, has a reputation for good services, and is delivering exciting projects. Once again, the team was impressed by the calibre and enthusiasm of staff.

Since the peer team last visited Central Bedfordshire the council's approach to quadrant working has continued to evolve and significant progress has been made on the schools agenda, alongside which relationships between schools and the council have improved. The council has also made some progress in its approach to commercialisation and income generation.

The council has reflected on its priorities and sought to reduce the number of projects running concurrently to ensure that the most important workstreams are prioritised and are not competing with less pressing projects for limited capacity. CBC has invested time and energy in 'getting its own house in order' and there are emerging plans to increase grip and consistency of project management across the council. The council is also developing capacity in portfolio management, for example the introduction of the internal and external boards. These are very welcome developments and will enable the council to bring appropriate focus and rigour to delivery against priority areas.

CBC has also tasked the Senior Management Group (SMG) to lead improvement across the council. Enabling and trusting this group of officers has injected energy and enthusiasm into the council's improvement activity and is developing talent within the organisation. It would be worth the council considering how to ensure that this group of staff continues to work together to tackle key issues for CBC – what should they turn their attention to next? Furthermore, given the success of this model, how can this be replicated to engage and motivate other staff within the organisation?

Internally the peer team heard that some non-executive councillors and staff had heard different versions of key corporate messages. Although the peer team recognised that there has already been work to improve internal communications, the team stressed the need for improved communications and cascade of information to non-executive councillors and staff throughout the organisation. This should aim to provide clear and simple messages to avoid people receiving mixed messages, and should seek to use a variety of channels to engage different audiences in different ways.

The peer team were told by a wide range of staff that there is now less silo working, but there is still more work to do. It is important that the council keeps a focus on this to ensure that cohesive, cross-departmental working continues to develop, including

¹ See Appendix I for a list of the recommendations from the 2017 Corporate Peer Challenge

considering wider opportunities for cross-departmental working and engagement, for example project teams drawn from across the council.

There has been initial work to start to shape a long-term vision for the area and this is to be welcomed, though the peer team expressed some concern that there is a risk of over engineering the process to develop the vision further. With this in mind, the team recommended that the emphasis be placed on developing a simple and clear vision, with tangible ambitions for Central Bedfordshire. It is essential that this be developed in concert with partners (this point is addressed further below).

The peer team heard mixed views from partners about CBC as a partner. One to one relationships between individuals were consistently described as being very positive and productive. However, looking at the council as a whole, some partners see the CBC as open and collaborative, others see the council as overly dominant or inflexible. It is important that the council reflects on this and considers how to ensure that more partners see the 'open and collaborative' side of CBC, not least because the peer team found that partners remain keen for the council to take the lead in an open and engaging way to increase collaboration and joint working.

The peer team recognised that there have continued to be challenges in some partnership relationships due to churn of leadership in some partner organisations or a lack of willingness to engage fully by others. There are opportunities to reset some of those relationships, for example the new stability within the CCG will give opportunities to forge a good relationship and accelerate activity around integrated health and care. The peer team heard particular frustrations regarding the Police's apparent reluctance to contribute to a set of priorities for Central Bedfordshire. While recognising that the police cover a wider geography than just Central Bedfordshire it is vital that efforts are made to involve the police in priority setting, etc given the important role the police ought to play in strategic, forward planning.

A significant opportunity to strengthen relationships with partners is presented by the work on a long-term vision for Central Bedfordshire. Growth across Central Bedfordshire is inevitable and it is essential that the council and its partners are able to shape this in a way that is positive and sustainable for the local area. It is incumbent on all partners – across the public, voluntary and private sectors – to work together to consider the challenges and opportunities growth will present and how best to plan for these. Without this, the growth that is inevitable in the area is less likely to happen on your terms and to be effective this must be a piece of work that partners develop together.

The council has an enabling role in supporting the work to do this planning – it has both a democratic mandate to provide leadership of place and, arguably more importantly, partners have told the peer team that they are keen for the council to do this. The council should seize this opportunity to bring partners together to develop a strategic line of sight for what Central Bedfordshire should look like in the future, with plans for how partners – individually and together – are going to support the achievement of this vision.

In summary

During the follow up visit the peer team was told that the council had been keen

initially focus on strengthening the internal elements from the corporate peer challenge before looking more widely. Overall the council has made a good progress in taking forward the recommendations from the 2017 corporate peer challenge. There remain however a number of areas that require further attention and action. It is especially important that focus be given to responding to these at pace.

These areas fall under three key themes:

1. What do you want Central Bedfordshire to look like in 25 years?

It is essential that the council is clear about what its overarching strategy and priorities are – everything else hangs from these. Recent activity on the CBC vision has been helpful, but there is currently no strategic line of sight for what Central Bedfordshire should look like in the future. A long-term vision, drawing on not just the council's perspective but also views from a wide range of partners, is essential. Without this, the growth that is inevitable in the area is less likely to happen on your terms.

2. Don't over-refine the development of the vision, ambition and purpose

There is no need to over engineer the process to develop the long-term vision for the area. It is important that partners are involved in this work from the start so that the resulting vision is developed together, well-rounded and owned by all partners. The council has an important enabling role here.

3. Invest in partnerships

Investing time and energy in developing relationships with your partners, both individually and bringing them together, is essential to ensure joined up public services that meet the needs of local people. Don't let the lack of strategic buy in from some partners (for example the Police) become a blocker to other partnership working.

The peer team would like to thank CBC for inviting them back to Central Bedfordshire to provide further challenge to the council, and hopes that the feedback above helps to support continuous improvement at Central Bedfordshire Council.

Next steps

Your LGA Principal Adviser Rachel Litherland is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Her contact details are: 07795 076834/ Rachel.Litherland@local.gov.uk She will be happy to work with you to identify any additional support the LGA can offer to help you respond to the points set out in the above.

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 2022.

Kate Herbert – LGA Peer Challenge Manager

On behalf of the Peer Challenge Team

Recommendations from the 2017 LGA Corporate Peer Challenge for Central Bedfordshire Council

Overall messages and observations 2017

- This is a good council with areas of good practice (eg extra care homes, inward investment, CSE)
- Overwhelming sense of Central Bedfordshire as an optimistic and positive place that has a great appetite for change
- Resident satisfaction has increased significantly since 2011
- Have good people that enjoy working here with a high level of staff morale
- Secure financially, with strong financial management arrangements, people understand the budget setting and financial management process
- Keen to take and shape opportunities, for example Oxford – Cambridge corridor
- Awareness that this is a key point in time for the council and its partners
- There is a lack of strategic priority setting and delivery plans
- The quality of partnership working is mixed, for a variety of reasons

Overarching recommendations 2017

- Develop a shared strategic vision with partners
- Prioritise, and back up with delivery plans
- Invest in quadrant work as means to deliver effective integrated cross partnership services
- Determine your appetite for commercialisation, income generation and use of assets
- Clarify your vision for and delivery plan around transformation and ‘One Council’