

Marshal Scott
Chief Executive
Ribble Valley Borough Council
Church Walk
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18 November 2019

Dear Marshal

Following a Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in November 2017, Ribble Valley Borough Council invited the LGA to conduct a follow-up visit. The purpose of this follow-up visit was to review progress made since the original peer challenge in 2017. The follow up visit took place between 26th and 27th September 2019, approximately 22 months after the original peer challenge.

The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by the people they met and material they had read both prior to and during this peer challenge revisit.

Scope, focus 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 following peers participated in the follow up visit:

- Stacey Burlet – Chief Executive, Ryedale District Council (Lead peer)
- Councillor Neil Clarke, Rushcliffe Borough Council
- Tracy Darke, Director for Growth, Economy and Culture, Milton Keynes Council
- Cindy Lowthian, Peer Challenge Manager (LGA)

To inform the revisit the peer team spent 2 days on site at Ribble Valley Borough Council. During this time the team met with the Leader and Chief Executive, Senior Leadership Team, Chair of the Economic Development Committee, members, front line staff, senior managers and strategic partners.

In November 2017, the peer team identified a number of recommendations to support the council on its improvement journey. These are shown in **Appendix A**. This revisit focussed on progress made in relation these recommendations as well as the Council's

new Corporate Strategy and Economic Development Plan, which was at the request of the Council.

Summary of findings and observations

Ribble Valley Borough Council (the Council) has made clear progress in taking forward the recommendations made by the peer team in 2017. An action plan, monitored by the Council's Policy and Finance Committee, was produced following the original peer challenge and this shows that most of the recommendations arising from the CPC have been completed or are in progress. This includes the development of the new Corporate Strategy and an Economic Development Plan, both agreed in September 2019. The Council has also progressed with the reorganisation of the planning, economic development and housing service areas into one department to support delivery of its ambitions.

The Council appointed a new Leader in January 2019; it was evident from conversations with staff, members and partners that there is respect for both the political and managerial leadership of the Council and that member and officer relationships are positive.

The peer team were pleased to learn that both staff and members had been encouraged to contribute to the development of the new Corporate Strategy. The challenge now that the new Corporate Strategy has been adopted is to ensure ambitions and values are fully embedded and understood. This will be achieved through ongoing engagement with members, officers and partners. There is also an opportunity to take a fresh look at the Council's performance indicators linked to the new Corporate Strategy, to ensure they are clearly aligned to the Council's ambitions and priorities.

As was the case during the original CPC, the team found that staff have a strong commitment and passion for Ribble Valley and for working together across council service areas to achieve the best outcomes for residents. The continued achievements of the Council in relation to service delivery and customer satisfaction (as shown by LG Inform data and the Council's 2018 perception survey) and prudent financial management are a credit to both the dedication and commitment of members and officers.

Moving forward, a challenge will be to ensure the Council's workforce planning continues to enable effective delivery of the Corporate Strategy in the context of an ageing workforce. In particular, staff recruitment and retention within technical and specialist areas such as planning may pose a particular challenge. Ensuring recruitment and retention of talented and skilled staff will be critical for future continued success. The peer team also received feedback relating to staff perceptions of terms and conditions and how these may compare unfavourably to other councils which are worthy of further exploration e.g. agile working, pay levels and flexi-time.

The original peer challenge recommended that the Council should develop an Economic Development Plan which sets out the economic development ambitions for the borough. The Council's self-assessment shows how this was initially put on hold to allow for the recruitment of a new Economic Development and Planning Director. The peer team were pleased to see that the Director was appointed in August 2018 and that a new Economic Development Plan was subsequently developed and approved on 19th September 2019. It was felt that there is more work to articulate and then move forward on this important agenda. The Council should continue to build on this work through continued engagement with partners, staff and members to ensure a consistent and jointly owned economic development vision and priorities for Ribble Valley. It is the view of the peer team that the Council would benefit from producing a delivery plan, overseen by the Economic Development Committee, which clearly captures the priorities, projects and associated resources for each year of the Economic Plan.

The peer team began to explore a number of themes with the Council as it seeks to future proof its medium term financial strategy against the challenges ahead including: commercialisation, opportunities for service re-design, digitalisation and organisational transformation. The team heard examples of current initiatives, including projects whereby income is generated through investment in community assets like sports pitches, generating income and social value. The Council may wish to consider developing these themes further including the exploration of investment opportunities in other areas such as technology.

The feedback (below) provides further detail on the findings from the peer review team and includes a number of suggestions and recommendations for consideration by the Council.

Corporate Strategy

The CPC undertaken in 2017 made three recommendations relating to the Council's Corporate Strategy.

1. Strengthen engagement with staff and partners to ensure clarity of vision and desired outcomes in relation to the Corporate Strategy, priorities and initiatives.

At the time of the CPC, the Council were proposing to develop a new Corporate Strategy in 2018 and it was the view of the peer team that this would provide the opportunity to strengthen engagement with staff and partners.

A mini review of the strategy was undertaken in 2018 and a new strategy, for 2019 – 2023, was developed following the local election in May 2019. A cross party working group was established in June 2019 to oversee the development of this Corporate Strategy and it was apparent, from discussions with members, that this working group has helped to ensure member ownership, input and challenge to the process.

The Corporate Strategy captures the Council's vision for Ribble Valley as an area "with an exceptional environment and quality of life for all; sustained by vital and vibrant market towns and villages acting as thriving service centres meeting the needs of residents, businesses and visitors". The Strategy contains five corporate ambitions: a well-managed council providing efficient services; a strong and prosperous Ribble Valley; to help make people's lives safer and healthier; to protect and enhance the exiting environmental quality of the area and to match the supply of homes with housing needs.

The peer team were also told that the ambitions and priorities within the Corporate Strategy were developed using feedback from staff consultation, the Council's Customer Perception Survey (2018) and the priorities of partners as identified in the borough's Sustainable Community Strategy. The peer team were particularly pleased to learn that two thirds of staff comments were subsequently reflected in the Corporate Strategy.

Moving forward, the Council's managerial and political leadership have a key role to play in ensuring the ambitions and values within the Corporate Strategy are fully understood, embedded and continually challenged. There is an opportunity to develop a communication and engagement framework which builds on current engagement methods such as 'Backchat', intranet, Leader's Blog and staff briefings to include opportunities for more face to face engagement with staff, councillors and partners. This could include 'roadshows' and visits to the depot, 'fronted' by the Chief Executive and Leader. It could also involve engagement activities around large corporate themes or projects such as the new 3G sports facilities in Clitheroe. It was clear from discussions with staff that both the Leader and Chief Executive are widely respected and that staff would be receptive to these approaches. Staff also want to have the opportunity to be further involved in developing and delivering the Strategy.

The Council's 'Heads of Service' who are the most senior officers after Departmental Directors, have an important role to play in engaging staff, listening to views and encouraging them to put forward suggestions and ideas to support delivery of the Corporate Strategy. It is the view of the peer team that the Council's 'Heads of Service' group should be used to help strengthen engagement on the Corporate Strategy and its delivery. This could include ensuring the Corporate Strategy is a standing item on future agendas for the 'Heads of Service Group' meetings.

A key objective within the new Corporate Strategy relates to engagement with "all communities to deliver services to meet customer needs". It was clear to the peer team that the Council continues to engage well with parish and town councils through the Parish Council Liaison Committee. Views of residents are also sought through the Citizen's Panel and biennial perception survey. There are opportunities to build on these approaches by strengthening approaches to engagement with young people. Councils can approach this in a variety of ways, just one common example of this is through a 'Youth Cabinet'. The borough has an ageing population, however, many of the challenges faced in Ribble Valley

and captured in the Corporate Strategy are expected to impact on young people including affordable housing, health inequalities and economic growth.

Another priority identified in the Corporate Strategy relates to the Council's re-cycling targets. The peer team noted that, similar to other east Lancashire councils, the Council's recycling rate has deteriorated since 2010/11 from 41% of household waste to 30.8% (DEFRA, September 2019). The peer team heard how the Council is already committed to addressing this. A recent initiative includes work with other Lancashire councils to ensure households can now re-cycle cleaned out pots, tubs and trays for the first time.

- 2. Review the Performance Management Framework linked to the Corporate Strategy.**
- 3. Review the resourcing of Corporate Strategy priorities**

It was the view of the original peer team that the development of a new Corporate Strategy would provide an opportunity to strengthen the Council's performance management framework and ensure it is more clearly aligned to the Council's ambitions, priorities and budget.

The revisit team found that, following the initial 'mini-review' of the Corporate Strategy in June 2018, the Council's Performance Management Framework (PMF) was reviewed and approved by the Policy and Finance Committee in September 2018. The PMF sets out the Council's annual strategic planning and performance cycle, showing how performance is managed, monitored and linked to the budget planning framework. The PMF shows how Heads of Service are responsible for providing regular performance information to committees. Performance is monitored 'in year' by the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and each committee receives an annual report, prepared by the Policy and Performance Officer, detailing year-end performance under their area of responsibility. This report also provides information on targets set for the following year.

The new Corporate Strategy (2019 -2023) identifies five corporate ambitions, nineteen objectives, fifty two priority actions and twenty nine measures of success. During the revisit, the peer team were advised that work will continue to review performance indicators. This provides an opportunity to set out more clearly and prioritise which of the Strategy's objectives and actions should be taken forward this year, in future years or which may not be a priority. This will help to ensure officer capacity and financial resources are targeted at those deemed highest priority and which will deliver the best outcomes for local people. It will also ensure members and officers are able to see clearly how well the Council is doing against stated ambitions in the Corporate Strategy.

The Council's Annual Governance Statement (2018-2019) also highlighted that "there is no formal planned benchmarking of services; however, ad-hoc service comparisons are undertaken as needed". As part of this work, there is an opportunity for the Council to

develop a more consistent approach to benchmarking and target setting in relation to all service areas.

Performance appraisals also form a key element of the performance framework. The original CPC found anecdotal evidence suggesting delivery of appraisals was patchy in some areas and encouraged the Council to review the appraisal system to ensure it is aligned to the new Corporate Strategy. During the revisit, the peer team learned that the appraisal system was reviewed in 2018 and that 95% of the 2018/19 appraisals were conducted which was an improvement on previous years. There is now an opportunity to take a fresh look at the appraisal system to ensure it is clearly aligned to the new Corporate Strategy 2019 – 2023. As highlighted in the Council's Annual Governance Statement, this review should also ensure that the appraisal system incorporates the Council's agreed organisational values and ethical behaviours.

Strengthening the appraisal system, linked to staff engagement, would enable the Council to consider and further develop its strategies for talent management and encouraging staff retention.

Economic Plan

The CPC in 2017 recommended that the Council:

4. Develop an Economic Development Strategy as an opportunity to set out its economic development ambitions linked to the Lancashire Enterprise Partnership and its own Corporate Strategy.

The peer team found that progress has been made against this recommendation. A new Economic Development Strategy was approved on 19 September 2019 following a 4 week public consultation period. Progress also includes the establishment of a cross-party Economic Development Committee that has helped provide governance for the new Plan. The peer team heard how this Committee will continue to have a key role to play in leading and driving delivery of the Economic Plan now that it has been approved.

The Ribble Valley Economic Development Partnership was formed in February 2019 and comprises of a number of local business representatives and Ribble Valley Chambers of Trade members. The aim is to ensure they have a voice in relation to the economic development of the borough. The peer team heard how they were consulted on the priorities within the Economic Plan. Since the original CPC, the Council has also progressed with the reorganisation of the planning, economic development and housing service areas into one department to support delivery of its ambitions, including the appointment of a new Director of Economic Development and Planning. The Leader's membership of the Lancashire Enterprise Partnership reflects the Council's commitment to economic growth and prosperity both within the borough and across the County.

The challenge now is how the Council can build on this work to ensure this economic development vision for Ribble Valley is consistently understood and jointly owned. Peer team discussions with some staff and partners indicate that there is still more work to be done in this area. The communication and engagement framework recommended earlier in this report could help to strengthen approaches on both the Corporate Strategy and Economic Plan.

It is the view of the peer team that the Council would benefit from producing a delivery plan, overseen by the Economic Development Committee, which captures more clearly the priorities, projects and associated resources for each year of the Economic Plan. Whilst the new plan aims to be 'concise' so that it is more business friendly, it comprises a mix of both high level, strategic objectives such as railway improvements to smaller projects and processes including reference to a careers fair and the frequency of meetings for the Economic Development Partnership. The peer team believe the Council have an opportunity to provide clarity on the key projects and priorities that will make a significant difference. The Council may also want to consider aligning the time frame of the Economic Plan which expires in 2022 to that of the new Corporate Strategy and Medium Term Financial strategy which runs up to 2023.

5. Explore opportunities to strengthen early engagement with developers in order to maximise community benefits, as well as opportunities to strengthen community engagement/communication in relation to development

The peer team were not able to explore this recommendation in depth although the Council's own self-assessment and some of the feedback from the re-visit indicate that while progress is being made, this needs to continue. The Council are now operating to the National Planning Policy Framework changes published last summer (2018) which puts an emphasis on the value of pre-application engagement and on the importance of considering design and environmental issues at the pre-application stage. Some examples of community engagement relating to planning developments were also shared with the team, including attendance at a recent community meeting by the Leader and senior officers to discuss a high profile local issue. The peer team would encourage the Council to continue to develop their engagement approaches with both developers and communities.

6. Strengthen engagement between the Leadership and Corporate Management Team (CMT) – including chairs of committees.

Since the original peer challenge, the Council's ruling group has experienced a challenging period politically including a change of Leader in January 2019. It is evident from conversations with staff and members that member and officer relationships are positive. There is respect for both the political and managerial leadership of the Council.

The Corporate Management Team (CMT) meets on a weekly basis and weekly meetings take place between the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council. Regular meetings also take place with the Leader, Deputy Leader and the Leader of the Liberal Democrats.

The original peer challenge recommendations encouraged the Council to consider developing a programme of 'top team days' and/or meetings between committee chairs and CMT, particularly in the lead up to the development of the new Corporate Strategy. The peer team were pleased to hear that a CMT and Senior members 'away day' was held in May 2018. A further session is scheduled to take place in the next few months which will focus on the Council's ambitions in the new Corporate Strategy. The peer team would encourage the Council and senior members to continue to invest time together to support collaborative working, delivery of corporate ambitions and to meet the challenges ahead.

Other observations

During the re-visit, the peer team made a number of additional observations as follows:

Capacity to deliver

As with the original CPC, the peer team were impressed with the commitment, enthusiasm and passion for the Ribble Valley demonstrated by both officers and members that they met with. A number of examples shared with the peer team demonstrate the flexible approach of staff to service delivery to achieve the best outcomes for residents. Sickness absence rates have reduced from 9.35 days in 2017/18 to 8.14 days in 2018/19. This is within a context of an ageing workforce (Ribble Valley Personnel Committee, September 2019). Staff turnover has increased only slightly in 2018/19 at 15.82% compared to 14.99% the previous year.

Moving forward, a key challenge will be to ensure the Council's workforce planning supports future succession planning and staff retention in the context of an ageing workforce. In particular, staff retention within technical and specialist areas such as planning. The National Audit Office's report 'Planning for New Homes' published in February 2019 highlights the national challenge that planning is facing with attracting and retaining planners.

Linked to this, the peer team found that there are perceptions amongst some staff that the Council's approach to agile working, use of technology, pay levels and flexi-time operation could be developed to compare more favourably with other councils in the region, supporting staff recruitment and retention. Whilst the peer team acknowledge that these may be perceptions, they are worthy of further exploration. Continuing to ensure the workforce are listened to, feel valued and motivated will be vital in meeting the challenges ahead.

The Council's perception survey undertaken in 2018 show high levels of satisfaction with the local area (79%) and customer experience (75%). 60% feel the Council provides value for money, down from 71% in 2015, but still higher than the most recent County Council average (26%). LG inform data shows the Council continues to perform above the average of other North West councils in relation to a range of service areas including: council tax collection rates; processing times for housing benefit claims; new business rate registrations and numbers on the housing waiting list. As referred to earlier, the Council's recycling performance is below the average of other North West councils and the Council is taking action to address this.

Financial planning and viability

The Council continues to have a prudent approach to financial management. Reserves are above the average for North West districts, debt levels are low and the tax base continues to show consistent growth. The Council's self- assessment shows how they have consistently been in the top performing council tax billing authorities over the years with an average in year collection rate of 99%. The Council was the lead authority in the Lancashire Business Rates Pool and is also now the lead authority for the Lancashire Business Rates Pilot Pool, piloting 75% retention.

The Council has increased its element of the council tax only twice in the last ten years and holds the lowest Band D council tax charge in the County. This is in the context of a 40% reduction in government funding since 2010 and future uncertainty on key government funding streams beyond the one year spending review for 2020/21.

In this context, the peer team began to explore a number of themes with the Council as it seeks to future proof its medium term financial strategy against challenges ahead. These themes include service re-design and transformation, the Council's approach to risk, income generation and commercialisation. A number of examples were shared with the peer team which demonstrate the Council's current approaches. This includes a £1.4m investment in a the 3G sports pitch at the Edisford Sports Complex in Clitheroe which aims to generate annual income of £95k from next year. It also includes the recent purchase of two homes for affordable rent using section 106 funding, working in partnership with a social housing provider who will manage them. The team heard how the Council are keen to use learning from this to inform future approaches.

The team did not have enough time to explore all of these themes in detail but would encourage the Council to continue to challenge itself in these areas, particularly as it moves to the implementation phase for both the Corporate Plan and Economic Development Plan.

Summary of recommendations

Ribble Valley has made progress since the peer team's visit in November 2017 and in particular in relation to the Corporate Strategy and the Economic Growth Plan.

To ensure the Council is able to achieve its overarching vision to be:

“an area with an exceptional environment and quality of life for all, sustained by vital and vibrant market towns and villages acting as thriving service centres meeting the needs of residents, businesses and visitors”

The team recommends that the Council gives particular focus to the following:

- 1) Continue to strengthen communication and engagement approaches in relation to the Corporate Strategy and Economic Plan to ensure ambitions and values are fully embedded and understood. This should include opportunities for more face to face engagement with staff.
- 2) Take a fresh look at the Council's Performance Management Indicators to ensure they are fully aligned to and drive forward delivery of the new Corporate Plan 2019 - 2023.
- 3) Develop a delivery plan which clearly articulates and captures the priorities and associated resources for each year of the Economic Plan, which can then be clearly overseen by the Economic Development Committee.
- 4) Consider aligning the time frame of the Economic Plan to that of the Corporate Strategy and Medium Term Financial Strategy (2019 – 2023)
- 5) Agree a future programme of 'top team days' and/or meetings with senior members and the Corporate Management Team. This will support collaborative working and delivery of corporate ambitions.
- 6) Develop the Council's Workforce Plan to support succession planning, talent management and the recruitment, retention and reward of staff.
- 7) Explore opportunities for the Council to continue to challenge itself, building on its strong financial position. This includes areas such as organisational transformation, service re-design, commercialisation and digitisation. It should also include future appetite for risk, investment and further income generation.

Next steps

We appreciate that the Council will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions with the senior managerial and political leadership in order to determine how the organisation wishes to move forward. A follow up meeting will be arranged with Claire Hogan, North West Principal Adviser, to discuss any follow up needs arising from the peer challenge re-visit.

We would like to thank you for inviting us back to the Council and hope that our feedback helps to support continuous improvement at Ribble Valley Borough Council.

Cindy Lowthian – LGA North West Adviser

On behalf of the Peer Challenge Team

Appendix A

Ribble Valley Corporate Peer Challenge, November 2017 Recommendations

- 1. Strengthen engagement with staff and partners to ensure clarity of vision and desired outcomes in relation to the Corporate Strategy, priorities and initiatives.** The proposed development of a new plan next year provides the opportunity to do this. Early involvement and engagement relating to key initiatives and projects is paramount in fostering shared understanding and ownership. Recognising past successes and building on these will help contribute to future organisational success.
- 2. Review the Performance Management Framework linked to the Corporate Strategy.** This will provide an opportunity to review key goals and KPIs linked to the Plan and identify opportunities to further strengthen corporate monitoring, including the role of committees.
- 3. Review the resourcing of Corporate Strategy priorities.** This will include exploring capacity in key areas in order to deliver ambitions, exploring opportunities for further income generation and the council's own appetite for risk.
- 4. Develop an Economic Development Strategy.** A real opportunity for the council to set out its economic development ambitions linked to the Lancashire Enterprise Partnership and its own Corporate Strategy. The council is ideally placed to use its relatively strong economic position as a platform to secure greater influence and leadership both in Lancashire and the wider north-west region.
- 5. Explore opportunities to strengthen early engagement with developers in order to maximise community benefits, as well as opportunities to strengthen community engagement/communication in relation to development.** During the peer challenge stakeholders raised issues associated with their perception of development and associated infrastructure delivery. The council would benefit from looking at ways it might strengthen early engagement with developers and community engagement to ensure maximum benefits for communities.
- 6. Strengthen engagement between the Leadership and Corporate Management Team** – this includes the chairs of committees. Regular opportunities to meet will support the council in moving forward positively to deliver its ambitions and address challenges.