



Corporate Peer Challenge **Boston Borough Council**

10 – 12 September 2019

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Boston Borough Council (Boston BC) has accomplished a great deal in challenging financial circumstances and alongside significant population growth. It can be proud of its achievements and should have the confidence to shout loudly about them.

Boston possesses strong geographic advantages – it is the second largest urban centre in Lincolnshire, and has only one main town within its boundaries. By recognising this, and embedding it within its corporate narrative, Boston BC can positively shape perceptions of the Borough and take a more prominent role in shaping leadership of place, locally and sub-regionally.

Boston's rich historical, cultural and social heritage provides the foundations for a powerful and inclusive identity of place. The Council and its partners recognise this and have made it a central plank of its town centre renewal plans and Heritage Strategy. This place narrative needs to be more fully articulated and widely communicated, so it is shared and owned by Councillors, staff, communities and partners.

The new Leader has brought fresh energy, ambition and a collaborative approach to the Council. This has been widely recognised and welcomed both internally and externally by partners. With all Councillors at the start of a new four-year term, investment in member development is important. Supporting the new Cabinet to develop a clear, strategic, political vision, articulated through a new Corporate Plan, will strengthen political and managerial leadership. Additionally, frontline Councillors must be equipped - through a learning and development programme - with the understanding and skills to be effective community champions and ambassadors for the Council, the Borough and all its communities.

There is a strong, highly regarded officer team. Through visible and enabling leadership they have positioned the Council well (e.g. financially sound, highly regarded by partners) and are ready to support the new administration to deliver its ambitions. Boston BC is seen by partners as having a strong track record of delivery and is described by some as '*by far the best local authority partner*' to work with in Lincolnshire. Its success at securing external funding and working collaboratively with partners to deliver greater value (e.g. Quadrant, Inclusive Boston, PE21 proposals) is a particular strength. There is genuine desire from public, private and voluntary community sector (VCS) partners to work more closely with the Council. This is particularly focused on the re-purposing of the town centre, exploiting the considerable heritage assets and the historic Pilgrim Fathers connection. Boston BC should maximise these collaborative opportunities to leverage additional capacity and deliver improved outcomes.

It is an exciting and pivotal moment for Boston BC at the start of a new electoral cycle, with a new Leader and Cabinet. It can capitalise upon this by setting a clear strategic direction, and aligning appropriate resources and capacity. This will provide a solid framework through which to deliver the administration's ambitions. It should seize the opportunity to align the new Corporate Plan, Transformation Plan, Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and growth agenda. Accelerating the pace of its Transformation Plan and digital thinking are also important. This will unlock efficiencies, drive service improvement and allow Boston BC to be bold in pursuing its growth ambitions. To do this effectively, greater strategic coordination, and consistency of practice will be required across the full range of Council activity. Additional capacity in critical areas - such as economic growth, communications and human resources - will be also key to achieving its aspirations and having maximum impact.

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Boston has huge potential. The Council has been the catalyst for much of the economic development and housing growth within the Borough. It has achieved this with modest resources. The prospect of leveraging in up to £25 million Towns Funding is a tremendous opportunity to realise the Leader's town centre growth ambitions. To do so, Boston must seize the moment, but also effectively focus, prioritise and align resources. It is not possible to do everything; political choices will be required to translate the fantastic opportunities it has created into delivery and impact.

2. Key recommendations

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

- **Talk up Boston!** Promoting the Borough more extensively and assertively would help to shape public perceptions to reflect your achievements and aspirations.
- **Define and communicate Boston's brand and share it consistently and widely.** This will embed and promote a positive place identity that the local community, businesses and partners can coalesce behind.
- **Take advice from the LGA Communications Improvement team.** External guidance and advice can help match the communications service to the needs and ambitions of the Council.
- **Invest in development of the administration to deliver more effective political leadership (i.e. external facilitated Cabinet vision and priority setting).** This investment will support the Cabinet to perform their strategic leadership role, establish clear priorities, and ensure this vision is reflected in the Corporate Plan and associated strategies.
- **Realise this vision through allocating the right resources to support the new Corporate Plan (specifically the growth agenda) and link this to the MTFS and Transformation Plan.** This will ensure the Council's priorities as set out in the new Corporate Plan and other key strategies are aligned with the resources needed to deliver them.
- **Develop a bold investment plan and explore innovative delivery models to support the PE21 project.** By securing a delivery model that provides a long term income stream this will support the Council's long term financial sustainability.
- **Use systematic customer insight to ensure services are responsive to community and customer needs.** Establishing an objective view of resident satisfaction will enable Boston BC to better target its activities and drive customer-centred service improvement.
- **Broader member development to support community leadership and effective representation.** This will support frontline Councillors to be effective community champions and ambassadors for the authority, the Borough and all its communities.

- **Refresh the workforce strategy, and consider building on LGA workforce strategy themes.** By using best practice guidance, Boston BC can align the refreshed Workforce Development Strategy to the new Corporate Plan priorities and Transformation Programme and future planning.
- **Broaden the scope and understanding of transformation to address the issues of service redesign, digital thinking, efficiency, and commercialisation.** This will facilitate a step change in Boston BC's overall pace of delivery and achievement of outcomes.
- **Harness capacity and willingness of local residents, community groups and businesses to 'live' and promote brand Boston.** In doing so, Boston BC can leverage in additional capacity and resources to maximise added value from collaboration.

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

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

- Steve Blatch, North Norfolk District Council, Corporate Director & Head of Paid Service
- Councillor Duncan McGinty, Leader of Sedgemoor District Council
- Councillor Neil Prior, Pembrokeshire County Council, Cabinet Member for Transformation and IT
- Jackie Smith, South Staffordshire District Council, Corporate Director - Commercial
- Donna Reddish, Chesterfield Borough Council, Assistant Director Policy and Communications
- Frances Marshall, Local Government Association, Challenge Manager

Scope and focus

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

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the Council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of Place: Does the Council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?

4. Financial planning and viability: Does the Council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
5. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the Council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to consider/review/provide feedback on: economic development and town centre regeneration; transformation and corporate strategy and planning.

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual Councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a Council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all Councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge every 4 to 5 years. Boston Borough Council had a Corporate Peer Challenge in 2012. Where relevant to do so, findings from that previous peer challenge have been referenced in this report.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 3 days onsite at Boston Borough Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 114 people including a range of Council staff together with Councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 39 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 270 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 7 weeks in Boston.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (10 – 12 September 2019). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

Boston Borough's geography, scale and critical size are key assets that can be exploited to its advantage. Boston is the second largest town in Lincolnshire, and the Borough has only one urban centre. Together with its rich historical, cultural and social heritage this provides a compelling narrative to anchor its place identity. The Council's sole office base, being centrally located in the town, provides a single focus for services and investment. This, in addition to the variety of services and amenities within the town, means that the community can meet the majority of its needs without looking beyond Boston BC's borders. These strengths are currently not recognised or utilised fully. Identifying as a 'small Council' risks underselling the locality, its achievements and aspiration. By recognising the aforementioned strengths, and embedding them within its corporate narrative, Boston can positively shape perceptions of the Borough by developing a compelling story of place that supports their ambitions for growth and community prosperity.

The Leader's aspirations for growth as a means of driving Borough-wide prosperity is widely recognised and supported by partners, staff and many frontline Councillors. There is huge potential in 'brand Boston'. The brand is developing, particularly around the economic growth agenda, with the 'VisitBostonUK' and 'ThinkBoston' websites recognised as effective promotional tools for the area, which could be more effective if content is regularly updated and shared through social media channels. More needs to be done however to develop a shared understanding of Boston's unique selling points (USP) and communicate them widely. Attention should be given to translating the new administration's ambitions into a clear vision and priorities, with ownership by Cabinet and buy-in from other members. It is not possible to do everything, so this will require a strategic approach, effective prioritisation and difficult decisions such as de-prioritisation or delivering some services differently. The new Corporate Plan and its promotion will be central to achieving the Council's aspirations.

There is limited evidence that the current Corporate Plan priorities are embedded throughout the organisation (i.e. no golden thread in service plans/strategies). The Council are however working hard to engage members, staff and the community in development of the new Corporate Plan (e.g. online consultation, workshops). There is a collective view that the new Corporate Plan should be a place shaping tool as well as prioritising activities, investment and resources for the Council. Its development would be strengthened by considering a broader evidence base including national, regional and local data sets (e.g. IMD, health profiles, demographic information/projections and customer insight). Horizon scanning activity to future proof the Plan over its four year term and beyond is also important. Careful consideration should be given to aligning service planning activity, the MTFS and the Performance Management Framework. This is important to monitor and manage performance, but also to demonstrate success to a wider audience. Communicating this corporate narrative widely - and consistently - with residents, businesses, customers, partners, Councillors and staff will be essential for Boston to achieve its ambitions.

Strong external communication is recognised as a key engagement tool, however the current size and focus of the Council's Communications Team does not match the scale of the Council's aspirations or potential. This is limiting Boston BC's ability to get its voice heard within the wider populace. Reviewing the communications service configuration and practice should be a priority. The focus should be on developing stronger, more resilient and pro-active communications which

can take advantage of the Borough's strengths. This will provide solid foundations with which to better protect and enhance the Borough's reputation and brand as a destination of regional, national and international significance.

Boston has experienced unprecedented population growth and demographic change – it is one of the fastest growing areas outside London and the South East. It has managed these pressures, compounded by dwindling public finances, exceptionally well. The officer team knows Boston Borough's unique local context, its diverse communities and the complexity of their needs (e.g. engaged with a wide variety of VCS organisations around social inclusion, described as “*understanding their community*”). It works actively with partners to add greater value and improve outcomes. Community and partnership engagement is a strength, with notable examples around community cohesion, inclusion, local democracy, skills development and collaborative funding bids (e.g. Inclusive Boston, Local Democracy Week, Primary Engineer Programme, Boston College, Schools, Quadrant). Councillors in their capacity as community champions have an important role to play in recognising and representing their diverse communities. This is particularly important given the uncertainty surrounding the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) and impact this uncertainty may have on individuals and businesses within the Borough. Steps should be taken to equip frontline Councillors - through a learning and development programme - with the understanding and skills to more actively fulfil their role and engage with the whole community. A more coordinated and systematic use of customer insight, intelligence and feedback should be employed. This would enable members and officers to have more in-depth oversight of the residents' views and issues. Equipped with a greater understanding of customer needs and more accurate information on how residents view the Council, Boston BC will be able to more effectively shape priorities and actions accordingly.

4.2 Leadership of Place

Externally Boston BC is seen as a valued, proactive partner, with a good track record of delivery. It is described as having a “*can do attitude*” and “*being a force for good*”. This positive view is shared by public, private and VCS organisations and reflected across the breadth of Council services. Its collaborative, strategic and proactive approach has delivered substantial successes. Key examples include: promoting community cohesion through Inclusive Boston; housing delivery (Quadrant); and through the Primary Engineer programme focusing the local education curriculum on local engineering employers' skills needs and developing highly skilled jobs. Boston BC has successfully secured external funding, and translated this into delivery (e.g. Housing Investment Funding (HIF), Controlling Migration Funding, Towns Fund and Rough Sleeper funding). It has therefore been able to meet community needs and sustain service levels despite significant reductions in government funding. Consideration should now be given to sustaining the community benefits of Inclusive Boston once Government funding ceases.

Boston BC's ability to respond to the social, economic and environmental challenges facing its communities - effectively and at pace - is a key strength. Residents and partners recognise and praise the critical role the Council played in responding to the closure of local employers (Fogarty's, NorPrint, Marks & Spencer), the flooding in 2013 and tackling rough sleeping. In doing so the Council has demonstrated powerful community leadership. This ability to be responsive, and successfully deliver multi-partnership working, will be valuable in managing any local impacts relating to uncertainty around and changes to the UK's membership of the European Union.

Boston takes an active role sub-regionally to promote and deliver shared agendas with Council partners (e.g. leading on joint Lincolnshire Waste Partnership, adopting a South East Lincolnshire wide Local Plan, providing flood response support etc.) Consideration should be given to how Boston leverages its geographical position, population size and growth aspirations to establish a stronger leadership role at a local and sub-regional level. Given its critical size, it can have confidence in doing so. Fostering closer relationships with Lincolnshire County Council (LCC) and the Greater Lincolnshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) would be a first step to achieving this. With several Borough Councillors also holding seats on LCC – including the Leader - Boston can seek to maximise these links to collectively speak with one voice in advocating for Boston's interests.

The relationships developed around the growth agenda are particularly strong, with developers describing Boston BC as their local authority '*partner of choice*'. Its "*pragmatic*" and "*enabling*" approach translates into timely delivery on the ground (e.g. HIF, Quadrant, Lincolnshire 2050). There is genuine excitement amongst partners about the Council's ambition for town centre renewal and they desire to be an active part of it. They recognise the potential of the PE21 initiative and the Heritage Strategy to positively shape perceptions of the Borough and drive up footfall and tourist visitors to the town. Boston should harness the capacity and willingness of local residents, community groups and businesses to share learning, risk and resources. To maximise outcomes this should be across all shared opportunities, not just the growth agenda. Suggestions include: events programmes with community wide ownership and promotion; maximising the value of Boston Town Area Committee; and a business engagement forum that is Borough wide.

4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

The new Leader has brought energy, enthusiasm and a collaborative approach, while leading from the front (e.g. staff briefings, visibly leading the growth agenda, and cross party engagement). This has engendered tangible goodwill towards the new administration, with staff and many Councillors enthused by his ambition for Boston and willingness to engage. The focus should now be on clearly defining the political vision, through an adopted Corporate Plan, to capitalise on the momentum and to strengthen political and managerial Leadership. Having a clearly defined agreed set of strategic priorities, which is collectively owned by Cabinet, will enable resources to be aligned to deliver the vision. Without this political prioritisation and shared ownership, Boston risks trying to do too much and spreading resources too thinly. Externally facilitated support would assist the Cabinet to develop this shared vision and prioritise the activities that will underpin its delivery. In developing a shared vision, this would also help balance a currently disproportionate amount of time that is spent on responding to a vocal minority who comment negatively on social media platforms compared to the Council delivering for the wider community and promoting the Borough positively as a place to live, visit and invest.

The Council's established scrutiny function works well and is widely seen as constructive and adding value to policy development. Innovative scrutiny approaches, such as enquiry days, member briefings and task and finish groups have proved popular and effective ways to examine relevant issues (e.g. Lincolnshire Waste Management Strategy, rural isolation, markets review). There is a genuine desire from the new administration to use the Cabinet and Scrutiny governance model to best effect and to provide external challenge.

Boston BC is committed to Councillor development, with a comprehensive induction programme, online resources and a Councillor group shaping this activity. Take-up of learning and development opportunities post the May 2019 elections has however been low. Going forward, it will be important to revisit the annual programme of member development and tailor the offer so as to encourage greater Councillor participation. All Councillors need to take personal responsibility for attendance at mandatory training and in ensuring that they keep up to date with their obligations, relevant legislation and council practices.

With the entire Councillor body being at the start of its four-year term, now is the time for further investment in supporting frontline Councillors, as well as those in leadership roles. A new Cabinet, with refreshed Portfolio responsibilities, can take advantage of learning and development opportunities which will assist them to channel their energy more effectively and successfully perform their strategic leadership role (e.g. LGA and East Midlands Councils training). Greater consistency in Portfolio Holder and Lead Officer engagement would also strengthen this.

Frontline Councillors should be supported not only in their community leadership positions but also to act as ambassadors for the authority and wider Borough. Currently Councillors' role in portraying a positive image of the Council and place does not appear to be fully understood (e.g. social media behaviour). The Member Code of Conduct is an important tool in promoting this understanding. Agreeing and adopting a refreshed Member Code of Conduct should be progressed as a matter of priority.

There is a positive organisational culture, reflected by a staff body that are passionate and proud to work for Boston BC. Healthy member and officer relations are evident, reflected by the positive working relationship between the Leader, Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive. Senior management are ready to support the administration's ambitions. This joint working could be further strengthened through the proposed clarification of the future vision and focus.

Boston BC's workforce are an important asset, which partners readily praise as "*intelligent and responsive*" (e.g. highly regarded externally, positive staff survey results). The Corporate Management Team (CMT) is cohesive, experienced, and held in high regard by both staff and Councillors. The Senior Management Team (SMT) is empowered by CMT, demonstrate collaborative working and are seen as supportive leaders by staff. Whilst staff briefings are welcomed as an effective means of communication, greater visibility of CMT and Cabinet would be welcomed by staff to better understand the pressures they face and their responsibilities. This more in-depth understanding would help inform resourcing decisions.

5. Financial planning and viability

Boston BC has faced acute financial challenges with reducing government grants and significant population growth (e.g. the most recent census showing a conservative 15.8 per cent increase in population; £2.5 million saving from net revenue budget in the period to 2020 due to withdrawal of government grant). It has managed these financial pressures well to date, and has a solid financial position (e.g. underspend contributing to reserves to plan for further challenges, Property Investment Fund to support future capital investment).

Sound, prudent, financial governance is evident by well-structured budget reports, an annually reviewed and scrutinised Medium Term Financial Strategy and successive unqualified audits. There is also a strong record of success in securing grant bids to support delivery whilst maintaining a balanced budget. (See understanding of the local place and priority setting).

With a £1 million budgetary saving to be made by 2023/24 - £538k of which is to come from 2020/21 - Boston BC has developed a proactive multipronged approach to close this funding gap in its Transformation Programme (e.g. income generation, service modernisation, commercialisation and policy changes). Further detailed work to achieve the 'savings targets' set out in the new Transformation Strategy will be important to ensure the deliverability of these savings.

Whilst there is an emerging bottom up approach to commercialisation, with staff supported to explore ideas to increase income (e.g. Guildhall), there is scope to strengthen this. Establishing a shared understanding of what commercialism means for Boston BC would encourage the generation of new proposals and provide a framework for identifying whether they fit with Boston's risk appetite. Additionally, assessment of fees and charges should be informed by contextual information and knowledge of the true cost of delivery (e.g. car parks).

There is clarity around the Council's £20million Property Investment Fund generating income to finance the future capital programme, reflecting a focus on long term financial sustainability (e.g. investment determined by greatest return). The Council would however benefit from a clear longer term approach to the use of its land and property assets. The development of a detailed Capital Strategy and Asset Management Plan would support a strategic approach to maximising the value of these assets.

Boston BC's approach to financial management has been consciously prudent and "*steady as you go*" (e.g. reserves for contingencies, external auditors' views on cautious approach to business rate appeals.) The £25 million Towns Fund, and PE21 investment, open up the opportunity for the Council to be bolder going forward. Boston BC will need to examine its appetite for risk to assess if its cautious approach remains appropriate to realise its growth ambitions. One area in which this will be pertinent, is in its choice of PE21 delivery model. It is recommended that Boston BC explore innovative delivery models/vehicles that gives the Council a stake in that development and supports Boston BC's long term financial sustainability by providing an ongoing revenue funding stream. Ensuring that the project is resourced at all stages will be paramount. The financial sustainability of regeneration projects should be considered and evaluated through business cases at project inception to ensure that capacity to deliver is adequately evaluated. As its growth plan takes shape, Boston BC may want to consider the benefits of "in-Borough" investment as a demonstration of the returns that flow from its commitment to place.

Boston BC's achievements around the growth agenda – both economic development and housing - are significant. It is the only Council in Lincolnshire to deliver housing growth above Objectively Assessed Need (OAN) targets and one of only a small number of Councils nationally to have successfully drawn down HIF funding through entering into a contract with Homes England (e.g. the Quadrant scheme including new road infrastructure, housing and commercial development and the new Boston United Community Stadium). The Council's proactive, visible and enabling officer leadership, is recognised and applauded by all partners (see Leadership of Place section). These achievements are all the more impressive given current modest staffing resources in this area. This level of resourcing is not sustainable in the future given Boston BC's ambition.

Addressing current levels of capacity is of utmost importance so as to not limit Boston BC's ability to deliver its future plans (e.g. PE21, Pilgrims 2020 & 2030, attract inward investment etc.). Identifying more resource – in-house or through partners – to engage and influence at a

strategic level and support project delivery should be an immediate focus. There are opportunities to harness and galvanise local partners that share Boston's vision, so that they can also articulate and sell it (e.g. Boston College, businesses etc.).

The PE21 proposals have great potential to create a vibrant mixed use community at the heart of Boston from a currently underutilised site (e.g. current consultation includes retail, housing, health, leisure etc.). The majority of frontline Councillors, and relevant Scrutiny Committee Members, support the proposition of broadening the economy through this place-shaping investment. There is also genuine excitement amongst partners for this re-purposing of the town centre and exploiting the considerable heritage assets, historic Mayflower and Pilgrim Fathers connections. Boston's heritage assets are considerable and unique, yet currently underused. The Heritage Strategy recognises this and is an important step in ensuring that they form a key pillar of 'brand Boston' going forward. Attention should now be focused on developing a coherent case to deliver these community wide ambitions through the £25 million Towns Fund.

6. Capacity to deliver

Boston BC has a skilled, flexible and adaptable workforce that are committed and motivated to deliver for Boston's communities (e.g. recent staff survey 82% would recommend as a good employer, 92% enjoy their work, 80% sense of pride). There are good employer and Trade Union relationships that are positive and mutually respectful (e.g. regular meetings, items raised and responded to). Boston BC also capitalises on the advantages of being based in one building and co-located with key partners to maximize effective communications and agile working (e.g. cohesive management team, adaptable workforce, working across broad areas, close working with partners in real time.)

Aligning the Workforce Development Strategy to the new Corporate Plan priorities and Transformation Programme will be critical to deliver against the new administration's ambitions. Boston BC recognises the challenges it faces around recruitment and retention, particularly in key areas. It seeks to employ innovative approaches to address these, including a successful policy to grow its own talent (e.g. apprenticeship programme which is highly regarded). Alongside recruitment and retention, HR and organisational development should also be key tenets of Boston BC's refreshed Workforce Development Strategy and prioritised accordingly. This would help the Council respond to the skills market, pay issues, recruitment challenges and seek to build resilience. Applying the appraisal process consistently, with a focus on helping managers' develop softer skills (e.g. behaviours), will aid skills development and the organisation's ability to deliver.

Boston BC effectively works with partners to leverage in resources and capacity to deliver jointly (e.g. Boston Clean Up, Boston Cemetery, Lincolnshire Assurance). Despite this, there are questions about the Council's ability to deliver on its ambitions. This deficit in capacity is particularly acute in the areas of economic growth and communications. The resilience of Human Resources (HR) could also be strengthened to support effective management of recruitment and performance issues and the consistent application of workforce development. As a matter of priority Boston BC should realign and grow capacity to keep pace with the changing environment for local government and avoid organisational overstretch. Responsibilities for new service areas and pressures have been absorbed within existing staffing, which is not considered sustainable in the medium-term. Regularly reviewing capacity and resource to ensure they align with current priorities and address new pressures will provide Boston BC with a strong foundation through which it can realise its ambitions.

There are good examples of joint working with other local Councils (e.g. parish councils, shared services on CCTV, procurement, community safety, payroll). However, Boston BC would benefit from a strategy for shared services arrangements to ensure they are planned rather than opportunistic. There are untapped benefits to be gained – such as economies of scale, efficiencies, resilience, better service outcomes - from further engagement and more systematic joint working with neighbouring Councils and the VCS.

Boston BC has successfully delivered against previous Transformation Plans (e.g. £2.5 million savings from current 4 year programme) and recognises the challenges of delivering a further £1 million savings from its 2020/24 programme. As it currently stands, the Transformation Plan operates as a savings plan, rather than a strategy that seeks to transform business process, unlock service efficiencies, release capacity and drive digital innovation. To realise these wider benefits, there needs to be a clear and broader understanding internally of what Transformation is and greater comprehension of the possibilities of digital innovation. This is currently a gap. Broadening the scope, and accelerating the pace, of its transformation and digital thinking will be essential to keep up with the changing external environment and delivering Boston BC's ambitions.

Time should be taken to establish this organisational wide understanding, along with clear ownership and active support from CMT and Cabinet. This visible leadership will be key to setting the behaviours and culture that are integral to driving transformative change. The new Transformation Plan has potential to enable a cultural change, and unlock staff potential, that would complement the new Leader's emerging vision and contribute to capacity.

The governance that sits around the programme will also be key. Effective oversight and challenge is not currently in place (e.g. project management not consistently applied). Establishing effective governance will provide the framework through which to drive forward and progress.

7. Next steps

Immediate next steps

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

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

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

Follow up visit

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

Next Corporate Peer Challenge

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

Annex 1: Examples of good practice

Approach to Scrutiny: Use of Inquiry Days

Boston BC's established scrutiny function which is focused on pre-decision scrutiny works well and is widely seen as constructive and adding value to policy development. It utilises innovative scrutiny approaches, such as enquiry days, member briefings and task and finish groups to examine relevant issues (e.g. Lincolnshire Waste Management Strategy, rural isolation, markets review). These have proved popular and effective ways providing effective challenge and contributing to policy development.

Task and Finish Groups: Overview and Scrutiny Committees are able to establish time-limited task and finish group reviews that focus on a particular issue and consider it in greater detail than is possible at committee meetings. These reviews will include a mixture of interviews with relevant officers, research of best practice, meetings with service users and community groups and consultation with wider parts of the community.

All-Member Briefings: These are scheduled to take place regularly throughout the year for officers and guest speakers to impart information to Members on topical matters of interest. These briefings are informal and give Members the opportunity to ask any questions they may have and can initiate ideas for matters to be scrutinised.

Inquiry Days: This is a relatively new way of working for the Council and involves Members and officers getting together informally in order for Members to receive full information and options on an issue and for officers to gauge Members' opinions, before drafting a focussed report for consideration at the committee meeting. These have been well received by members and officers, with meaningful outputs.

Inclusive Boston

In leading a £1.4 million Controlling Migration Fund Bid and chairing the Inclusive Boston Board, Boston BC has demonstrated a collaborative approach to managing migration issues. As lead partner and accountable body, Boston secured resources to support a range of projects and activities that together will have a cumulative, lasting impact in mitigating some of the issues the Council, its partners and its existing and new population face as a direct consequence of migration. The four project themes are collective and cohesive and align closely with each other; where significant, extended, diverse provision is required - for example in terms of English Language and ESOL - Boston BC have a coordinated thread that runs through the programme. Chaired by the Head of Regulatory Services, the Inclusive Boston Board oversees delivery of the Controlling Migration Fund and reports directly to the Cabinet. Boston BC have commissioned an independent evaluation of the programme which will report back at the end of the four year funding period, the learning from which could benefit other authorities.