

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Boston Borough Council

14 – 16 May 2024

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance, governance information and spending three days at Boston Borough Council to provide robust, strategic, and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of Sector-led Improvement (SLI) put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are: Responsible for their own performance, Accountable locally not nationally and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

CPC assists councils in meeting part of their Best Value duty, with the UK Government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years.

Peers remain at the heart of the peer challenge process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

This report outlines the key findings of the peer team and the recommendations that the council are required to action.

2. Executive summary

Boston Borough Council (BC) includes within its boundaries the historic town of Boston in the Lincolnshire Fens, as well as numerous villages in the surrounding rural area. The borough has a wealth of heritage and natural assets, with strong agriculture and horticulture sectors, and an increasingly diverse population as a result of inward migration. There are also significant environmental, social, and economic challenges, due to vulnerability to flooding and with Boston BC ranked 102 out of 326 authorities in terms of indices of multiple deprivation (IMD)¹.

The council has embraced significant organisational changes in recent years. Notably with the formation in 2021 of the South and East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership (the Partnership) with South Holland and East Lindsey District Councils.

¹ [Headline Report for Boston Borough Council - Bar Chart View | LG Inform \(local.gov.uk\)](#)

The Partnership has undoubtedly brought huge benefits to Boston BC - from financial savings, to punching above its weight in access to expertise and skills.

The May 2023 local elections brought further change, with a new Independent political leadership and 18 newly elected councillors. The new administration has hit the ground running, bringing a clear focus and leadership which is widely recognised. Boston BC has continued to deliver whilst pivoting to adapt to these changes. This has inevitably been a learning curve, and there are some challenges around respective councillor – officer roles, relationships, and behaviours. The resetting of councillor – officer relationships, alongside further learning and development support for councillors will be important to support everyone and embed positive change.

There is a strong commitment from Boston BC councillors to effective audit and scrutiny and desire to perform their roles well. There is nevertheless an opportunity to strengthen scrutiny by investment in development support for councillors and embracing policy development at an early stage.

Boston BC, like most councils, faces financial and modernisation challenges to meet demand pressures, transform services, and deliver efficiency savings. It has a £990,000 budget gap in 2024/25, increasing to £2.1 million in 2028/29. The council's financial position is exacerbated by pressure from the Internal Drainage Board (IDB) levy. The council has a sound awareness of its financial challenges, and has taken proactive approaches to generate budget savings, through its Transformation and Efficiency Programme and other measures. Efficiency plans however are high level and without detailed benefits realisation. For Boston BC to have confidence in addressing its Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) budget gap, a robust multiyear Transformation Programme and acceleration of a 'bolder' Service Review programme will be imperative. Prioritisation should be given to ensuring that concerns raised by Boston BC's external auditors – that identified some weaknesses in internal financial controls – are fully addressed.

The role of Public Sector Partners Services Limited (PSPS) will be critical to Boston BC achieving its transformation aspirations. Recent investments in improving operating and assurance processes across PSPS and the Partnership have impacted positively. Further work is however required to benefit both partners to achieve seamless joint working as barriers remain to effective financial management,

driving productivity and transformation. Improvements seen, since concerns were raised by the Council's external auditors around financial management controls, need to be sustained. Boston BC are also encouraged to take external advice on PSPS Board governance to seek assurance that current structures reflect good practice.

The Peer Team heard and witnessed a supportive workforce culture, meeting with passionate, committed staff proud of their work and its impact on Boston BC's communities. Whilst many staff expressed a desire to support organisational improvement and change, stretched capacity was consistently raised. Continuously reviewing capacity - aligned to Boston BC's and the Partnership's priorities - will be vital to ensure Boston BC can deliver its ambitions and mitigate risks to staff wellbeing and resilience. Peers were impressed with the Partnership's prioritisation of workforce development and planning, with the Future Leaders Programme and planned Lincolnshire Academy notable examples. The ongoing programme of harmonisation of pay spines and terms and conditions for staff across the Partnership brings opportunities and risks. The Peer Team would encourage Boston BC to create Strategic Senior HR capacity to drive this activity to mitigate potential capacity risks and future costs.

Boston BC has had impressive success at securing inward investment, leveraging in £76.7 million of Government funding for Boston town centre alone since 2021. It has an enviable breadth of regeneration and growth projects underway, with the Boston Town Deal Board a notable example of partnership working. Capacity to deliver on its Capital Programme however is a risk, with significant slippage having occurred in recent years. This requires continuous risk mitigation.

2030 is the 400-year anniversary of the establishment of Boston, Massachusetts, and provides a unique opportunity to capitalise on the borough's tourism and heritage assets for lasting community benefit. In order to unlock the borough's potential and the council's ambitions for Boston, it will be important to develop and communicate widely a long-term strategic vision for the borough in collaboration with partners. Identifying senior officer capacity to support the Chief Executive and Leader to bolster visible place leadership for Boston BC - and raising the strategic influence of communications function - would further aide this. This would provide a clear focal point and vision which partners could coalesce behind and contribute towards delivery of shared ambitions.

The Cabinet has brought a renewed community focus and clear commitment to climate action. To fully realise these ambitions, further work is required to embed them across all aspects of the Boston BC's operations. This will require a strong focus on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and systematic approach to garnering resident views, insight, and data so it underpins and informs all aspects of Boston BC's priorities, service delivery, and transformation. The planned residents survey, recent introduction of the Intelligence Hub, and strong culture of performance monitoring provide Boston BC with a great platform from which to do so.

There is much for Boston BC to be proud of and celebrate, as well as more to do to continue to adapt and modernise to unlock its potential, secure financial sustainability, and achieve its ambitions for place.

3. 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:

Local priorities and organisational and place leadership

- 3.1 **Develop and communicate widely a long-term strategic vision for the Borough of Boston in collaboration with partners.**
This will enable partners to coalesce behind the vision and contribute towards the delivery of shared ambitions.

- 3.2 **Consider identifying senior officer capacity to support the Chief Executive and Leader to manage sovereign relationships and provide visible place leadership for Boston BC.**
This visibility and locality presence will strengthen links with locality specific partners and support the administration.

- 3.3 **Undertake systematic engagement to gather and utilise customer insight to inform Boston BC's priorities, service delivery, and transformation.**
This will drive data, insight, and citizen centred outcomes and service transformation.

3.4 Raise the strategic influence of the communications function.

This will enable internal and external communication to support delivery of the council's and Partnership's ambitions.

Governance, culture and finance planning and management

3.5 Reset councillor – officer relationships and behaviours, including:

- a. Formalisation of protocol for councillor triage system.**
- b. Training for councillors and senior officers on respective roles, behaviours and code of conduct.**
- c. Top team development between Cabinet and Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and Corporate Management Team (CMT).**
- d. LGA political leadership development and mentoring.**

This will help support councillors in their roles and foster healthy councillor – officer relationships and a one team approach.

3.6 Develop a comprehensive programme of learning and development for councillors, including training on overview and scrutiny.

This will support continuous learning for councillors and strengthen the scrutiny function.

3.7 To enhance governance and mitigate strategic risk:

- a. Take external advice on PSPS Board governance to seek assurance to ensure that structures reflect good practice.**
- b. Take actions to provide reassurance that concerns raised by external audit have been fully addressed.**
- c. Take further steps to achieve seamless working between PSPS and Boston BC to drive transformation.**
- d. Embed the commitment to climate action in services to deliver green ambitions and address key risks to Boston BC.**

This will provide Boston BC with assurance as to its management of risk and governance regarding these issues.

Capacity for improvement

- 3.8 **To fully deliver the benefits of transformation and support staff wellbeing and retention:**
- a. **Develop a robust multiyear Transformation Programme aligned to the Medium-Term Financial Strategy savings plans, vision, and priorities.**
 - b. **Prioritise and accelerate the programme of Service Reviews and be bolder in these.**
 - c. **Continuously review and align capacity to ensure ability to deliver priorities.**

This will support the Transformation Programme to be truly 'transformational' and deliver against the Medium-Term Financial Strategy financial savings gaps.

- 3.9 **Create Strategic Senior HR capacity to drive the programme of activity around Terms and Conditions and pay spine.**

This will support the success of the programme and mitigate potential future cost and capacity risks.

4. Summary of peer challenge approach

4.1 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 by the LGA on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Dan Gascoyne, Chief Executive, Braintree District Council
- Cllr Sarah Rouse, Independent Member, Malvern Hills District Council
- Cllr Linda Robinson, Conservative Member, Wychavon District Council
- Richard Block, Chief Operating Officer, Colchester City Council
- Hollie Walmsley, Head of Human Resources, Chorley Council and South Ribble Borough Council

- Jenni French, Programme Lead Adviser, Local Government Association
- Frances Marshall, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

4.2 **Scope and focus**

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

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? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - **Does the council have a grip on its** current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges? What is the relative financial resilience of the council like?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

As part of the five core elements outlined above, every Corporate Peer Challenge includes a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance, and assurance. In addition to these themes, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback integrated within these are a focus on organisational sustainability; and effective governance and culture including leadership and scrutiny.

4.3 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. This included a position statement prepared by the council in advance of the peer team's time on site. This provided a clear steer to the peer team on the local context at Boston Borough Council and what the peer team should focus on. It also included a comprehensive LGA Finance briefing (prepared using public reports from the council's website) and a LGA performance report outlining benchmarking data for the council across a range of metrics. The latter was produced using the LGA's local area benchmarking tool called LG Inform.

The peer team then spent 3 onsite at Boston Borough Council, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 40 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 100 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.

5. Feedback

5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

Boston BC has a population of 70,806 and includes within its boundaries the historic town of Boston in the Lincolnshire Fens, as well as numerous villages in the surrounding rural area. The borough has a wealth of historical, heritage, third sector and natural assets. There is a strong agriculture, horticulture sector, as well as businesses ancillary to these. It has an increasingly diverse and multicultural population, with the latest Census data showing 25.5% of the population identify as non-white UK, and 6.6% of the population reporting that they cannot speak English well or at all². Boston BC has some significant social economic and environmental challenges, being vulnerable to climate change impacts due to its low-lying nature and coastline, and ranked 102 out of 326 authorities in terms of indices of multiple deprivation (IMD)³.

The Cabinet have clear local priorities which are articulated within the Sub-Regional Strategy and well understood internally. There is a wide awareness of the Sub-Regional Strategy among both councillors and the wider workforce. The Strategy's direct impact on Boston borough however is not clearly understood by all. There is more to do to ensure the administration's longer-term priorities and vision for the Borough are articulated, communicated, and embedded. (See Organisation and Place Leadership Paragraph). For example, the administration has brought a renewed community focus, emphasis on civic pride and clear commitment to climate action. Whilst this work remains in its infancy, it is recognised that these environmental aspirations need to be embedded in the Council and translated into how all services can contribute to reducing emissions and addressing key risks, such as flooding vulnerability. Refreshing and reviewing the Climate Change Strategy would help provide greater clarity, embed, and translate these commitments into collectively owned actions across all of Boston BC's activity.

A culture of performance monitoring is evident across the council. The Partnership has a robust Performance Monitoring Framework, which is delivered well and taken seriously with reports to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), Cabinet and Scrutiny.

² [Headline Report for Boston Borough Council](#)

³ [Headline Report for Boston Borough Council](#)

The Peer Team heard examples of performance information being used to drive service improvement from service areas such as homelessness through to council tax collection. The Peer Team was impressed by regular performance clinics which it considered good practice.

To provide a view on Boston BC's performance, the Peer Team considered the latest key performance reports, customer satisfaction data and [LGI Inform](#) report which compares Boston BC's performance to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) nearest neighbours. These showed how Boston BC performs strongly in some areas, including on households in temporary accommodation and affordable housing delivery⁴. Boston BC performs less strongly on areas including residual waste and business rates and council tax collection⁵. The Council's quarter four Performance Report showed that customer satisfaction in relation to direct service delivery was particularly high in areas including customer services, whilst areas such as revenue and benefits were reported to be below satisfaction targets.

Community focus is a clear priority of the new administration, bringing with them a strong desire to engage with residents and prioritise what the community values. The Peer Team heard that there is an active network of voluntary and third sector organisations and that community engagement has increased in recent years, building on activity during the Covid 19 pandemic. There are good examples of proactive collaboration across partners to tackle health inequalities – such as through the Healthy Living Board. However, a strong awareness and understanding of Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) across Boston BC was not widely apparent. The political leadership's commitment for the community to be at heart of everything Boston's BC does provides a platform to bring a stronger focus to EDI. Ensuring EDI is integral to all aspects of Boston BC's activity will strengthen its ability to improve social, economic and health outcomes and meet the needs of Boston BC's diverse communities.

The Peer Team heard positive examples of consultation and targeted community engagement, such 'Love Your Neighbourhood Campaign' and 'Boston Heroes Awards.' It was not however clear how residents' views and data are systematically used to inform all aspects of Boston BC's priorities, service delivery, and

⁴ [Headline Report for Boston Borough Council](#)

⁵ [Headline Report for Boston Borough Council](#)

transformation. Further work will be required to bring about this holistic citizen centred approach. The recent introduction of the Intelligence Hub and planned residents survey are positive steps which have potential to further strengthen Boston BC's understanding of the challenges of its communities and ability respond accordingly with system partners such as the Integrated Care Board (ICB).

5.2 Organisational and place leadership

The May 2023 local elections saw a change in political administration, with a new independent political leadership. The new Leader and administration have hit the ground running, prioritising a number of key pieces of work, such as a focus on the town centre and events. The Leader is recognised internally and externally as a key figure in the leadership of Boston borough whilst the Cabinet is cohesive, engaged, and enthusiastic. The new administration has brought a clear political focus and level of engagement that is widely recognised and broadly welcomed across all levels of the organisation. Boston BC has continued to deliver whilst pivoting to adapt to these changes, though inevitably organisational readjustment is continuing. (See Governance and Leadership).

There has been relative stability in recent years in the Senior Leadership (SLT) and Corporate Management Teams (CMT) which are shared across the Partnership. The CMT are perceived as visible and accessible, however with stretched capacity at times impacting their ability to support staff. The role or visibility of SLT did not come across strongly in conversations with staff. The Chief Executive's workforce engagement roadshows have however been positively received, with staff welcoming the ability to shape these.

Boston BC's commitment to the Partnership with South Holland and East Lindsey District Councils has remained through the political leadership change. Boston BC has benefitted hugely from the Partnership. This is evident in it punching above its weight in access to expertise and skills. The Partnership's lobbying on the financial pressures from Internal Drainage Board levies further demonstrate the benefit and influence brought. The Greater Lincolnshire Devolution Deal provides potential opportunities for Boston BC but is effectively on hold due to the dissolution of Parliament ahead of the 4 July General Election. It will be important for Boston BC to take an active role to seek to influence and unlock opportunities for the benefit of

Boston BC and the wider region if, and when, this goes ahead.

The recently adopted Sub-Regional Strategy sets out the collective priorities, aims and ambitions for the Partnership across its geographical footprint, as well as administration's local priorities for Boston BC. An important next step will be clearly articulating a long-term vision for Boston borough as a place. By building on the Sub-Regional Strategy and emerging Economic Strategy - and working in collaboration with partners - this vision will help establish a collective "north star" which councillors, partners and staff can buy into, contribute towards delivery of, and unlock potential of through collaboration.

As a borough with one major urban centre, and with key regeneration projects centred on Boston town, there has understandably been a strong focus on the town. Boston's Town Centre Strategy and plans to enhance Boston's Market are key tenets of the council's efforts to revitalise the town centre and foster community pride in the area. The Peer Team heard a desire for a wider focus outside of the Town centre. The new administration's positive focus on community engagement with parish and villages, as well as Boston town, will be important to ensure the strong focus on Boston Town can be replicated for the whole of the borough, and working more inclusively with the parish councils.

The 400-year anniversary of the establishment of Boston, Massachusetts, in 2030 offers an incredible opportunity for the whole borough to capitalise on its tourism and heritage assets. There is desire from partners to be engaged collaboratively at an early stage in planning this. This will be important in order to secure lasting community benefit.

The collaborative Boston Town Deal Board - described by partners as a strategic catalyst and best practice - is a notable example of impactful place-based partnership working. The Peer Team heard apprehension that the benefits from this successful collaboration could be at risk beyond the lifetime of the Towns Board. Partners are keen to work more closely and proactively with Boston BC generally. The council's senior officer leadership being seen as visible and outward facing for Boston BC, not just the Partnership, will be important part of this. Consideration should be given to identifying senior officer capacity to support the Chief Executive and Leader to bolster visible place leadership for Boston BC. Enhanced visibility and locality

presence would be welcomed by partners, strengthen future joint working opportunities, and provide further support to the administration.

Boston BC has had impressive success at securing inward investment. Since 2021 the council has secured £76.7 million in Government funding for regenerating Boston's town centre⁶, as well as drawing down funding for priorities ranging from business growth to culture⁷. It has an enviable breadth of regeneration and important placed based initiatives projects underway, from its Town Deal activity to PE21 project. Whilst this is a feat to be commended, it brings risks and capacity challenges, as well as opportunities. There has been significant slippage in delivery of the Capital Programme, with a £23.9 million projected underspend in 2023/24 within a £33.3 million budget. The Peer Team heard concerns about the council's capacity to deliver on its Capital Programme. Continuous mitigation and review will be critical going forward to ensure there is sufficient capacity to deliver on the Capital Programme and that inflationary increases to the cost of schemes are managed effectively.

5.3 Governance and culture

The past 12 months has seen Boston BC adapt to a new political leadership and intake, with 18 newly elected councillors and most Cabinet members were new councillors in May 2023. This has inevitably been an organisational learning curve. The new leadership being more engaged and involved has led to a cultural shift which officers and councillors are still adapting to. There are opportunities to strengthen ways of working to further support this journey. For example, the Peer Team heard councillors would value more succinct, timely reports, with executive summaries. Reviewing the Scheme of Delegations as part of the planned Constitutional Refresh could empower Cabinet further now that they have over a year's experience of working together. Also formalising the councillor 'triage protocol' would provide welcome clarity and boundaries on the management of councillor engagement and queries.

The Peer Team heard examples of councillor and officer roles and responsibilities being blurred. Peers heard concerns that at times councillor behaviours have fallen

⁶ Towns Deal, Long Term Plan for Towns and Levelling Up Fund.

⁷ UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Arts Council England funding

short of expected standards, and staff need to feel supported by senior officers in challenging such situations. It will be important for Boston BC to take steps to reset relationships and behaviours to foster a culture of strong, respectful, open, and honest councillor-officer working. Providing greater clarity on councillor and officer roles, responsibilities, and behaviours will help embed strategic and operational boundaries and create a one team approach. To do so, activity should include training for councillors and senior officers on respective roles, top team development between Cabinet and the senior officer leadership, and take-up of LGA political leadership development and mentoring courses.

The Peer Team heard positive feedback from councillors about the quality of the induction training they received post elections. Ensuring there is a coordinated ongoing councillor development programme will be important to build on this good work. Doing so will support a continuous learning culture, mirroring that advanced within the workforce.

Boston BC has an Audit and Governance Committee, two Overview and Scrutiny Committees, as well as joint Partnership scrutiny arrangements. There is a desire from councillors for effective audit and scrutiny and to perform their roles well. The Peer Team heard that the Audit Committee provides robust challenge, but there is scope to improve the efficacy of scrutiny. To do so, Boston BC should embrace policy development at an early stage, and invest in development for councillors to understand their roles, the vital importance of scrutiny and its neutrality. The value of dedicated specialist scrutiny resource to support effective and independent overview and scrutiny may also be something BC wants to reflect on.

The council's statutory officers take an active role on Boston BC's approach to governance, audit, and risk. They are supported by a clear organisation Strategic Risk Register. The Peer Team heard there is a good working relationship between the Chief Executive, Section 151 Officer, and Monitoring Officer as the 'golden triangle'. Statutory officers come together on a regular basis, including through monthly SLT meeting dedicated to governance. Internal Audit has direct access to the SLT and attend these governance meetings which is good practice.

Boston BC's most recent External Auditors report from 2021/22 issued an unqualified Value for Money judgement, and Internal Auditors judgement was 'substantial

assurance' on most areas. However, both internal and external audit have identified weaknesses in internal financial controls, challenges in the operational effectiveness between PSPS and Boston BC, and expressed concerns about adequacy of response provided to these. Significant efforts have been to address these challenges and improvements made. (Financial Planning and Management refers). Further work is nevertheless required, and it is imperative that Boston BC take actions to provide assurance that issues raised by internal and external audit are addressed fully. The Peer Team would encourage Boston BC to take external advice on PSPS Board governance to seek assurance that current structures reflect good practice.

5.4 Financial planning and management

Like many councils, Boston BC is facing a challenging financial context with inflationary pressures, increasing demand, and imperative to transform services, and deliver efficiency. With a budget gap for 2024/25 of £990,000, increasing to an estimated £2.1 million by 2028/29, the financial challenges facing Boston BC are significant. The SLT has a strong understanding of these challenges, and confidence in the Section 151 Officer is high. There is a wide awareness of the financial pressure facing Boston BC across the workforce.

The council's financial position is exacerbated by pressure from the IDB levy, with this increasing at a higher rate than Boston BC's resource base. In 2023/24, the IDB levy represented 22 per cent of the council's overall budget and 58 per cent total council tax collected. Notwithstanding the success of the Partnership in securing additional funding from Government for this in 2024/25, without a long-term funding solution, this remains a key financial risk. It is imperative that Boston BC develops contingency plans in the eventuality that further funding is not forthcoming.

The council's ambitious approach to bidding for external funding has secured significant extra capital to improve the Borough, with a £43.4 million five-year Capital Programme, of which £33.9 million is grant funded. (Organisational and Place Leadership refers).

Boston BC has a track record of generally managing expenditure within budget. With £14,847 million reserves in 2024/25, this is within prudent levels. The council has no plans in 2024/25 to use reserves to directly fund gaps in the revenue budget and has

utilised reserves to support key priorities including Transformation and its Capital Programme. Boston BC has taken proactive approaches to generating budget savings and reducing debt, securing a £6.4 million discount from Public Works Loan Board debt redemption. Further ideas are coming forward through the Innovation Transformation and Efficiency Board.

Boston BC's Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is linked to corporate priorities and sets out clear assumptions over five years. Whilst transformation and efficiency plans are in place, these are high level, without detailed benefits realisation. It will be important to develop a more robust multi-year Transformation Programme with stronger link between how activity to generate savings will support gaps in the MTFS.

For Boston BC to have confidence in addressing its long-term budget gap, accelerating a bolder Service Review Programme will also be required. The Peer Team heard consistently that this has not progressed at the desired pace, with reviews not necessarily bringing about 'transformational' change. Unblocking the Service Review programme – and continuously reviewing and aligning capacity to ensure ability to deliver transformation – will be important to maximise financial savings and benefits realisation.

The council's ability to ensure sound financial planning management and transformation has been adversely impacted by the challenge of establishing seamless working between PSPS and Boston BC. This can be seen in unexpected overspends and gaps in financial information at points during 2023/24. Significant efforts have been made by the Partnership and PSPS to address these issues, including a Finance Improvement Plan, and investment in resources and recruitment. The Peer Team heard this has resulted in notable improvement in performance and quality of outcomes, though there is further to go. It will be important to build on this progress made and ensure all actions in the finance improvement plan are completed. Succession planning and resilience in finance across the Partnership and in PSPS remains a key concern which requires action. This is a great opportunity to consider how the Partnerships 'Lincolnshire Academy' plans and PSPS's talent development programme could support development of future talent in this area.

5.5 Capacity for improvement

Boston BC has a history of embracing external peer challenge to support ongoing improvement and shared learning. This is the council's third Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) with the last one taking place in 2019. Over the past three years the council have also undergone and embraced the feedback from a Peer Challenge and Progress Review of the Partnership.

Boston BC's workforce is an asset. The Peer Team met with passionate, committed staff who were proud of their work and the positive impact they have on Boston BC's communities. As part of the Partnership, Boston BC has an agreed set of staff values and behaviours, with a 'one team' ethos. These organisational values are reflected upon both formally and informally by managers and staff to embed them across the organisation. Staff the Peer Team spoke with were aware of these and described Boston BC as having a supportive workforce culture between colleagues. There were examples of inconsistencies in corporate messages cascading throughout the workforce and in management practices. Whilst there are annual appraisals, there is an opportunity to do more to implement consistent leadership expectations across the council to ensure that officers feel effectively supported.

In conversations with staff, the issue of capacity was also consistently raised. The Peer Team heard that all levels of the workforce are feeling stretched. There has also been a downward trend in organisational health performance figures in recent months. For example, in the 2023/24 staff survey, between quarter one to quarter four, the results reflect a workforce who feel less valued and informed, and feel there are fewer opportunities for development. Across the Partnership, sickness absence increased by 2 days per full time employee between quarter four in 2022/23 and the same period in 2023/24, with 52% of all absences attributed to mental ill health. Boston BC should agree an action plan to address organisational health performance figures. Undertaking a continuous review of capacity - aligning to Boston BC's and the Partnership's priorities - will also be vital for staff wellbeing and retention.

There are strong internal communication mechanisms with weekly internal communications bulletins widely recognised as a key source of corporate information. There is an appetite from councillors and staff for more succinct internal communications. Councillors expressed a desire for more regular, concise, 'Boston BC' focused information that can be shared more widely to aid them in their

community leadership roles. Communications more broadly would be strengthened by raising the strategic influence of the communications function. Engaging and embedding communications earlier in key issues policy development, would provide a more effective platform for communications to support delivery of Boston BC ambitions.

The Partnership has a joint Staff Forum which is genuinely employee-led and an effective group to enact improvements for the workforce. Boston BC has an EDI Policy which governs how it meets its commitment to provide equal opportunities in employment and create an inclusive culture. There are currently no specific networks to understand and respond to the experience of staff reflective of protected characteristic or experiential groups. There is an opportunity harness energy and insight of the Staff Forum to further develop and embed the council's internal approach to EDI. (Local Priorities and Outcomes refers).

The Partnership has provided Boston BC with access to experienced skilled officers that it would be unable to benefit from as a single district. The prioritisation of internal workforce development – through the Partnership's joint Workforce Development Strategy – has had demonstrable success and is a key strength. The success of the Future Leaders' Programme is being built upon with the Lincolnshire Academy approach which has great potential to develop a pipeline of talent, whilst also expanding opportunities for residents.

The council has recently aligned two terms and conditions of employment to those of its partner councils – around sickness and professional fees - for the benefit of the workforce. The Partnership is taking a phased approach to review of terms and conditions for all staff and harmonisation of pay spines for shared officers. This brings with it significant opportunities and risks. To mitigate potential future cost and capacity risks, it is imperative that analysis of the financial, legal, and operational impact of the terms and conditions review, and implementation of a new pay spine and Job Evaluation scheme, is conducted at the outset. The Peer Team would encourage the creation of Strategic Senior HR capacity to drive this programme of activity to mitigate key corporate risks.

Whilst many staff expressed a desire to support organisational improvement and change, the Peer Team heard that uncertainty around Service Reviews was causing

anxiety for some staff. Bringing services together is a significant undertaking and clear plans are needed to support services to ensure this is successful. It will be important for the Service Review Programme to include clear plans and communications to effectively bring services together within the Partnership.

The Peer Team heard examples of systems, processes and culture being barriers to modernising, innovating and efficiency. PSPS have invested internally to transform their services and delivered significant improvements for Boston BC, such as the significant ICT infrastructure upgrade. There is still however further to go to achieve a fully joined up approach with PSPS and further steps are required to ameliorate barriers and to benefit both partners. As an enabler of much of Boston's BC ambitions, utilising the skills and experience of PSPS more effectively will be important to drive transformation and service reviews.

6. Next steps

It is recognised that the Boston BC senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. The LGA will continue to provide on-going support to the council. As part of the CPC, the council is also required to have a progress review, and publish the findings from this, within twelve months of the CPC. The LGA will also publish the progress review report on their website.

The progress review will provide space for the council's senior leadership to report to peers on the progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations, discuss early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC action plan. The progress review will usually be delivered on-site over one day.

The date for the progress review at Boston Borough Council will be before 13 May 2025.

In the meantime, Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser for Boston Borough Council, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Mark is available to discuss any further support the council requires. mark.edgell@local.gov.uk.