



Introduction

LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel sessions provide an opportunity for the Leader, Chief Executive, senior members and officers to come together, virtually, with peers to:

- Reflect on what the Council has achieved and learnt in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic
- Discuss with peers the challenges and opportunities Covid-19 has presented for the Council and local area
- Consider the steps the Council wishes to take towards recovery/renewal

The sessions are intended to help to identify steps the Council may wish to consider as well as further support and good practice available from across the sector.

Between 10th – 12th November 2020, Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) participated in an LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel. This took place over two sessions on 10th and 11th November, with a third feedback session held on 12th November.

Within the overarching theme of recovery and renewal, CBC identified particular areas where they would value the input of the Peer team as follows:

- Emergency response and governance – a sense check and recognition of what the council has achieved, how well it managed the response to Covid, how well the governance arrangements have helped or could be improved into the future. This is a backward-looking reflection and the purpose is to learn and record this
- Recovery and renewal – now and into the future, looking at the existing recovery plan and sense checking it, establishing whether there are lessons to be learned from elsewhere, whether the scope and horizon setting look right, whether there is a clear link to the council and place prioritisation and whether there is tangible leadership and ambition

The LGA are particularly grateful to the Peer team from Exeter City Council who agreed to undertake this work and who, over a short period of time, read and digested numerous supporting background documents and then conducted two virtual discussion sessions, the second of which was with external stakeholders, and a feedback session to the Leader, Chief Executive and senior officers. The Peer team for the Panel were:

- Cllr Rachel Sutton – Deputy Leader, Exeter City Council
- Karime Hassan – Chief Executive, Exeter City Council
- Emily McGuinness – LGA Programme Manager
- Kathryn Trant – LGA Regional Adviser

Background to Recovery and Renewal Panels

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and lockdown began in March 2020, the LGA suspended the physical delivery of all peer challenge work including the core offer of a corporate peer challenge.

To continue to support councils during this unprecedented period, the LGA rapidly refocused their support and adopted a new remote approach, focusing on supporting the recovery and renewal of local government and its communities. Recovery and Renewal Panels do not replace LGA Corporate Peer Challenge and offer something distinctly different. This note acts as a high level summary of the key reflections from the detailed discussions.

Key Reflections

Response

One of the areas for consideration by the Peer team was the council's response to the Covid19 pandemic. There are many examples of effective and impactful actions taken by the council in response to the pandemic, all of which we heard are valued by members, partners, stakeholders and staff.

External stakeholders in particular, value the council's ability to adapt at pace to meet the needs of residents and businesses in a dynamic and complex environment. The Community Help Hub is widely recognised as a good example of helping vulnerable residents or those in need. The council's willingness to work in partnership with the voluntary sector for the benefit of residents is evident, although opportunities exist to build on the enhanced relationships built over recent months and more effectively map existing third sector provision. The pivotal role played by the council in providing support to homeless people from across the whole county through proactive and high visibility engagement in the Local Resilience Forum is a further example of positive partnership working recognised by local communities.

The business sector value the council's rapid and efficient response, and particularly appreciate the lead role the council took in administering the payment of support grants and working at speed to get grant payments 'out of the door', to support local businesses. The work in collaboration with other district councils to ensure fair and consistent distribution of discretionary grant funding was recognised. We were also told about the proactive work with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and Business Improvement District (BID) to support the re-opening of the High Street.

The pace at which the council transitioned the workforce from being traditionally office based to being essentially a virtual council is commendable and demonstrated your commitment to protecting the wellbeing of your staff alongside ensuring the continuing provision of services. Effective steps were also taken to ensure that governance arrangements were put in place to enable decision making to continue. The internal communications between officers and members such as welfare calls and regular briefings, has strengthened ties across the organisation. Both internally and externally the enhanced communications put in place by the council are recognised and hugely valued as transparent and timely, in particular the council's social media channel has helped to maintain visibility for the council and keep people informed.

The council's profile 'on the ground' was evidenced by the setting up of a community presence team covering open spaces and townscape. Officers were visible and seen to be supportive, particularly to the business community in areas such as translating government guidance.

In holding regular meetings with key partners and collaborating on a dynamic risk assessment which was continuously reviewed to understand new and emerging risks, the council provided valued practical support to the third sector. Now that those links have been established, they are keen to continue to work with the council. The partners we spoke with would welcome further opportunities to identify a continuation of these enhanced ways of working – utilising the existing third sector network and developing a collaborative, not competitive approach.

Recovery Strategy

CBC was one of, if not the first council to publish a Recovery Strategy. That early publication and consultation enabled the council to clearly signal recovery aims and objectives, which in turn informed the thinking and work of others including Gloucestershire County Council and therefore whilst publishing early could have resulted in things being missed, in this case that early publication was positive. It is important that the document is kept under review, as the pandemic, and associated impacts, continue over a pro-longed period of time. The economy is in a difficult position nationally and being able to respond dynamically will be key to supporting the rest of the town to recover.

The Recovery Strategy is informed by existing corporate plans so aligns with the council's established vision of place and longer term priorities. That the council was able to take the Corporate Plan and adapt it to respond to the Covid19 crisis shows organisational flexibility and the ability to re-orientate focus and resources in light of emerging situations.

CBC is ambitious for its place and going forward, it will be important that there is a realistic assessment of the capacity needed, versus the capacity available to realise all of these commendable ambitions. CBC is at an important milestone on its journey having so far responded well and achieved incremental growth. The council is now looking at a step change and has set the organisation on a transformational course. At this point, taking stock and considering what this means for leadership of place is crucial:

- Where does Cheltenham fit in, within the wider Gloucestershire place?
- In terms of governance of place, how can CBC work with partners, as a convening body, to develop and deliver a shared agenda?

There will be challenges in bringing the community with you and helping them to help themselves, but there are others in the sector (in particular members of the Peer Team), who have experience of success in this area and are willing to share and support. Partners of the council are well versed in the potential challenges around how to build community infrastructures, deal with skills deficits, etc, and are ready and willing to work alongside CBC to deliver the outcomes articulated in the Recovery Strategy.

The level of positivity, engagement and support we encountered when meeting with the council's partners and stakeholders is impressive – and should give you confidence in developing a collaborative and mutually beneficial way forward. The willingness of CBC to take the lead during the crisis and pull everyone together to work for a common goal was appreciated by those we spoke with. In considering how to move forward we would suggest that thought is given to capitalising on this energy and positive regard to put in place the longer term governance for partnership working. This would enhance partnership working, would lead to shared ownership of key objectives and would give stakeholders the confidence to play their part in helping to address the structural challenges that will arise as the recovery process continues.

CBC's stated ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030 is a credible and commendable plan and consideration should be given to whether the council could play a more central role in developing a carbon reduction plan for the Borough as a whole. Amongst the council's partners and stakeholders is a common understanding and commitment to sustainability and reducing carbon footprint, but there is a sense of everyone working within their own organisations. The experience of the Peer team is that the convening power of CBC could provide leadership for a strategic overview of where the Borough is going in terms of carbon neutrality. There is an opportunity now to draw on the goodwill of those stakeholders to see how they link up and whether there is learning to be shared.

A strategic overview will ensure that each organisation is making progress at a similar rate and nobody is left behind. The carbon neutral ambition is not something the council can achieve without support and collaborating with your stakeholders will widen and embed your place based carbon neutral approach and make them part of the solution. A Communications Strategy would also help to take residents with you on your carbon neutral journey, ensuring residents feel they have opportunities to input and influence.

Cyber Capital aspirations

Cyber Capital UK (and the Golden Valley) project is recognised as a transformational programme and an impressive step change for the council and the wider place. These projects could, and should, act as catalysts to help bring forward the structural changes needed to ensure these projects realise their potential and ensure the full benefits of these projects benefit the wider community. Inclusive growth and the ingredients required to support a successful economy require the leaders of place assemble many ingredients, such as:

- A good supply of skilled labour
- Homes
- Connecting infrastructure
- An attractive cultural environment
- An innovation ecosystem.

A place based governance model, of which there are numerous examples, can support the council to address these challenges. This is a genuine opportunity with an enviable national profile and provides you with a 'USP' during an important period of national recovery.

CBC's collaborative working with other councils has resulted in adoption of a Supplementary Planning Document and we heard how CBC is working with Gloucestershire County Council to achieve investment in the highways and phasing of the project. This is a significant achievement, the impact of which should not be underestimated. The decision of the council to invest in the development is a bold statement of intent for the future of Cheltenham. The council's acquisition of the land will enable you to control details of the development, minimise development risk and control the quality of the project.

There will be pressures on the council both politically and publicly to quickly achieve a commercial return on investment. It will be difficult to achieve that return at the pace you need to, and at the same time protect the quality of the development. The momentum and pace of progress will not always be in your control. You have made a significant capital investment and will undeniably need to show a return. The challenge for you will be managing those tensions between quality and return.

The strategic partner that the council chooses will be an important decision. This is a transformation project that will have measures of success that go wider than a simple return on investment. Therefore the choice of development partner needs to be selected carefully with the key objectives in mind. The Peer team shared learning from other places where joint ventures have failed because the relationships were not right, and partners failed deliver on promises and intentions. It is vital, albeit challenging, to ensure your strategic partner is as invested in the wider town as you and your existing partners are.

There is a fundamental credibility associated with Cyber Capital UK that should provide some confidence in pursuing a long term strategy, anchored by the strategic asset of GCHQ and the ecosystem that sits around it. There is evidence that GCHQ are invested in delivering local impact and this is a positive commitment. They will attract other private

sector organisations to the area; you may wish to consider how best to build on their commitment in a visible way so that they are seen to be invested. In the absence of a mature private sector track record in this field, the relationship of GCHQ and the bold land investment by the council will paint a persuasive case for Cyber Capital UK. In the absence of the council's leadership there would be no reason to assume the private sector would bring such an ambitious programme to fruition. The council's leadership in this regard is impressive.

The Hatch Report commissioned by the council is an important reference document as you look to develop a more inclusive approach to growth. The risks identified in that report indicate there are gaps in the Cheltenham asset base and other issues that will need to be addressed to achieve the strategic ambitions especially inclusive growth. To do this, we suggest the council should work on the other ingredients that make Cheltenham attractive. The cultural offer will need to be 'edgy' to attract the right people. CBC is placing itself on a global stage and will want to attract world class talent, and to do so should consider what Cheltenham can offer them.

It was not fully evident that relationships with your Higher and Further Education partners are what they need to be to support this ambitious programme and to develop the wider skills agenda. Both the council and its partners recognise that skills development will be essential to secure investment. The Peer team shared the experience of being faced with private sector companies saying they are not confident of being able to recruit locally. Partners we spoke with stated that young people want to leave Cheltenham at the earliest opportunity because there are better options for work elsewhere. Addressing this in the short term will require the right HE and FE partners to be more active and engaged partners

We heard about your Minster Innovation Exchange project. This is a brilliant example of what you need to do in a town centre to diversify. The project is a stepping stone to Cyber Capital UK and will provide innovation space and workspace, as well as supporting the cultural sector by providing a state of the art performance space. Whilst the timescale to deliver the project is challenging, it has the support of a number of partners and is a unique urban regeneration scheme that will have a positive impact on the town and the region.

Final thoughts and next steps

In summary, there are numerous examples of positive action taken by the council which our stakeholders were keen to acknowledge. There is a real opportunity now to work with partners, who understand that by working collaboratively more can be achieved and who see the current partnership working through response and recovery, as a catalyst to continue and enhance working together. The CBC's enhanced communications strategy has benefitted staff, members, residents and businesses and the social media activity has positively raised the profile of the council in the community. A robust communications strategy will be important as the council progresses through recovery and as the council's cyber development ambitions evolve.

The council will have challenges in progressing the cyber capital project as the choice of strategic partner will be absolutely key to success. The council will have to manage the tensions between pace of commercial return and quality of development. However, the foundations are in place with stakeholders and partners to make this a fabulous success and put Cheltenham on a worldwide stage. The council should be congratulated on the progress in respect of Cyber Capital UK – this really is a massive achievement.

CBC is a council with ambition and a focus on the projects to deliver that ambition, and the council has demonstrated the organisational flexibility to respond to the Covid19 crisis in such a way that many of the external stakeholders were keen to acknowledge positively. The council's dynamic assessment and review of risk will ensure that community needs continue to be met and front line services delivered.

The LGA would like to thank Cheltenham Borough Council for undertaking an LGA Recovery & Renewal Panel.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Paul Clarke (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). His e-mail address is paul.clarke@local.gov.uk