Scope and purpose of the peer challenge

You asked us to:

• Provide an external view of the council and give recognition, where appropriate, for progress made; and supportive challenge and feedback on how you are prepared to meet future issues and opportunities for Boston.

• Provide specific feedback on:
  – the effectiveness of elected member roles and how they might develop further to meet future challenges
  – How the authority works in partnership to increase capacity and deliver better outcomes and services
Scope and purpose of the peer challenge

In doing this the peer team have considered the critical issues that provide reassurance about future performance and the ability and capacity to deliver future ambitions:

- Understanding the context and priority setting
- Financial planning and viability
- Leadership and governance
- Capacity
Scope and purpose of the peer challenge

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 focus. The peers used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.
Overall messages: Summary

• You have clearly been on a journey of improvement of which you are rightly proud. This provides a positive track record and momentum to build on for the future. But don’t underestimate the challenges ahead and the ambition needed to stay in the game.

• The foundations are in place for continuous improvement through the establishment of a new Corporate Plan, Medium Term Financial Strategy and Transformation Programme. Priorities, plans and projects now need to be developed and delivered.

• You have invited and been receptive to external challenge, support and advice to inform improvement through the Improvement Board and the peer challenge.
Overall messages: Summary

- You have recognised the need to deliver more in collaboration in the future. There are examples of partnership working and relationships to build on.

- An increasing challenge for Boston is the social impact of a more diverse population. This provides an opportunity for the council to demonstrate its leadership in building stronger cohesive communities.

- You have done notable work to develop and support elected members since the elections last year and have an ambition to achieve Charter status. The focus has understandably been on induction and current responsibilities, but now needs to shift to future roles.
Understanding the local context and priority setting

- A new Corporate Plan sets out the aspirations of the council for 2012-15. The Plan has been informed by political priorities.
- The Plan recognises the challenging financial context and the need to deliver more in partnership and collaboration in the future. There is now an opportunity to engage and involve partners, customers and citizens in implementing the Plan.
- Does the Plan reflect the scale of the challenges for the area? E.g. are the needs of an increasing and more diverse population adequately addressed by the priorities?
Understanding the local context and priority setting

• Is the Corporate Plan ambitious enough? Does it set out an identity for the place and type of authority Boston Borough Council aspires to be?

• There is a gap between the Corporate Plan priorities and service delivery plans. This is understandable given the Plan is new. We suggest that action plans and measures of success now need to be developed.

• We suggest that you consider how you disseminate the priorities to residents and partners. This will be an important part of communicating to people that you are a new council with new priorities and new ways of doing business.
Financial planning and viability

• Financial management and planning has improved. You have recognised the need for savings to ensure a balanced budget in the future, and have made progress towards this through your Transformation Programme. Estimated £400k saved to date.

• You know more needs to be done. A number of potential projects are planned to deliver the further savings required as part of the Transformation Programme. The momentum of your early achievements will need to continue as savings will become harder to deliver.

• You have identified the key risks. But have you adequately assessed the potential impact of the ‘unknowns’ such as welfare reform, changes to local government finance and legislative changes?
Financial planning and viability

• Does the MFTP reflect the delivery of the Corporate Plan? Is there a need to move from a ‘funding the services’ to ‘funding the priorities’ approach?

• The Transformation Programme identifies potential savings. Continue to explore all options for service delivery and savings – e.g. joint working, opportunities for income generation, outsourcing, and other alternative service delivery mechanisms.
Leadership and Governance

• A range of stakeholders recognise the impact political and managerial leadership has had. It has helped ‘steady the ship’ and moved the council forward.

• As the council starts to move from a ‘deliverer’ to an ‘enabler’, how does the leadership role and style need to change?

• The challenge of a more diverse population could provide an opportunity for the council to demonstrate community leadership?

• How do you further develop the links with partners essential to helping you deliver your corporate plan priorities?
Leadership and Governance

• You have made some tough calls for tough times – e.g. staff T&Cs, reconfiguration of the green waste (reinvestment of savings to improve service delivery)

• The key processes to enable good decision-making and governance appear to be in place. Some of the roles and approaches within the framework may need to develop further, e.g. Overview & Scrutiny.

• You have a sound risk management process in place. Consider how the approach can be strengthened and developed further?
Capacity

• You have developed officer knowledge and capacity – e.g. senior managers Lean trained, managers training programme. A people strategy is being drafted.

• There is a performance management framework in place and a range of processes to support it, e.g. performance clinics and regular performance reporting.

• Sickness levels remain stable through the tough times. Staff seem committed and motivated in the continuing journey of improvement required.

• Your are involving staff in the Transformation Programme. This has generated ideas and potential change projects.
Capacity

- Sharing officers (e.g. S151 officer) delivers savings. Sharing services boosts resilience (e.g. Strategic planning). The approach appears to be opportunistic. Does there need to be a clear overall strategy?
- Do Senior management levels provide enough strategic capacity to lead and deliver the changes required?
Member roles, responsibilities and relationships

- You have done notable work to develop and support elected members since the elections last year and have a positive ambition to achieve Charter status.
- O&S has an opportunity to be involved in policy development and helps to inform decision-making
- Member development – good foundation (e.g. Induction programme, PDPs, buddy system). Training now needs to be focused around future roles, e.g. Localism, community leadership and scrutiny.
Member roles, responsibilities and relationships

• The style of scrutiny looks to be focussed on holding to account and commenting on draft policy. Is there scope for Task & Finish Groups to be more involved in shaping thinking and policy proposals on key issues? To achieve this, the style will need to be collaborative.

• You are making progress towards the Charter standards. You know there are some gaps and working to meet them.

• Member and officer relationships appear to have significantly improved. Members generally appreciative of the support they get from officers.
Working with others (partnerships)

• There are good examples of partnership working and relationships to build on. Working together has delivered mutual benefits and outcomes.

• Localism – delivering with people not to people
  – How do you plan to engage with your customers and residents in taking your priorities forward?
  – Working with the customer to shape services
  – How are you building capacity within your communities?
Working with others (partnerships)

• Evidence of small scale partnerships, not necessarily a holistic approach to service delivery.

• Relationship with LCC seems good. Opportunity to jointly explore what the Localism agenda will mean for the two authorities.

• The LSP (BAP) was scaled down to reflect current circumstances. Is its purpose and plans for the future clear to everyone?
Suggestions and questions to consider

• Develop a vision for Boston – what is the identity, brand and raison d’etre and how will it be communicated?

• Define and deliver the new operating model for the council of the future. This will enable you to produce a workforce plan, clear strategies for sharing services and building capacity.

• Work with key partners to develop action plans to deliver the Corporate Plan priorities.

• Consider priority led rather than service led budgeting.

• Review and assess the list of Transformation Programme projects to ensure that the purpose, cost and outcomes for each are clear.
Suggestions and questions to consider

- Introduce an annual horizon scanning and work planning session to help determine the scrutiny work programme.
- Use the issue of a more diverse population as an opportunity for the council to demonstrate community leadership.
- Ensure a robust and funded programme and project management approach and capacity.
- Examine your relationship with partners and citizens and consider its effectiveness.
- Re-assess strategic risks taking into account changing local government landscape.
Follow up activity

• Improvement and prioritisation workshop
• Support towards member charter
• Critical friend challenge to transformation programme