

Cllr Simon Blackburn and Neil Jack  
Blackpool Council  
Town Hall  
Blackpool  
FY1 1AD

01 September 2014

Dear Simon and Neil

**Blackpool Council**  
**Corporate Peer Challenge 30 June-3 July 2014**

On behalf of the peer team, I would like to say what a pleasure and privilege it was to be invited to Blackpool to deliver the recent corporate peer challenge as part of the LGA offer to support sector led improvement.

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 Blackpool were:

- Rob Tinlin, Chief Executive and Town Clerk, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
- Councillor Clyde Loakes, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Lead Member-Environment, LB Waltham Forest (Labour)
- Dave Perry, Director of Corporate Resources and Deputy Chief Executive, South Gloucestershire Council
- Stuart Palmer, Assistant Director- Home and Communities, Plymouth City Council
- Clarissa Corbisiero, Senior Adviser-Environment, Localism and Welfare, (LGA)
- Paul Clarke – Programme Manager, LGA (Peer Challenge Manager)

**1. Scope and focus of the peer challenge**

You asked the peer team to play particular attention to the following areas as part of the challenge:

- How clear are we about our priorities?

- Are we correct that the failure of the housing market is our biggest issue?
- How brave are we being in tackling housing market failure?
- How does our financial situation affect our ability to make things happen?
- How effective are our senior managers in driving change?
- How effectively do our corporate support functions facilitate the delivery of our priorities?

All of the above we have addressed within the core components looked at by all corporate peer challenges which are outlined below. The exception is the housing market issues you asked us to consider and we have specifically covered in the body of this letter.

1. Understanding of the local context and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and has it established a clear set of priorities?
2. 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?
3. Political and managerial leadership: Does the council have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?
4. Governance and decision-making: Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?
5. Organisational capacity: Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

We hope the feedback provided, which is structured to address the areas you wanted us to focus on, will help Blackpool Council (BC) build upon your self-evident strengths and stimulate your future plans.

## **2. 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 focus. 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 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.

This letter 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. In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors.

### **3. Summary of feedback: overall observations and messages**

We were privileged to have a guided tour of Blackpool during our 4 days there. The panorama view from the top of the iconic Blackpool Tower showed us the beautifully crafted and revamped splendor of the Winter Gardens and sea defences. This served to remind us of the significant national and indeed international identity of the place. But the same panorama also reinforced the challenges that the council and its partners face. We saw the physical restrictions for growth and the neighborhoods and communities within Blackpool that have significant social and economic challenges.

The council has a range of expectations for and from both its residents and visitors. It tries hard to respond to both. The council aims to raise aspirations, create a prosperous town and improving health outcomes for its residents. However there is a legacy to contend with. We were told about Blackpool's 'transient population', essentially in some areas creating a mix of poverty, seasonal dependency on low paid and low skilled jobs, low aspirations, poor housing, many vulnerable people and a population with poor health outcomes and an imbalanced housing and socio-economic mix. These are the core challenges.

In terms of the council itself, we were clear that it welcomes challenge. Indeed this corporate challenge follows one earlier in 2014 which focused on the health and wellbeing of Blackpool. Many of the messages sounded in that challenge are echoed here, and more besides. These are highlighted in the main body of this letter and underpin a core theme: the council and its partners have made tangible progress in certain areas but recognise that there is still much to do. It needs to prioritise these and act upon them by focusing improvement on the way the council itself and the systems it operates addresses them. The external focus of place must be matched with an internal focus on transformation.

In our view the range of improvements will come from an overriding one. The first fundamental task is for the council to articulate a concise and compelling vision for the future of Blackpool. It should then outline a clear role for the council in the delivery of that vision and finally underpin this with a specific plan for how it funds and provides services from 2015/16 onwards.

Some of the building blocks exist to help put the above in place but much more will be required. We saw at first hand a passionate and proactive leader of the council who has and will see through, changes that do and can make a difference to people's lives, for example the borough wide free school meal provision. We saw 'flashes of

brilliance'. For a small unitary council with limited resources there is a willingness to do new and different things. Indeed some of what the council does is both courageous and bold and the commitment to address the private sector housing crisis is evidence of that.

You have people who are completely committed to Blackpool, both place and council. We saw staff, managers, a senior team and a Chief Executive who live and breathe that. That commitment needs to be harnessed so that it can really make the changes you require.

Therefore, our overriding view is that Blackpool is a place with an international reputation that has fallen on difficult times. The Council appreciates the scale of the challenge it faces and now needs to act at pace to identify the key determinants for change, together with its own priorities moving forward, to tackle a fundamental review of services and delivery models and to embark on transformational change to ensure that services provide good value for money and achieve the investment it needs. Our main suggestions to address these are listed towards the end of this report and reflect the feedback we delivered on our final day with the council. Further detail is outlined in the body of this letter:

### **3.1 Local Context and Priority Setting**

A strong plus point is that the understanding of the issues is clear. We saw you and your partners eloquently outlining the range of significant social and economic issues facing Blackpool. You had in your Council Plan 2012-2015 set out three clear themes and a set of values to underpin the way you address them. You have a range of proactive positive initiatives supporting these:

- A strong drive around more effective licencing and enforcement arrangements
- Bold asset purchasing and commercialism- the Winter Gardens and the commitment to the Mamma Mia show demonstrate this
- Your new offices stand as a physical symbol that you are driving the regeneration of the town
- You have evidence of redefining services in light of changing priorities and financial context, for example the partnership work with the Clinical Commissioning Group has changed the commissioning and provision of adult social care
- There is a clear drive to address the private housing issues and associated social issues

A clear vision for Blackpool the place and the council is needed. Your plan and many other supporting plans expire in 2015. You have started to work on defining what is your vision for place for the next 5-10 years and beyond and that must continue at

pace. We were told of the master plan from earlier in the last decade around the notion of the super casino, which for a range of circumstances never materialised. That plan clearly captured imagination and garnered support and, despite not being adopted, many of the associated actions had a positive effect. So the firmed up the plan for the next decade must capture the same level of engagement?

This vision for Blackpool the place needs a broader context and narrative. You are rightly concerned with the issues created by Housing of Multiple Occupation but during the four days on site we wanted to hear more about the underlying economy, about skills and business, and about what the economic future of Blackpool ought to be. This is a key issue for determining the overarching plan for Blackpool.

It is self-evident that such a vision needs to be underpinned by clear priorities and proper engagement with stakeholders and you should consider investing in this area. We were not clear about how you effectively managed the 'whole' of your engagement strategy. We do not believe that you have utilised a resident survey for some considerable time and we would encourage you to revisit your plans to do so. You do have some effective approaches in neighbourhoods and in special interest groups but these need co-ordination and scaling because, as one stakeholder told us, you do have the 'raw material'.

This influence and engagement with stakeholders is key. We saw some significant examples of strong community engagement. We also saw what appeared to be a real strength in the relationships with the CCG and other health colleagues. We were however not as clear about how you effectively engaged with communities and stakeholders across Blackpool as a whole and we received mixed feedback on how effective you are in influencing regionally and nationally. Our strong opinion is that you should reflect on those issues, both where you clearly do this well and also where the opposite is true. Ask yourself the fundamental questions as to why this is patchy, when it needs to be strong everywhere if you are to truly succeed.

We think you should also refresh your evidence base which is not as robust as it should be and use that evidence to properly help you target your scant resources. This is crucial. We saw core public health information that provides a rational evidence base but we didn't always see such evidence underpinning your plans.

A repeating theme for us was that many of the plans you have expire in 2015. It was not clear in many of the plans we read about how or when you intend to refresh or update them. However that does offer you an opportunity to establish the vision and the strategy we have referred to already. Thereafter you can be clear about what sort of council you want to be as this will then help you and your partners properly manage resources and joint action for the future. Our strong advice is to focus on the 'function' for the council and then organise your 'form' to deliver this.

### **3.2 Financial strategy and viability**

Blackpool Council, like many others councils, should be rightly proud of the way it has delivered a significant savings programme in the last 3 - 4 years. The Council has identified and is in the course of delivering £68m in savings since 2010. A lot of these savings have come from 'downsizing' on the cost and headcount reduction principle and by renegotiating contracts with staff and external suppliers.

Whilst we applaud the council for making the savings we do have a concern that it has, perhaps, been relying on an incremental approach that is not sustainable for the future. Equally, the council also needs to free itself from, as one stakeholder told us, a 'pressure cooker financial climate where getting a balanced budget annually consumes the organisation'. A focus on the medium term is key.

We were encouraged to hear that the council has in place since 2012 a Priority Budgeting approach in which both senior managers and lead members are actively engaged and some budget lines have been prioritised over others. This move away from an incremental target driven approach is welcome. This will give the council clarity of priorities and as such a greater sense of knowing when and how to demote lower priority budgets and schemes in favour of higher priority ones.

We saw evidence of routine monitoring of financial and budgeting which is positive but the MTFS needs to be a more strategic driver of budgeting and weaknesses do exist in managing overspends in, for example, Children's services and in Community and Environmental Services which need to be addressed. We do not believe that the strategy which has existed for many years of closing these off with reserves and good treasury management is sustainable or helpful. The council needs to address the core reasons for these system overspends.

You have strengths to build upon and exploit. Blackpool is a resourceful and 'fleet of foot' council. It has a strong eye for grant funding and utilises these opportunities to the best for the area, e.g. in its successful funding for its sea defences. You couple that resourcefulness with a strong commercial acumen and the evidence on return from commercial activity is impressive: the Winter Gardens, Mamma Mia, bus services, and the development of trading activity. All of this demonstrates resourcefulness and innovation.

However, given the changing financial climate we would suggest that for the future some of these 'big ticket issues' as well as your core priorities need stronger more robust risk assessment and financial planning. We would also draw your attention to using the analysis available through the LGA and previous Audit Commission VFM

profiles to further challenge yourselves around spend and performance. We believe this will help you to fully understand the reasons for your high spend and performance challenges and it is crucial that you do so.

All of the above point to some core strengths that have got you to this point but also to some clear markers for the future. You do have an ambition and appetite for change. You do have some very good individuals in the organisation with skills in disciplines such as procurement and programme management. As such you have a foundation. It is our view that this foundation now needs to be driven at pace by a stronger corporate core, and enriched through capacity and consistent evidence.

Our overriding message is that the time is right for you to now take a step change and move towards more transformational, and if necessary, more innovative solutions which rebuild services around new models, making use of the skills of private, voluntary and public sector partners where appropriate. In doing this, you should give some serious thought to how in-house skills can be deployed most effectively on the highest priority areas. As such we felt the Council needs a strategic transformational savings programme and a medium term financial plan for the next 4 years, and rolling update thereafter, with clear ownership at the senior political and managerial leadership level of the council.

### **3.3 Political and managerial leadership**

We were very impressed with the sustained and visible political leadership of the council. It was clear to us that the councillors have and will positively lead change for the benefit of Blackpool's residents and visitors.

We also saw what we deemed to be a far more 'open' culture than had previously existed within the council. During our time with you we know staff were encouraged to 'tell it as it was' and to see the peer challenge as a participative and learning experience and one to which their contribution was key. This speaks volumes and is a real strength.

We were delighted to see managerial leadership focused on making a positive difference and the big lottery fund bidding success and town regeneration are two very obvious examples of this.

We saw some very open and encouraging cultural messages around involvement and empowerment. It was clear that your Senior Leadership team (SLT) and Corporate Leadership team (CLT) were currently working hand in glove to, as one stakeholder told us, 'walk the talk'. The engagement with management is also brought to life with the physical environment of the new Council building at Bickerstaffe. The council's

ambitions for the utilisation of its assets and the way staff operate are to be applauded. Our view in relation to these matters is a strong reinforcement of what you are doing and a strong message to stay true to this and to deliver at pace.

We saw your political and officer leadership working as one united top team. The on-going informal as well as formal opportunities that your Executive and CLT are now creating to work together and plan for the future for the place and for the council are again all strengths and will help you.

There are things that we believe you can build upon to help these strengths flourish. The first is to actively work on how you bring policy to practice. It wasn't always clear how a policy turned into practical reality and as such whether the outcome you had hoped for was delivered. One example might be the Homeless Prevention Strategy and some Housing Plans we saw. Outcomes are mentioned but not underpinned with sufficient smart targets or objectives. The absence of these makes it more difficult for the council to know they have achieved effective and sustainable outcomes. As such we believe you need to be relentlessly focussing on outcomes and set this at the core of your policy to practice framework.

We felt that your approach to what is leadership and what is management also needs attention. It seemed to us that staff often deferred to management despite receiving messages from your leadership team to be empowered to act. We saw such empowerment in work in your enforcement activity but often heard that staff were not enacting the message in other services areas, perhaps because of detail conscious senior staff.

We would also encourage you to look again at where your strategic capacity sits and more importantly know where you want it to sit for the future. What is the role of CLT and SLT for the future? What are the key issues where the visibility of Leader and Chief Executive are critical? How will you manage the interface between front facing services and delivering a core, one council message? You have a great opportunity to use your physical building changes to reinforce these cultural change messages and we urge you to carry on using this as a lever. This takes us to a core point about how to manage the message of change more effectively. You do try to tackle this issue in a number of ways but in our view it did not always amount to a coherent message or narrative. For example the recent changes you made in SLT were not we were told as visible to staff as they might have been.

### **3.4 Governance and decision making**

We saw clear member leadership for some key aspects of governance and decision making, most notably your arrangements with the CCG and CVS. We also saw evidence of successful delivery of projects, e.g. in community arts. We also saw

respectful and progressive relationships between members and officers. Trust clearly exists and is something that you can use as a powerful tool.

However, we could not find a clear 'golden thread' from policy to implementation as already described which was evident in the lack of on-going strategies and plans. There were times when staff we spoke to were unaware of the council's policy context for the area of work we were discussing with them or where it existed the staff were unaware of how and when policies would be refreshed. A review of policies and a refresh based upon agreed priorities is needed.

We have made reference to empowerment earlier in this letter. With that empowerment comes accountability and, through our study of your performance management arrangements, we were not convinced that you had arrangements in place that consistently and effectively helped you to manage performance in the round. Our conclusion is that this is an area you must pay greater attention to. You have a compulsory appraisal scheme for staff yet its implementation is nowhere near 100%. No-one we spoke to could tell us what that meant and what were the consequences. Similarly, we did not find consistency in risk assessment, nor clear corporate ownership and reporting on internal audit activity (including a truly risk based approach owned by senior management or members) or on wider information governance.

It was our privilege to meet with a range of your community partners. Our overwhelming view was that what underpins all of these are strong relationship based on mutual trust and respect. However, again, there is a need to be clear about the effectiveness and decision making in all of your partner arrangements. As you embark on any similar arrangements it is essential that your governance and performance management arrangements are fit for purpose.

### **3.5 Capacity**

As a small unitary with limited and reducing capacity this is a key area for you. When we saw services working well together it was a positive and powerful message about how you as a council can build better outcomes and effectively harness the capacity you have. A good example of this would be your transience project. Here you are making effective use of multi-agency and multi-disciplinary teams leading to better outcomes for individuals, thus reducing demand.

We were very privileged to meet with an engaged staff group. It was obvious to us all as a team that they want to be proud of the place and council. The staff we met recognised the need for change, and even radical change that will inevitably impact upon the way they operate now. Indeed, staff are very keen to make a positive impact but are frustrated through lack of capacity to deliver this. This was not simply about requests for more resources but a more effective utilisation of what exists and a

revisiting of systems and looking beyond what is done now to transformation of services.

There are services and approaches adopted by the council and its partners that have positively focussed on delivering effective change. The commissioning reviews in adult social care are evidence of this. The developing approaches you have to shared teams with other partners and the way you are seeking to align budgets and developing new trading opportunities all demonstrate the wherewithal to build more effective capacity.

The new offices already referred to should develop integrated working, enhance capacity and cultural change. Again this is a ripe opportunity to build capacity but you will need to manage the temporary transitional arrangements with care to get the optimum results from your investment and ensure you ultimately deliver on your original plans.

We felt that you were trying to do too many things all at once. One stakeholder called it a 'preoccupation with initiatives'. Our message is clear; you will not build capacity this way. Be clear about what is important and what you don't need to do. Reduce the amount of initiatives and stop the 'firefighting'-a phrase we heard repeated.

We have mentioned the lack of corporate capacity already. We did not find a strong 'one council' core. That is not us advocating for an increase in posts at the centre of the organisation or at a senior management level. It is about being clear about what is core to the council and how it operates and putting in place an effective infrastructure to deliver it. Corporate functions, including those existing in service departments need to harness together their collective capability so that you can ensure accountability for delivery is clear and create capacity for strategic thought and then action which is an important precursor to moving away from a culture of firefighting. This also reinforces the one Council' message and consistency of approach.

Corporate policies and procedures are not as robust as they should be in terms of timely review and implementation. In our view they need clarity, reinvigorating and then accountability for their delivery needs to be owned and championed by Members and CLT.

We felt you should focus and co-ordinate your strategic support services to help develop and deliver your future transformation programme. We didn't see sufficient evidence as to how that was being currently marshalled or planned.

To support this whole transformation a clear workforce plan and reward strategy aligned to your priorities to deliver your vision must be created so that your future workforce, whether employed direct or through other sources, meets your future needs. The current workforce plan comes to an end in 2015.

### **3.6 Is the housing market our biggest issue and how brave are we being in tackling housing market failure?**

Having looked at the council's SHMA, Core strategy, and Economic assessment and following conversations with its stakeholders the honest view of the peer team is that two central issues for you are economic regeneration and resilience. The disappointment is that we did not have sufficient time for engagement in these matters whilst we were in Blackpool.

Clearly housing is a critical part in the above, especially as Blackpool appears to be acting as a magnet for people with problems due to the lively and thriving local private rented market in redundant guest houses, and Blackpool's ability to address the issues affecting individual new residents. This unfairly places a higher burden on the council's support services, benefit and health sectors. The council, trying to tackle this individual market on its own, will not solve the problem. We believe that a regional response and collaboration is needed, and while the council may be able to regularise and raise standards in this sector, ultimately what is needed is a rebalancing of the socio economic agenda. There was some evidence that regional partners recognise the challenges facing Blackpool and these needs to be maximised by optimum interaction at regional and national level. The Council also, in the view of the team, must address the housing and social need challenges within the wider envelope of economic opportunity, including skills and schooling.

There is a good understanding of the impact of the local private housing market on the demand for services, and some brilliant initiatives and interventions, both in regulatory services and the wrap around of a very vulnerable community. If the council can address the imbalance then housing could also be a driver for Blackpool's economic success creating stable communities, Improving health and wellbeing, and reducing costs of support services.

The peer team was very much impressed with the council's innovative work with transient communities, with clear positive outcomes for people with complex lives through combining key working of multi-agency teams with wrap around support, blended with housing interventions. We see this as an example of good practice to be celebrated and built on.

The council's planned market interventions in the Private Rented Sector are bold and could make a real difference. However, to make that difference we believe that it needs to be delivered at scale and in a targeted way. One initiative, however good, should not stand alone, and will not deliver the economic success that is sought. Rather than being another stand-alone project a big picture plan for all housing markets in the area linked to work on jobs and skills and wider vision for Blackpool is required. We believe that the courage the council is showing by

leading in this area could be greater with more impact by embedding this in a comprehensive plan covering all sectors – and led by clear regional strategic approach , with an outcome based vision delivered through a range of interventions with partners in a networked way.

We believe the role of the ALMO (BCH) should be clarified early in this and examine and shape their potential to maximise skills and resources. We think the council should also ensure, as part of the initial plan, that a rigorous cost benefit, sensitivity analyses and scenario planning to give long term sustainability and potential for scaling up with institutional or other investment partners is carried out. We would strongly recommend that you build in sufficient staff capacity and commercial skills to drive the ambition you seek and also put in place effective governance to secure success.

We were not clear about how the council are involving your partners / potential partners in exciting interest in this delivery and also how integrated its plans are with the growth plans of the sub region. As mentioned previously we see a big picture plan with clear links to the wider housing market (based on the good work in the SHMA) as integral to this. It may be that other providers could bring complementary products to the table to strengthen the council's work on the private rented sector by helping to diversify the tenure mix (for example via shared ownership schemes).

The council has clear evidence of how multi agency focused work can deliver a community based approach that creates the stability for people to thrive; this now needs to be translated across other areas of work, harnessing the capacity of partners. An example of where this doesn't appear to have worked in the Homelessness Prevention Strategy. On analysis, it's not clear that the council has addressed the issues and challenges from the homelessness review; neither can we see clear and smart actions.

In line with other comments in this letter the council's strategies are becoming out of date, and while there is the beginnings of a plan to develop a plan (Housing Business Plan 2014/15) we would suggest that this needs to be linked to the ambition and vision for the council, owned by the whole council and its partners – with direct connection to regional drivers. This revised strategic approach is mirrored in other parts of the feedback. This doesn't mean stopping the rigour of developing the council's own initiative as outlined above, but we suggest running this in parallel to getting a housing plan in place which addresses all housing markets, with buy in across the region and not just the sub region. We would suggest aligning this to a comprehensive asset plan so that you have a 'plan on a page' for how Blackpool as a whole will work in its housing market and demographic for the future.

Clearly you will take into account the roll out of Universal Credit from November, potential implications of the Elphicke and Lyons review, plus any potential changes at national government level that are mooted across sectors, to ensure you future proof any plans. As one stakeholder said 'Digging a moat around Blackpool will not solve our issues', but neither will creating even more attractive private rented housing... All plans should consider the push/ pull factors across tenures and markets.

#### **4 Key suggestions and ideas for consideration**

The peer team developed some key recommendations for you to consider. These are based on what we saw, heard and read and we fed the list below back to you at our feedback session on the last day. Drawing on our experience of the sector and knowledge of local government improvement, the following are things we think will help you to make best use of your skills and experience, deliver some quick wins, and develop the strengths you will need to see your change agenda through:

- Work with communities and partners to develop a coherent vision beyond 2015
- You can't do everything. Be clear on what are the one set of key priorities for attention and focus resource around these
- Consult regularly with key internal and external stakeholders and use and share the information: remember to take your stakeholders with you
- You have some serious financial challenges, service and corporate capacity issues- accept help and build your capacity and resilience
- Be seen to base your priorities and decision making on sound evidence
- Be clear what sort of council you want to be from 2015 and beyond: function first then form
- Develop a transformation master plan for the council. A significant shift is needed:
  - Become a corporate body - Departmental and/or service focus still pervades despite the significant movement already made
  - Decision making should be grounded and risk assessed
  - Restructuring to date has been based on seizing opportunities that arose - plan now for the next 5 years and build strategic capacity
  - An effective performance management framework needs building
  - The council needs a linked suite of: corporate plan, MTFP, workforce plan etc. These need to be consistently reinforcing each other, reviewed and kept up to date

#### **Next steps**

You will undoubtedly wish to reflect on these findings and suggestions made with your senior managerial and political leadership before determining how the council wishes to take things forward. As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of continued activity to support this. In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with you and colleagues through the peer challenge to date. We will endeavour to signpost you to other sources of information and examples of practice and thinking.

I have included the contact details for Gill Taylor who, as you know, is our Principal Adviser (North West). Gill can be contacted via email or telephone at [Gill.taylor@local.gov.uk](mailto:Gill.taylor@local.gov.uk) (07889512173). She is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Hopefully this provides you with a convenient route of access to the Local Government Association, its resources and any further support.

All of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish you every success going forward. Once again, many thanks to you and your colleagues for inviting the peer challenge and to everyone involved for their participation.

Yours sincerely

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On behalf of the challenge team