



Corporate Peer Challenge **Wyre Forest District Council**

7th-9th March 2017

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Wyre Forest District Council is a prudent and well managed organisation. It has clearly grown in confidence and ambition since the last LGA Corporate Peer Challenge in November 2011. The Council has continued to deliver against its priorities and remained committed to minimising reductions to frontline services, whilst maintaining a balanced budget through asset rationalisation, cost reduction, shared services and increased income generation. It has demonstrated an ability to think beyond its role of delivering statutory responsibilities, and is a self-aware organisation that understands the need for continued change, improvement and innovation. As a result, the Council is well positioned and equipped to respond to current challenges and future uncertainties.

The Council has a good reputation. Many external stakeholders consider it be a reliable and credible partner, and this is helping to nurture confidence and trust in the organisation. The Council is seen by many as 'easy to do business with' and one that delivers on its promises. There is a particular recognition and respect for the work the Council has done to enable economic regeneration in the District - through both direct interventions and the influencing of others. There is also a widespread acknowledgement of the contribution the Council makes to the wider county and sub-regional agenda. This includes its active involvement and participation in key partnerships including the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Worcestershire Partnership Executive Group (PEG).

The organisation benefits from stable and collaborative leadership from a Corporate Leadership Team and Cabinet that is seen as strong and coherent. There are good officer-member relationships and sound governance. It may be timely to take stock of certain elements, including Overview and Scrutiny, and the 'Member Champion' roles to ensure political leadership benefits from timely challenge, and additional support for key priorities, projects and initiatives. The Council rightly sees engagement and consultation as important elements of its overall governance - in terms of informing and reality checking priority setting, key decision-making and policy development – and is keen to further improving the effectiveness of its engagement with a range of stakeholders.

The Council is also committed to localism and the building of capacity at a local level. Support to parish and town councils, and other community organisations, has helped to enable significant asset transfers and ensure the continuation and enhancement of services that contribute to the priority of 'clean, green and safe communities.' The willingness of the Council to devolve and empower, combined with an appetite from town and parishes to take on responsibilities, provides a solid base for potential future changes to service delivery in the context of the current and future financial challenges.

There is a good understanding of the medium term future financial challenge facing the Council, with a widespread awareness of the projected budget gap of £1.8million by 2019/20. The strategy to address this is predicated on further efficiencies, growing income, and new models of service delivery makes sense. But the balance between those facets is yet to be fully developed or articulated in detail. To help inform this there will be a need to further develop aspects of financial management to ensure more accurate forecasting, scenario planning and modelling. There is also potential to consider other approaches so the strategy is more multi-faceted.

There is broad support for the Council's plans to prudentially borrow up to £35million to create a Capital Portfolio Fund to increase its capital assets portfolio to generate revenue, and a fund from which to provide loans to third parties to help deliver regeneration and economic development projects. These investment programmes are a good illustration of the ambitious and innovative approaches now being adopted by the Council. But they are at the early stages of development. There is a need to develop the detail, including a clear articulation of the overall purpose, and the principles and criteria that will be used to determine investments.

The Council recognises the need to develop thinking about its future role and purpose. To date the Council has been able to take a considered and incremental approach, responding to opportunities when they arise and judging each on a case by case basis. Moving forward it may need to adopt a more definitive and planned approach. There is scope to better align the Corporate Plan, Financial Strategy and future operating model so there is a cohesive and compelling narrative about what the Council is striving to achieve (and why), and how it will deliver its priorities. In the meantime, the Council should continue its focus on workforce development to support the organisation of the future, ensuring that its commitment to staff training and development is well communicated.

2. Key recommendations

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

- 1. Further develop thinking about the Council's future role and purpose post 2020.** Better align the Corporate Plan, Financial Strategy and future operating model so there is a more cohesive and compelling narrative about what the Council is striving to achieve and how it will deliver its priorities, including the ways by which it will remain financially viable, and the further organisational transformation required.
- 2. Consider wider communication and clearer articulation of priorities and purposes.** There is scope to increase understanding of the rationale behind the priorities, and provide a narrative about why the Council is choosing to invest resources, capacity and energy on them, and the outcomes, impact and return on investment being sought.
- 3. Explore ways that the Council can further develop the approach to consultation, engagement and involvement.** The recent [LGA Publication 'New Conversations: LGA Guide to Engagement'](#) may be of assistance. It offers guidance on creating a stronger two-way relationship with communities, and provides advice on becoming better at listening and responding to resident concerns.
- 4. Review Overview and Scrutiny and the 'Member Champion' role to ensure clarity of purpose, roles and expectations.** This is an opportunity to take stock and reflect on both the strengths and areas for improvement. The LGA can assist

with a light-touch review of the Overview and Scrutiny function that can help re-clarify relationships and responsibilities.

- 5. Continue the work on workforce development and consider how you communicate development opportunities to staff.** There is an apparent disconnect between the commitment from the organisation's leadership to invest in workforce development and perceptions of staff about training opportunities. It is timely to revisit how this is communicated, and to consider ways to celebrate and reward good practice and successes. Continue to engage regularly with staff to capture opinions, ideas and sense check morale across the organisation.
- 6. Continue with the initiatives and innovation to achieve income generation and cost savings.** This has served the Council well to date, and there is a recognition of the potential to do more. It should remain a key facet of the financial strategy. There is a wealth of examples from across the sector to draw on as you do this: <http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/efficiency-and-income-generation>
- 7. Further develop and evolve the Financial Strategy to include:**
 - a. Modelling (and scenario planning) of the potential impact of growth and investment on business rates, Council Tax, planning gain, and broader economic outcomes for the district.
 - b. More consideration of large scale service redesign, alternative service delivery models and service providers, digitalisation and demand management.
- 8. Clarify the intended impact of the £35million investment policy on the Financial Strategy and the Corporate Plan priority to deliver a successful local economy.** Develop the detail, including a clear articulation of the overall purpose, and the principles and criteria that will be used to determine investments. Part of this is will be clarifying whether the investment policy is a strategy to balance the budget over the medium and long term, or a means by which to deliver the corporate priorities. Consider external gateway reviews as you develop the investment plans.
- 9. Review the current approach to underspends and reserves so that base budget and forecasting are as accurate as possible.** Underspends and transfers to reserves can create uncertainty about the financial challenge presented. The Council should refine its approach to in-year forecasting, including the attitudes and expectations of service managers and budget holders.

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

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

- Ian Frost – Chief Executive, Allerdale Borough Council
- Councillor Paul James (Conservative) – Leader, Gloucester City Council
- Simon Jackson – Director of Corporate Services, Charnwood Borough Council
- Verna Connolly – Executive Manager (People, Customer & Business Support), Hastings Borough Council
- Jessica Eagleton – Political Assistant, Local Government Association (LGA)
- Paul Clarke – Programme Manager, Local Government Association (LGA)

Scope and focus

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

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

In considering the areas above, you asked the peer team to provide their observations on the Financial Strategy and whether that matches the challenges facing the Council.

The peer challenge process

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

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge (or Finance Peer Review) every 4 to 5 years. Wyre Forest District Council had a Corporate Peer Challenge in November 2011 and a follow up visit in March 2012. Where relevant findings from that previous peer challenge have been referenced in this report.

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

- Spoke to more than 70 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 20 meetings and additional research, reading and site visits.
- Collectively spent more than 190 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 5 weeks at Wyre Forest.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (7th-9th March 2017). In presenting feedback to the Council, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things the Council is already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the Council understand its' local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?

The Council has articulated its vision and priorities in the Corporate Plan 2014-19. The Plan, set out on one page, clearly and succinctly sets out two key priorities focussing on contributing to a successful economy and supporting people to live in clean, green and safe communities. The Plan summarises the strategic actions proposed (e.g. bringing forward regeneration opportunities and infrastructure to support them), and sets out some of the key outcomes those actions will support (e.g. improved infrastructure). This works well as an overall summary of what the Council is striving to achieve.

There is widespread recognition of the Council's focus on economic development and growth. It is seen by many stakeholders to be the number one priority. The Council is considered to have a good track record of delivery against this priority. This is demonstrated by a range of projects, plans and schemes that are delivering regeneration on the ground, such as public realm improvements in Kidderminster and the Lion Fields development. As a result of this clear focus on development there is a growing confidence from stakeholders, including the business community, of the ability of the Council to deliver on this agenda.

The Council's intention to enable significant further investment in regeneration and economic development projects – for example, through the creation of a capital fund (£10million) to provide loans to third parties - is also well supported. This is a good example of the Council investing in its priorities. The plan has unsurprisingly raised expectations and enthusiasm about potential future investment and development in the district and its town centres. There is now a need to develop the detail – including the process, principles and criteria that will be used for decision-making.

The Council is keen to ensure priority setting, policy development and decision-making are informed by evidence. In addition to drawing on analysis such as the District Needs Profile, it is committed to engagement and consultation as a means by which to supplement its understanding of the local context. The Council already has a comprehensive programme of consultation to inform the Corporate Plan, undertakes a range of topic based engagement (e.g. website survey, budget 2017/18 consultation), and has increased use of digital and social media. But there is a desire to do more.

The Council is keen to develop more effective approaches to increase participation levels and the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their local area (the last Viewpoint resident survey suggests this remains low at 28.7%). A recent LGA publication, 'New Conversations: LGA Guide to Engagement', may be of assistance when considering new and different approaches. It offers guidance on a range of ways for councils to create a stronger two-way relationship with communities. It provides advice on how to rebuild trust in relationships that may have broken down and help councils become better at listening and responding to resident concerns.

The Corporate Plan priorities and purposes are not recognised by some external stakeholders, and the relationship/connection between corporate priorities and purposes is not understood by all staff. We appreciate the desire to keep the Plan as a succinct document. But there is scope for it to increase understanding of the rationale behind the priorities, and provide a narrative about *why* the Council is choosing to invest resources, capacity and energy on them – perhaps by linking the priorities and purposes explicitly to a summary of the evidence supporting them (e.g. District Profile, consultation/engagement). The addition of more measurable outcomes for each of the priorities would make it easier to demonstrate progress against them including impact and return on investment. This will ensure there is a clearer narrative linking the evidence/rationale, the proposed action/projects/initiatives, and the outcomes/impact anticipated for communities.

Leadership of Place: Does the Council provide effective leadership of place through its' elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?

There is a good understanding of the Council's 'leadership of place' role. Senior officers and councillors clearly understand the key challenges and opportunities facing Wyre Forest - including the need to enable better connection to regional and national road networks. There is a desire to represent, advocate and champion the place to get the best for the district. They understand the need for the Council to contribute to countywide and sub-regional discussions, and are seen to be making a credible and valued input to them by partners. The Chief Executive was cited for his positive contribution to the Worcestershire Partnership Executive Group (PEG) and a willingness

to take a lead on formulating policy and proposals on specific topics and work streams, including the potential for public service reform.

Through its leadership the Council is clearly making things happen for the district in terms of economic development. There are numerous examples of it using direct interventions and investments, and its influence and involvement in partnerships – such as the ReWyre Board and the two Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) - to deliver positive outcomes on the ground. The Council has also sought to enhance its political leadership and advocacy for the focus on economy. Four ‘member champions’ help to drive forward initiatives focussed on town centres, skills development, connectivity and enterprise.

The Council has worked successfully with partners to improve town centres, and enable new infrastructure such as the Hoo Brook link road which has opened the district up for commercial investment. LEP funding, and joint work with the County Council, are enabling the creation of a new transport interchange at Kidderminster. The Council has already invested significant resources in the public realm in Kidderminster town centre. Expectations are now rising, particularly amongst the business community, about the potential further capital investment in Kidderminster town centre which they believe will create the conditions for the private sector to invest as well.

The Council is obviously committed to developing localism and building leadership capacity at a local level across the district. This is demonstrated by support and funding to parish and town councils, and other community organisations, to make a greater contribution to delivering outcomes for communities – particularly those that contribute to the priority of ‘clean, green and safe communities’. Support has been provided to the development of Neighbourhood Plans, and the Council has created a £50,000 fund available to parish and town councils and other organisations to provide grass root services in their area, including services the Council may have traditionally delivered in the past.

The Council is very active in a range of partnerships. Partners consider the Council to be ‘easy to do business with’ and one that delivers on its promises. They consider it to be a reliable and credible partner, and an organisation that is consistent to deal with regardless of the service or individual they have contact with – it speaks with ‘one voice’. This is helping to grow confidence and trust in the organisation, and is a key strength for the Council.

To build further on this strength, the Council may need to consider how its leadership style and partnering approach can evolve to maximise opportunities for less formal and more collaborative relationships in the future. If further commissioning, commercialism and innovation are to remain features of the Council’s future operating model, then there will be a need for more informal and earlier dialogue with potential delivery partners. This will better support and enable relationships that are based on the principles of ‘collaboration’ and ‘co-creation’, and founded more on a mutual understanding and appreciation of the roles others can play and the value, expertise and capacity they can potentially provide. Given its intention to invest in income generation schemes it will be critical the organisation has the agility to respond to commercial opportunities.

Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?

Relationships between councillors and officers appear positive and mutually supportive. There is a strong working relationship between the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and Cabinet who are viewed by staff and external partners as collaborative and coherent. There are regular opportunities, both formal and informal, to discuss strategic issues and risks, consider progress against major projects and review the Financial Strategy. In addition to a monthly meeting of CLT and Cabinet, individual portfolio holders meet regularly with CLT officers and there are regular 'away day' sessions to enable discussion and debate on specific topics, such as income growth. The WF20 forum provides a bi-monthly opportunity to bring together other senior managers from across the organisation to share learning and practice, and to shape corporate policy.

There are opportunities for all councillors to inform and influence decision making and policy. Non-executive councillors feel informed and are kept up to date through various channels including 'Wyred Weekly' newsletter, regular email updates, the Forward Plan, and copies of press releases. Member Forums were also cited as a helpful mechanism to update councillors on current and planned developments, enabling questions and discussion on those. All Councillors can attend Cabinet meetings and are permitted to ask questions, and there is a fortnightly scheduled catch up meeting with the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council. Senior officers are considered to be open, accessible, and approachable and respond quickly to councillor inquiries. All of this suggests an organisation that is committed to openness and transparency, and one that values the input of its elected members.

Overview and Scrutiny has evidently made a positive and timely contribution to various key decisions and policy. We heard about several examples, including the task and finish group on market provision in towns which included stakeholder consultation, and how the work of scrutiny influenced the location of the new Leisure Centre. More recent examples include a panel looking at Section 106 monies, and work on Local Plans. Having an opposition chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is seen to be a positive feature in terms of ensuring independence from the Cabinet.

There are, however, a number of different views about the current effectiveness of the function. It may be timely to take stock through a light-touch review of the role and purpose of Overview and Scrutiny at Wyre Forest to re-state and clarify relationships and responsibilities. There currently looks to be a blurring of these, including a perception that any councillor can participate uninvited in meetings, and that Cabinet can be too involved. There obviously needs to be a constructive relationship between executive and scrutiny, with each informing the other. But it is important that protocols and practice on the ground support the integrity and independence of the scrutiny function so it is free to hold to account, and develop evidence based recommendations for decision-makers to consider.

'Member champions' are seen to be a positive initiative, and are a good way of harnessing the skills, talent and enthusiasm of councillors from all political groups to support key priority areas and major projects. As acknowledged already, there are currently councillors championing town centres, skills development, connectivity and

business enterprise. While we didn't hear or see anything to suggest any fundamental issues or problems with the initiative, it may be timely to review the role (including selection and support) and expectations to ensure that both Council and councillors are getting maximum value and benefit.

Innovation and ideas are encouraged by both the political and managerial leadership. They appreciate the value of enabling an innovative culture across the organisation, particularly in terms of supporting the Council to be more commercial and increase its income generation. An innovation fund, staff suggestion scheme, and the organisational values reflect this ('be innovative in our work'). Internal communications also help to support this. Many staff mentioned Wyred Weekly as being well regarded and informative, and a good mechanism by which to promote a 'one team' approach and celebrate good performance. It will be important to ensure there are further mechanisms in place to share learning from effective projects so that innovation and good practice can be embedded further.

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?

Through prudent financial management the Council has maintained a stable financial position. It has successfully sustained a focus on protecting frontline services and kept Council Tax increases to a minimum over recent years despite the period of austerity. It has made more than £5 million of savings since 2010 through the Wyre Forest Forward Transformation programme and now has an established track record of delivering savings through a range of approaches including asset transfer and rationalisation, efficiencies, shared services, and income generation (which has grown by £0.7million over the last 4 years and is set to be £4.5million in 2016/17).

There are good levels of awareness and a consistent understanding of the financial challenge over the medium term. Virtually everyone we spoke to cited the £1.8m budget gap by 2019/20. There is also a widespread acceptance of the need to keep going with savings and income generation to enable the Council to become self-sufficient from central Government funding. There is a recognition that a continued reliance on drawing from reserves to balance the budget is an unsustainable approach in the medium term, and that the scale of the projected budget deficit requires a new and different strategy. We comment further on the Council's Financial Strategy for 2017-2020 below.

The accuracy of in-year forecasting is an area for further development. The Council regularly achieves a material surplus on its overall budget position – and in most years this is significantly greater than good practice would suggest. On the face of it this could be perceived as a positive (and certainly better than regular overspends). However, underspends and transfers to reserves can create uncertainty about the financial challenge presented. We appreciate some underspends are a result of unexpected events (e.g. lower interest rates secured on capital borrowing), and in other areas it can be notoriously challenging to forecast accurately (e.g. business rates). Notwithstanding the continuing uncertainty about the impact of further changes to local government funding, we think it important that the Council refines its approach to in-year forecasting. We note this

is something the external auditor in their Annual Audit Letter (October 2016) also identified.

The Financial Strategy 2017-20

The Council has developed a Financial Strategy for 2017-20. A key facet of the strategy is the realisation of further efficiencies and cost savings through the Wyre Forest Forward programme. Given the track record to date, we think this is right to encourage a sustained focus on it. Another key aspect is an increased focus on income generation as part of a strategy that enables a 'budget for affordable growth' – with bold ideas to invest to create revenue streams for the Council, but also to support regeneration, housing and economic growth. The Council is in the process of creating a Local Authority Trading Company and is investing in its Green Street Depot to realise commercial income potential. Those approaches all make sense for Wyre Forest. They are also in line with practice and approaches in many other councils.

Perhaps the biggest single demonstration of the investment intent is the new major plan to prudentially borrow up to £35million. This will create a Capital Portfolio Fund of £25million to increase its capital property and assets portfolio to generate revenue, and a fund (£10million) from which to provide loans to third parties to help them realise regeneration and economic development projects. There is broad support for this. We were struck with the levels of buy-in from councillors, officers and external partners. Many see it as a positive illustration of the Council's willingness to be bold and innovative to support the economic growth across the district and enable future financial sustainability of the Council.

However, this plan is at an early stage of development. There is a need to develop the detail, including a clear articulation of the overall purpose, and the principles and criteria that will be used to determine investments. At the heart of this is clarifying whether the investment policy is a strategy to balance the budget over the medium and long term, or a means by which to deliver the corporate priorities. It can of course be intended to do both. We appreciate the desire to be able to take a considered and incremental approach, responding to opportunities when they arise and judging each on a case by case basis. It is an approach that has served the Council well to date. However, given the scale of financial challenge and investment potential we think the Council may need to provide a more definitive narrative, set of principles and criteria upfront. This may also help enable the agility required to respond to commercial investment opportunities.

Irrespective of the above, there is a need to model the potential impact of growth and investment on business rates, Council Tax, planning gain, and the broader economic outcomes for the district as part of the Financial Strategy. Robust scenario planning will help better determine the amounts predicated on each facet of the strategy, and will help also help determine levels of risk, and required return on investments. Currently it is uncertain how much of the £1.8million budget gap in 2019/20 will be met by the various approaches set out in the Strategy (e.g. income generation, transformation, etc.)

There are also features and approaches that other councils are adopting as part of their financial strategies which may warrant further and/or greater consideration at Wyre Forest. Many are adopting a diverse range of approaches as part of their medium term

financial strategy in order to spread risk, increase resilience, and ensure sustainability. These include:

- Large scale service redesign, transformation and new models of service delivery (e.g. more shared services, more assets and services run by parish councils) and ways of working so that outcomes are achieved in a more cost effective way (and help reduce demand and increase digitalisation)
- Smarter commissioning and procurement to achieve savings (e.g. through re-negotiating big contracts, categorising spend strategically and challenging high spend areas) and increase social value, and an increased focus on outcome-based commissioning to enable innovation and genuine co-creation
- Reducing demand for services through changing thresholds, early intervention, prevention activity and building community capacity and resilience
- Increased digitalisation to encourage and enable service users to access online and on mobile devices, reducing the costs of customer contact and transactions

It may be timely to refresh the Wyre Forest Forward Programme so it is focused on the future role and purpose of the Council, and helps the Council consider some of these approaches. It struck us that a lot of what is currently included in the programme are mainstream or 'business as usual' activities, albeit ones that are improving outcomes, saving money or increasing income.

There is a further observation on the Strategy which is a relatively minor one. The Strategy is described on some occasions as a 'budget strategy' and on others a 'finance strategy'. There is a need for consistency, and we would suggest 'financial strategy' best describes the document and approach being taken.

Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the Council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

The Council has an established track record of delivery that is recognised by partners. This is helping to nurture confidence and trust in the organisation. 'Systems thinking' has helped improve services and make them more customer focussed and efficient. But the Council appreciates it does not have all of the skills and capacity to develop and deliver the range of activities that will deliver the priorities for the district.

Like many councils it has acknowledged the need to leverage capacity, skills and expertise to achieve efficiencies, improve outcomes and increase resilience. It has demonstrated a willingness and track record of doing so. There are good examples of collaboration, partnership working and shared services to do this – including the ReWyre Board, North Worcestershire Economic Development and Regeneration, Worcestershire Regulatory Services, work with the Community Housing Group and the establishment of an LLP with Public Sector Plc.

We have already mentioned the willingness of the Council to devolve and empower, and the support provided to build capacity of town and parish councils, and other community organisations to enable local service delivery. This provides a solid base

for potential future changes to service delivery in the context of the current and future financial challenges.

There is a recognition of the need for the organisation to develop new and additional expertise to support its future ambitions. In addition to the development of new specific skills and expertise – such as property investment and commercial skills – the Council has rightly identified that it is likely to have fewer staff in the future. The Organisational Development Strategy is intended to support staff development, but also enable an increased flexibility of the organisation and its teams and individuals. There has been good progress with policies such as mobile and flexible working (with over 150 staff being set up to work from home or on a mobile basis), and this agile environment and approach is obviously valued by staff. Many readily refer to it as a positive feature of working for the Council.

However, we heard less positive messages about staff training, development and the extent of clarity about the future capacity of the organisation. There is an apparent disconnect between the commitment from the organisation's leadership to invest in workforce development and perceptions of staff about training opportunities. It is timely to revisit how this is communicated. Feedback more generally from the staff we met about their experience of working for the Council was also varied. This is not unusual or unique. But it did suggest some staff are beginning to feel stretched and uncertain about the future direction of travel. It demonstrates a need for both the political and managerial leadership to keep a regular check on the morale and buy-in of the organisation to the future plans.

5. Next steps

Immediate next steps

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

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Helen Murray, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are: Email helen.murray@local.gov.uk and Tel. 07884 312235

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

Follow up visit

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the Council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate

the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the Council. A date of March 2018 has already been provisionally agreed. This will enable some, or all, of the original peer team to consider the next iteration of the Council's Financial Strategy.

Next Corporate Peer Challenge

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the Council will commission their next full Corporate Peer Challenge before March 2022.