

Ian Miller
Chief Executive
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7th March 2019

Dear Ian,

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Follow Up visit 5th and 6th February 2019

Following the original LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in March 2017 Wyre Forest District Council (WFDC) asked the Peer Team to make a Follow Up visit to help review and assess progress and development in response to the original feedback and recommendations. This visit took place on 5th and 6th February 2019.

This letter summarises the main observations of the Peer Team. 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 before and during their visit.

Process and peer team

Peer challenge is one of the key tools to support sector-led improvement. It is tailored to meet individual councils' needs, and designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. The Peer Team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.

The Follow Up visit included members of the Peer Team who were involved in the original CPC:

- Ian Frost (Chief Executive, Allerdale Borough Council)
- Councillor Paul James (Leader, Gloucester City Council)
- Helen Murray (Principal Adviser: West Midlands, LGA)
- James Millington (Peer Challenge Manager, LGA)

To inform their findings, the Peer Team spent a day and a half on site at WFDC, during which they spoke to around 50 people including a range of council officers, councillors and external partners. The Team gathered information and views from around 20 meetings.

We would like to thank you for inviting us back to Wyre Forest to provide further challenge to the Council and we hope that our feedback helps to support continuous improvement.

Messages and Observations

The focus of this Follow-Up was to specifically review progress and developments in response to the peer challenge feedback and recommendations in the 2017 CPC. From discussions the Peer Team had it was clear that WFDC is a forward looking council which has taken the Peer Review seriously and progressed well on implementing the recommendations.

The Team recognise that with all-out elections in May, this is a transition year for the Council. However, with its work to date, the Council has already built a sound foundation. Its financial challenges post 2020/21 are recognised and understood both internally and by partners. The implementation of activities including the Wyre Forest Forward Programme will be critical for the future of the organisation.

The original CPC recommendations are laid out below with commentary on progress and further considerations for WFDC's review.

1. Further develop thinking about the Council's future role and purpose post 2020

The Peer Team heard how the Council is very visible across Worcestershire, is proactive and fully participates in regional issues.

The current corporate plan has served the Council well and there are plans in place to refresh it and ensure that the right resources are in place to deliver it. There is clarity that some tough decisions are required but there are good relationships in place – including at the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) level and between elected members.

The commercial agenda is an important part of the Council's future plan and the Team would encourage WFDC to ensure that all elements of this, not just limited to the property investments, are articulated well and understood as part of the future role and vision of the Council post 2020.

The financial challenge is well understood by staff at all levels. The Peer Team recommend ensuring that the impact of the future changes is translated into what this means for the organisation, and staff, to provide clarity on how the Council will operate in the future.

The Peer Team understand that the first all-out elections in May 2019 are bringing a new level of uncertainty to the organisation. However, the Council will want to ensure that it has made preparations and is poised to swiftly enact its plans and to refresh its key strategies after the elections.

2. Consider wider communication and clearer articulation of priorities and purposes

3. Explore ways that the Council can further develop the approach to consultation, engagement and involvement

The Peer Team heard about the Council's internal communication channels. Staff value the Wyred Weekly updates, including CLT minutes, and the corporate briefing sessions which facilitate direct communication and question and answer sessions.

The Communications Team have access to WFDC's leadership and there is evidence of the development of a central and strategic approach to communications – with the recent Budget

Consultation as an exemplar of this. The Communications Team have developed some punchy messaging in consultation with employee focus groups and these 3 key messages have been used in external communications. However, there remains further work to ensure that messages/priorities/objectives are clearly defined and embedded across the organisation so that staff understand these, as there still appears to be multiple sets of key messages in use. Having a new Communications Strategy ready to deliver after the elections will be important.

The Peer Team observed that messages around financial sustainability have overtaken some of the objectives in the corporate plan and the Team support WFDC's plans to refresh the corporate plan post elections.

The Peer Team would also encourage WFDC to take advantage of the sector's good practice in regard to developing the Council's communications approach and sharing your own experience. The LGA can provide some support through a Communications Healthcheck and further bespoke activity.

4. Review Overview and Scrutiny and the 'Member Champion' role to ensure clarity of purpose, roles and expectations

There has been significant improvement in the Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) function since the Peer Team's visit in 2017. Members describe feeling more in control and happy with how O&S is now operating and we recommend that the Council continues to build on these improvements. The Review Panels are also working well although WFDC may wish to consider a more consistent focus on outcomes and recommendations and clarity about how these feed into wider governance arrangements. The Council should also ensure the induction for new members post elections includes training on O&S to keep up the momentum in this area.

Although the Council has reviewed the roles, the Peer Team found that the Member Champion role is still not clearly and widely understood and varies from seeking information from officers to leading the town centre work. If WFDC wishes to retain these roles the Council may wish to consider having a specific project or aspect to focus the work of a Champion, in order to maximise the expertise of councillors.

5. Continue the work on workforce development and consider how you communicate development opportunities to staff

The Council has developed its approach to staff training, linking training needs to development reviews and achievements of formal qualifications being celebrated in Wyred Weekly. However, staff, particularly at the Depot, still feel unsighted on the developmental opportunities available and feel their working pattern and the location of training limits their involvement.

Following the recent staff survey WFDC has responded quickly by developing an action plan. It is too early to see the benefits of this but the Peer Team would encourage the Council to continue to respond to staff feedback.

The Peer Team observed that iLearn has been rolled out but has been met with mixed views from staff. We understand that the planned redesign of iLearn will make it more attractive and user friendly and we encourage WFDC to focus on ensuring that this becomes an effective learning tool for staff.

The Peer Team noted that although staff understand the financial situation they were unsure about the impact of the transformation programme on them. As future plans become clear communicate and consult regularly with the workforce and the representative bodies.

To support transformation the Council will also wish to consider lead in times for workforce planning and reorganisation and capacity at potential pinch points.

The Team heard that the phasing out of long service award payments - even though decided and implemented a year ago – was still a live issue for staff and we encourage the Council to be mindful of this.

6. Continue with the initiatives and innovation to achieve income generation and cost savings

The Peer Team heard how the Finance Team were well respected and trusted across the organisation. The Council's financial position is understood and accepted and this is a sound position to be in for WFDC's future plans.

The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is central to the work of the Council and the Team observed how commercialisation initiatives are becoming embedded and are achieving their aims in a risk-aware way. The Council has a good track record of income generation and the Peer Team encourage WFDC to maintain this momentum and to also consider the opportunities of destination management and tourism. Commercialisation is only one part of the MTFS and the Team would ask the Council to continue to maintain a focus on the other elements.

The Council should make the most of the opportunities to transfer services to willing Town and Parish Councils. Similarly, WFDC should consider increasing the pace of exploring shared services with Bromsgrove and Redditch councils if there is commitment to do so. Connected to this WFDC should review how to further communicate the potential impact of reduced/changed services to the public. The Peer Team would encourage the Council to include this narrative as part of the refreshed corporate plan and communications strategy.

7. Further develop and evolve the Financial Strategy to include

a. Modelling, 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

9. Review the current approach to underspends and reserves so that base budget and forecasting are as accurate as possible

Significant progress has been made against these recommendations since the Team visited in 2017. This has included modelling assumptions for the MTFS for 2018-21; and more accurate profiling and monitoring which has led to a small variance overall at the end of March 2019. We heard about the plans to improve processes for WFDC, including real-time monitoring, and we would encourage the Council to continue to take this forward and further

develop the approach to ensuring the best possible support for budget holders and the finance team is in place.

The Peer Team has seen that the Council has come a long way since 2017 in regard to its investments – particularly in property. The Council's approach has been considered and it has only made investments which are deemed to be the 'right ones' for the authority. This has included investments within the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) geography and included industrial units and grow-on spaces for businesses. The Peer Team recommend that the Council continues this approach to make the most of future opportunities.

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

Your LGA Principal Adviser, Helen Murray, will be happy to work with you to identify any additional support the LGA can offer to help you respond to the points set out in this letter. Helen can be contacted on 07884 312235 or Helen.Murray@local.gov.uk.