

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Wyre Forest District Council

March 5<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> 2024

Feedback report



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## 1. Executive summary

Wyre Forest is a Council that is determined to provide the best environment and services for its communities. A new Conservative administration was elected in May 2023 and following consultation with residents, employees and key stakeholders a new ambitious Corporate Plan was developed to cover the period 2023-2027. The plan contains three clear local priorities which together underpin a strong vision from the Leader and the new administration. The priorities are around:

- Economic Growth and Regeneration
- Securing financial sustainability for services the local communities value
- A clean, safe and green place to live, work and visit.

The Chief Executive and Leader are both seen as 'strong leaders' and the driving force within their respective cohorts. Most of the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) underneath the Chief Executive are relatively new in their corporate leadership roles and they are still developing as strategic leaders. As a result, CLT and the whole organisation relies heavily on the Chief Executive. The Chief Executive, Leader and Councillors are highly regarded by partners including police, fire, and Community Housing. We heard a consistent narrative from partners that Wyre Forest is a stable organisation which plays a positive role in place shaping across the district and the wider county of Worcestershire.

The Council is striving to ensure that it has the capacity and resources to deliver on its priorities. It has secured considerable funding from Levelling Up and Future High Streets funding and it is undertaking several significant regeneration projects in the main town of Kidderminster. External consultants are providing additional professional expertise to ensure projects are delivered. An in-house project management or programme office to oversee the delivery of all the projects would be beneficial for the Council.

In common with most local authorities the Council has a considerable financial challenge and a budget gap. However, many of the challenges are time bound and within the life of the current financial forecast. The Council demonstrated a good understanding of its financial position. The base gap is reported as £2.1m including assumed additional income; the delivery of that additional income should be tracked

in a formal corporate process. Going forward it will be important for the whole organisation and stakeholders to have a common definition and understanding of the financial challenge including the numbers involved.

The Council has a strategy to address its financial challenge. That strategy is largely focussed on commercial income generation. An updated commercial strategy will be in place in March 2024 and the Council's Commercial Programme Board has been re-established. It is possible that this approach may be a case of “putting all your eggs in one basket” which could lead to other opportunities to close the budget gap being missed.

The Council is quite rightly seeking to add some additional resource capacity to achieve its regeneration agenda and to strengthen the focus on commercialisation. As part of a restructure of the Corporate Leadership Team, a new Deputy Chief Executive (Regeneration and Commercialisation) post is proposed. Whilst understanding the rationale for the proposed new structure we are concerned that the additional line management responsibility for the proposed post holder may negate any perceived capacity gain and potentially detract from the focus on commercial income.

Wyre Forest staff enjoy working for the Council and there is a low staff turnover. However, it is not clear if everyone in the Council understands Wyre Forest's budget position and their role in meeting the financial challenge and commercialisation agenda. Some frontline staff and many in professional and business support roles will have little day to day contact with commercial activities. Nevertheless, it is important that everyone in the Council understands the need to be “business like” and have an entrepreneurial outlook to their own service. Good internal and external communication will be important for promoting this message and countering pockets of initiative fatigue from staff who have seen strategies “come and go” in the past.

There is a renewed focus on localism within the Council. A new Localism Strategy was agreed in September 2023. Over a decade or more the Council has successfully transferred significant assets to town and parish councils or to other local bodies. Representatives from the town and parish councils said that they would appreciate better engagement with them, particularly long-term planning around assets. Equally where there are no further plans that still needs to be communicated.

## 2. Key recommendations

There are several observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

### 2.1 **Establish a consistent approach to assuring delivery and reporting on the progress of major projects to adequately manage risk and ensure good governance.**

There is currently no consistent programme or project management methodology being applied and the council lacks a corporate programme management office within the Council to oversee the delivery of what are major regeneration projects with significant spend. Individual projects have external professionals to help manage projects on behalf of the Council but there is no one team overseeing progress across all projects using a common methodology.

### 2.2 **Review previous business case decisions that may be out of date to reaffirm costs, benefits, affordability, viability and validity of previous decisions in the light of a high inflation environment.**

There are several approved business cases and programmes that are now over 18 months old and have not commenced. It is suggested that there is a review of these projects to re-affirm the costs, benefits and viability and if the project is still a valid priority.

### 2.3 **Review the scrutiny process in line with best practice.**

Several members and officers said that scrutiny could be used more effectively to help decision making. A review of scrutiny arrangements in line with best practice would enable consideration to be given about whether changes need to be made in either the make-up of the committee or the process e.g. use of task and finish groups.

### 2.4 **Embed a corporate approach to service business planning to ensure resources are allocated to priority tasks linked to the corporate plan.**

There is no consistent service planning process across the Council. A corporate approach to service business planning would ensure that resources are allocated to priority tasks linked to the corporate plan and enable better performance

management and benchmarking. Lack of service plans has also made it difficult to see a clear “golden thread” link from the Corporate Plan down to service delivery and onto individual objectives.

## **2.5 Promote commercialisation within the Council to ensure that everyone understands the part they play**

It is important that everyone realises they have a part to play in supporting commercialisation and having a business mind set even if they are professional and business support services like HR and IT.

## **2.6 Members to review the delivery of member training to consider how it can be delivered to suit their needs and availability.**

We heard that attendance of Members at training sessions was low. A review by members themselves of Member training and how it can be delivered to better suit their needs and availability could enable more Members to attend.

## **2.7 Provide training on understanding financial reports for non-finance staff and Members.**

In the current financial climate, it is more important than ever that Members and senior managers understand the financial reports that are prepared for CLT, Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny. Reports contain considerable financial jargon which a lay person may not be familiar with. A glossary of terms would also be a useful addition to reports such as the quarterly monitoring reports.

## **2.8 Bring forward the development of workforce and succession plans to provide resilience to the delivery of the Corporate Plan**

Workforce and succession plans do form part of the three-year plan set out by the HR and Organisational Development Manager to deliver the Organisational Development Strategy 2023-25 and enable the delivery of the Corporate Plan. Given the ageing workforce and possibility that some key officers might choose to leave the organisation in the short to medium term, we believe that this risk should be recognised and succession plans brought forward and addressed as soon as possible.

## **2.9 Develop a strategic corporate approach to Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) encompassing both HR and service/community considerations.**

EDI is already a key feature of the Council's HR and OD Strategy. However, the peer team heard little about EDI specifically from a service or community perspective.

### 3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

#### 3.1 The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected based on their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Andrew Pritchard – Chief Executive - Runnymede Borough Council
- Councillor Nick Worth - Leader South Holland District Council
- Councillor Maxine Clarke – Stoke City Council (shadow member peer)
- Angela Woodhouse - Director of Strategy, Insight & Governance - Maidstone Borough Council
- Bob Watson - Strategic Director Finance and Customer Service - Surrey Heath Borough Council
- Gill Elliott - LGA Peer Challenge Manager

#### 3.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance

arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?

4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

### 3.3 The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. 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 peer team prepared by reviewing a 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 Wyre Forest District Council, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 25 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 70 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1 Local priorities and outcomes

The new administration has very clear priorities and a strong vision of what it wants to achieve for Wyre Forest. The Corporate Plan 2023- 2027 was approved by Council on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2023. It is closely aligned to the latest Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).



There is a growing performance management culture within the Council. The proposed new Policy and Performance Management role will be critical to further embedding performance management within the Council. The postholder will also oversee the complaints process which currently lies within each individual service area making it difficult to have a corporate overview.

There are a number of processes in place within the Council for monitoring performance including corporate plan actions and corporate risks. A strategic overview of performance is produced quarterly for Cabinet, CLT and Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The latest Q3 performance management report is more detailed than in previous quarters and provides comprehensive financial and service performance information against the corporate priorities. The peer team feels that if it also contained “Red, Amber, Green” performance ratings it would more easily identify and track good/poor performance.

The Council is starting to use service data benchmarking reports produced by Oflog and the Local Government Association’s LG Inform to compare its performance against similar councils. This is now being reported in the quarterly performance management report, providing a clear graphical representation of performance against national measures including spend per head of population and service processing times. Graphs are accompanied by a useful brief commentary around trends or exceptions. In Q3 the Council reported that overall spend on its services had moved closer to the average for all district councils and some were significantly lower including culture and sport, and environmental services. External auditors said that in their view council services are providing value for money.

Housing and dealing with homelessness are key service challenges for the Council. Benchmarking data shows that there is a “markedly higher” level of households in Wyre Forest in temporary accommodation than in the comparator group of similar councils. The housing waiting list showed a marked increase between 2020-21 and 2022-23 although the list has decreased in the most recent annual review. The Q3 report also contains an in-depth review of the costs of homelessness support and how the council is tackling this issue.

There is a lack of consistency around service business planning across the Council. We heard that previously there was very much a “systems thinking” approach which

had more top-level performance measures. As a result, the “golden thread” from the Corporate Plan is yet not fully embedded in the organisation. This has been recognised by the new administration and there are plans to re-establish links between service plans and the corporate plan.

Green issues are included in the Corporate Plan with the Council pledging to produce and implement a carbon reduction plan for the district and to help people make their homes more energy efficient. A new Climate Change and Carbon Reduction Plan for 2024-27 was adopted in December 2023. There is a new contract in place with a private contractor to provide electric charging in council car parks which the Council will earn a small income from. It will be important for the Council to manage the expectation created by the corporate plan in delivering on the green agenda and ensuring that there is the capacity to deliver. There is an active and vocal Green Alliance network in Wyre Forest which will be observing and checking the council's performance on these pledges. The green activists locally are a useful asset for the Council and were very keen to be involved in the Council's plans for green initiatives in the district.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is a key feature of the Council's HR and OD Strategy and HR are already putting in place measures to address EDI from an employment perspective. We heard little about EDI specifically from a service or community perspective. Going forward it would be good to have a corporate approach to EDI encompassing all these elements as well as providing some more Member and Officer training to aid understanding of all protected characteristics and current EDI issues.

## 4.2 Organisational and place leadership

Wyre Forest Council is seen as a sector leader and a trusted partner in the region. Partners from the police, Fire and Rescue Service and community housing were complimentary about the Council and see it as a reliable and trusted partner. The Council is a member of a wide range of partnerships across Worcestershire and the West Midlands including:

- Worcestershire Health and Wellbeing Board
- Wyre Forest District Collaborative
- Wyre Forest Youth Network

- Worcestershire Housing Board and Strategy
- Worcestershire Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Group
- Worcestershire Domestic Abuse Partnership Board
- Wyre Forest Green Alliance
- West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership

The Council also works closely with its neighbouring councils through shared services arrangements e.g. building control, and payroll; shared posts in housing and jointly commissioned services and initiatives such as the Promoting Independent Living Service and Act on Energy.

There is a clear vision of place for Wyre Forest reinforced by the new Corporate Plan and delivery of externally funded schemes. The Council has received Levelling Up Funding (LUF) of £17.9 m and Future High Street Fund funding of £20.5m and it is now in the process of delivering on several associated capital projects. These include a refurbishment of the former Magistrates Court as a new creative and innovation hub and creation of an urban park in the Kidderminster town centre. Wyre Forest was a category one priority area for Levelling Up and Kidderminster town centre was identified as a key area requiring regeneration due to high vacancy rates and low flexibility of use which had led to a lack of economic opportunities. LUF funding will be used to invest in the town's cultural heritage and visitor economy. Three key projects are to improve the canal towpath, regenerate the Piano Building and repair the existing Town Hall. Kidderminster Town Council will be meeting around £0.5m of the cost of improving the Town Hall.

The Chief Executive is recognised by neighbouring councils and partners as forward thinking and strategic - a "bit of a "tour de force" in Worcestershire". He is clearly a significant asset to the Council but as one stakeholder pointed out "a single point of strength is also a single point of failure". The organisation relies heavily on the Chief Executive. Issues escalate from service areas for him to resolve and there is a perception that all reports have the Chief Executive's sign off.

The Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) are fully sighted on the financial challenge being faced by the organisation, but they are not necessarily aligned in their role in resolving that challenge. The structure is relatively new (around two years old) and only one other than the Chief Executive was a member of CLT prior to that although

most have long service in the Council. They are also clearly very focussed on managing their own service areas. However, it is also important for them to be able and willing to act corporately and collectively to support the Chief Executive in delivering the corporate priorities. Going forward, the Council might like to consider the LGA's Top Team Development support offer to assist the development of its CLT.

The Council's Localism Strategy was refreshed in September 2023. It outlines the Council's commitment to collaborate with local councils and organisations to safeguard community services and facilities. Over the past ten years it has successfully transferred significant assets to town and parish councils including the Kidderminster Town Hall, public toilets in each of the three towns (Bewdley, Stourport and Kidderminster) and several parks and open spaces. We found that the perception of Localism varies. Parish and Town Councils highlighted their limited visibility of the direction of travel and engagement when decisions are considered, specifically, around assets. They would welcome being fully sighted on longer term plans of the council to give themselves time to plan their future precepts and build resilience for the future transfer of functions.

### **4.3 Governance and culture**

Leadership of the Council by Members is strong, well supported by officers, and prepared to take difficult decisions. An example of this is the recent decision by the Council to leave the Northwest Worcestershire Development (NWedR) partnership with Redditch and Bromsgrove Councils to pursue its own Commercialisation Strategy. Backbenchers of different parties agreed that the new administration appeared to be "running a tight ship".

Member officer relationships are generally good within the Council. There is a sound relationship between the s151 Officer and the Cabinet Member for Finance, which is essential given the current financial challenge faced by the Council. Challenging and robust conversations between CLT and Cabinet in private meetings are universally welcomed, however we heard that it can sometimes feel to Officers that "they're not hearing" and to Members that "they're not listening".

We understand that on occasion behaviours may fall below the expected standard. It appears that most behavioural issues are being resolved informally. The point was made that the most recent ethics and standards committee was cancelled for lack of

complaints. The Corporate Risk Register refers to “Poor or reckless planning decisions taken contrary to officer recommendation which could ultimately result in planning decisions being removed from local authority control.” The risk register also mentions group discipline as an issue. The External Auditor has highlighted that not all members of the planning committee have attended training, which links into the poor member behaviour referred to above. Further training around the Council’s Code of Conduct could be of benefit to Members and officers.

The scrutiny process could be more useful as a critical friend to the Cabinet. Several opposition and backbench Members commented that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is “top heavy” with Members from the Administration group which meant that the opposition members were rarely able refer decisions back to the Executive. Task and Finish groups are not currently being used. A review of Scrutiny might be a useful way of learning about best practice from organisations like the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, which can also provide additional training for committee members.

There is no apparent consistent corporate programme or project management methodology within the Council. A programme management board needs to be more firmly established as evidenced by implementation of several projects being slower than planned, although progress has sometimes been affected by factors outside the council’s control.

The contract to provide internal audit by an external organisation appears to be well managed. The Chair of Audit is a strong chair, who works well with the new contractor and the chief finance officer. Internal Audit observed that there are effective processes in place at the Council and audit recommendations are enacted in a timely manner.

There is a programme in place for Member training, although attendance is low. This could be improved by reviewing the topics that Members would find useful and the timing of training sessions. There also needs to be more leadership from Groups and better role modelling to increase attendance.

#### **4.4 Financial planning and management**

The Council has a clear understanding of its financial position and is aware of the

budget gap. However, we found that there is an element of inconsistency about describing the size of the challenge. There is a clear link between the various financial strategies. The impact of the capital programme on the revenue budget is factored into the MTFS, although potentially the revenue impact may be deferred as the capital programme slips causing in-year underspends on debt financing budgets matched by a failure to generate benefits in the planned timescales. The MTFS is linked with the Corporate Plan. Councillor priorities (discretionary growth) are listed and approved in the MTFS. The Council has agreed MTFS budgets for use of reserves to plug any gap. The level of reserve balances is sufficient to accommodate this (including use of earmarked reserves). The MTFS identifies the gap and partly mitigates this through its unspecified budget savings and the planned returns from the commercial programme. This approach does have risks as it is not sustainable.

The strong focus on commercialisation could be seen as a rather one-dimensional approach focusing purely on income generation and not around driving further efficiencies and savings. The Council is building in some increased capacity for commercialisation following withdrawal from joint arrangements. This is subject to a proposed new CLT post of Deputy Chief Executive with focus on commercialisation, reflecting its importance to the organisation. The Commercial Programme Board has also been re-established and the team would recommend that its terms of reference need to be redefined to increase the focus on performance monitoring.

The whole Council needs to support and embrace the commercialisation agenda as it is rolled out and develop a more “business like” culture. There is evidence of a robust business case process but there are delays in commencing projects following approval. There are several approved business cases and programmes that are now over 18 months old and have not commenced. In light of the recent inflationary pressures on construction and labour costs nationally, it is suggested that a review of these projects is done to re-affirm the costs, benefits and viability and if the project is still a valid priority. For those that are financed by prudential borrowing, the debt-financing costs will also need to be re-affirmed in the current higher interest rate environment. Once the new strategy has been agreed, a clear delivery plan to support it should be developed as a priority. We understand that for the Capital Portfolio Fund and Capital projects fund in the capital programme there is a requirement for secondary approval by Cabinet (and review by O&S prior to decision)



which depends on a viable business case and takes account of current costs and interest rates. Our concern is that some relevant parties may not be aware of this process or they consider that it is not always followed.

The Council had previously embarked on a savings and efficiencies programme, through restructure and changes in the departments. This has been effective in delivering savings. However, it is unclear if any more can be removed from budgets and the focus has turned instead to income generation through the commercial strategy. Currently it feels like the Commercial activity is the “single egg in the basket.” This may be because other avenues for savings and efficiencies have been exhausted. However, in our view there needs to be another iteration of this savings and efficiency programme which clearly identifies further savings and tracks cashable and non-cashable benefits. Failure to achieve the Wyre Forest Forward Savings budget and the Generic Localism savings, along with the proposed commercial income targets will require a further draw on reserve balances.

There are effective budget monitoring arrangements in place, but it could be considered that the “December re-set” doesn't help. Historic evidence indicates that the year-end outturn is more closely correlated to the original February budget rather than the December adjusted budget. The December budget reset will generally increase the net cost of services’ budgets and this will invariably lead to underspends as the trend indicates that budget forecasts are not that accurate and tend to be risk adverse. There is a need for better budget management training and competencies for budget managers. A culture of ‘underspends are good’ is only valid if the underspends are a result of effective and efficient cost control or over-achievement of income and not as a result of ‘over-budgeting’.

The Capital Financing Requirement is calculated in accordance with guidance. It is then factored into the strategies in terms of minimum revenue provision (MRP) and debt financing forecasts. Sensitivity analysis around rates changes (and the pace of changes) is not clear. It would be advantageous to review the capital programme structure to ensure the most efficient allocation of resources, specifically: MRP and debt finances.

There is an inconsistent level of understanding of financial reports by non-finance staff and Members. The technical aspects of the report have occasionally been lost

on the lay-reader. Finance training for budget managers and Members is recommended as a priority. Risk is generally well managed at a corporate level. However, there is a varied understanding of risk amongst some officers and Members and some more training around risk management would be a benefit.

The council is up to date with its statements of accounts and the feedback from both internal and external audit demonstrates an excellent working relationship with the council.

#### **4.5 Capacity for improvement**

Delivery of priorities is the uppermost consideration of the new administration. Two of its three key priorities in its Corporate Plan are around economic growth and regeneration and securing financial stability. To better deliver on these priorities, the Council has considered a number of options to provide the best structure, capacity and capability. The current proposal is to restructure CLT by establishing a new post of Deputy Chief Executive which will provide a stronger commercial focus as well as providing support for the Chief Executive. The new post will also have line management responsibility for the Head of Strategic Growth and the Head of Community and Environment. Under this proposal the current Head of North Worcestershire Economic Development and Regeneration (NWEDR) would be assimilated into the post with effect from July 1<sup>st</sup> 2024. The decision of the Council to dissolve the NWEDR partnership with Redditch and Bromsgrove councils was taken in December 2023 and this will come into effect on June 30<sup>th</sup> 2024. Whilst understanding the rationale for appointing the new Deputy Chief Executive, the peer team questions whether the span of responsibilities of this post (line managing two Heads of Service that cover significant areas of frontline services), will detract from the necessary focus on commercialisation and regeneration.

The Council is taking steps to improve its performance management of services including plans to upgrade the Pentana performance management system and improving linkages with priorities and actions in the Corporate Plan. Performance Indicators have been identified for each head of service and these will be part of new service plans. Due to ongoing austerity the Council has not been able to maintain levels of investment in corporate policy functions in recent years, however capacity has started to be rebuilt with participation in the LGA's National Graduate



Programme. A new corporate Performance and Policy Officer post has been established to strengthen performance management, policy and to provide a corporate overview of complaints.

The Council is seeking to establish a more entrepreneurial culture amongst all its employees to support the focus on commercialisation. Internal communication will be a key part of this so that all staff can understand their role in delivering corporate priorities including commercialisation. Initiative fatigue with the number of programmes and changes relating to services and savings must be a consideration, and to help counter this there needs to be clear consistent language on commercialisation. The Council has good systems for communicating with staff including a weekly newsletter, monthly health and wellbeing newsletter, use of the intranet, managers networks three times a year and in-person corporate briefings at the Green Street Hub led by the Chief Executive and Leader as well as an on-line briefing. All frontline staff at the Green Street Depot have a council e-mail address and can access the intranet and receive internal communications.

Low staff turnover in some key departments such as Legal has meant good continuity of knowledge and commercial experience. This will be a considerable asset for enabling the council to deliver its investment projects. However, the Council has an ageing workforce with over 60% of staff over the age of forty-five. A consistent approach to succession planning is needed to avoid the Council “sleep walking” into a problem when that knowledge leaves the organisation.

The Council has an HR and OD Strategy in place. However, as it was written before the most recent Corporate Plan, the new HR and Organisational Development Manager has set out a three-year delivery plan of key actions that more closely match the corporate priorities. HR priorities now include management training to support line managers around recruitment, having difficult conversations with staff and absence management etc. Relevant management training is in place, but there needs to be better tracking, monitoring and consistency of training. This has been recognised and is being prioritised by HR. A review is taking place of systems to enable HR data to be reported. A new HR dashboard has been made available to CLT. Structured training is available for Cabinet Members to support their portfolios. The LGA can provide peer support and specialist training including change support days

## 5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a progress review within twelve months of the CPC, which provides space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the recommendations from this report.

In the meantime, Helen Murray, Principal Adviser for the West Midlands, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Helen is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

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