

Corporate Peer Challenge **Watford Borough Council**

12 – 14 September 2017

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Watford Borough Council is a high-performing, bold and progressive council with a lot of ambition for the future. A strong partnership between the Mayor and the Managing Director has ensured a stable and sound platform for delivering services and has created a strong legacy for post-May 2018 when the current Mayor intends to step down. The peer team felt that some further detail was needed on the council's future to provide clarity for the incoming Mayor and suggest that a clear roadmap for the council after May 2018 would help to capitalise on the council's current position and go some way to future-proofing key strategies. The peer team's view is that this could be achieved quite quickly and would help to create a successful next step in the council's journey.

The council benefits from mature officer and member relationships that are based on mutual trust and respect. This was seen at different levels within the organisation. The peer team found staff to be positive about working for the council and enthusiastic and committed to Watford as a place. Staff felt valued and appreciated the recognition that they received through the staff awards that took place both monthly and annually. Whilst the peer team found that officers and members shared the same vision for the future it was thought that more could be done to articulate this to all stakeholders at all levels including staff, the community, businesses and residents. An integrated communications plan would simplify this and enable consistent messaging to stakeholders. The council's move to work with a communications expert on messaging shows that they are moving in the right direction.

Watford Borough Council has good self-awareness and understands the communities, economy and geography of the borough and leadership of place role. This is demonstrated through its partnerships and projects with other key place stakeholders e.g. working with the business community to attract new businesses to Clarendon Road, and providing support and networks to make their transition smoother. The Council sees Watford as being more than a commuter town for London – an economic driver in itself and for the county of Hertfordshire. An example of this is the project that the council is working on with Transport for London and the extension of the Metropolitan tube line in Watford, which would provide better transport links to key business and retail areas.

The peer team were impressed with the ambition of the council with this and other projects. However, it is important that the council assesses whether it has the right skills and capacity in place currently to deliver these projects to time and specification, and to recognise the demand that they place on the senior leaderships' time. The peer team suggests that some further thought is given to whether there is sufficient resilience within the organisation given the number and variety of projects being undertaken both internally and externally by the council. One way of building this resilience and capacity is to utilise the willingness of partners. The private and public partners that the peer team spoke with were keen to support the council with their future plans for the Borough.

The council is committed to financial planning for the future and a good appetite towards risk has been developed. This is supported by a good planning / borrowing approach

but the Council will need to be vigilant to ensure savings capture is achieved in its transformation and income generation programmes.

To support the external ambition for the place, the council is undergoing an internal transformation programme. It is important that the council is able to integrate all of its plans to ensure that there is a holistic council – wide programme that incorporates the council's work on transformation, commercialisation, medium-term financial strategy and the people and digital strategies. Following this the council might wish to pull together a 'state of the borough' narrative to help secure buy in from partners to support the council's future plans and ambitions.

To deliver such a big internal change programme there needs to be strong and visible leadership from the senior leadership team. Whilst it was clear that this was happening currently the peer team felt that more could be done. This needs to be a priority in the coming months and will be essential in developing a future culture for the organisation and for driving change and maintaining the pace and rigour to keep the programme on track. This could prove difficult due to the parallel ambitious place-shaping projects that are also being delivered by the council. To be successful at both the peer team believe that the council should invest in and develop the right capacity and resilience needed to deliver on both their internal change programme and their external place shaping programme.

It is clear that Watford Borough Council has achieved a lot of successes over the past few years and has a lot of positive stories to tell. More could be done to promote this. Whilst it is understandable for the council to have been focused internally over the past decade, it now needs to think about what it has to offer regionally and sub-regionally. WBC should take this opportunity to look outwards and shout about and share what they have done. The council is seen as punching above its weight in terms of the partnerships and investment projects for the size of the place. There are a number of recommendations within this report that the peer team hope will help the council move to the next stage of its vision and future plans.

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. Develop capacity and skills to deliver and sustain your ambitious programme to keep pace and rigour
2. Develop communications strategies to articulate vision to residents, commuters, businesses and partners
3. Prioritise visibility of leadership on internal transformation
4. Integrate transformation, commercialisation, MTFs, people and digital strategies etc. into one coherent whole = holistic council-wide change programme
5. Consider the Council's role in owning management and delivery of housing supply

6. Create a roadmap for post May 2018 and future proof key strategies e.g. finance, asset management
7. Build on the willingness of partners to develop the future Watford agenda
8. Be more outward looking - shout & share your success
9. Decide what culture you want for 2020 and beyond

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 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 Watford Borough Council were:

- Alan Goodrum, LGA Associate Peer
- Councillor Keith House, Leader of Eastleigh Borough Council
- Chris Trail, Strategic Director, Charnwood Borough Council
- Tom Blackburne-Maze, Service Director, Milton Keynes Council
- Emily Coulter – Officer, East Hertfordshire District Council
- Ami Beeton – Challenge Manager, LGA

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges cover. 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. 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?

4. 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?
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 addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to provide feedback on:

- Watford's place-shaping & economic development agenda
- Community Engagement

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focused 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 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. The team then spent three days onsite at Watford Borough Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 90 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 42 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 180 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 4.5 weeks in Watford Borough Council.

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 visit on 14th September 2017. In presenting feedback to you, 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 you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

Watford Borough Council has good self-awareness and understanding of place and context. The peer team found that a broad consensus on the future direction and vision for Watford was held by members, officers and partners. It was evident to the peer team that council has clear objectives and a direction of travel. This coupled with honest, open relationships and a track record of doing what it says it is going to do led the peer team to view the council as being effective and place-led.

The council has done some good work to get partner buy in for their place-based change agenda centred around building a new Watford. This has been carried out through high level meetings and discussions with strategic partners. Having the right partners on board has enabled key support to some of the projects and the council's growth agenda which is vital in ensuring opportunities and benefits for local people e.g. health, economic and housing benefits from the Watford Riverwell regeneration project and economic benefits from the revitalisation of Clarendon Road.

The peer team found evidence that the council has a positive approach to working with partners to make sure that the best options and services available are delivered to residents. Examples of imaginative and innovative delivery vehicles used by the council include the council's shared services arrangement with neighbouring authority Three Rivers District Council, as well as third party contractors, joint vehicle and place partners.

The peer team felt however that further work could be done to cascade and share council priorities down to strategic partners on a more operational level. When talking to some business partners it was clear that they had good relationships with the senior leadership of the council but this did not filter down the organisation. If partners had a contact point within the organisation outside of the leadership team, it could mean that the council would be more open and accessible, creating resilience and capacity.

Watford Borough Council has a mixed economy approach to delivering services for its residents and customers. It maintains generally good relationships with service providers that are mature and allow for the sharing of information and flexibility when needed. An example of this is the contract with Veolia for Waste, Streets and Parks where a number of beneficial changes have been made since 2013.

The council has a strong focus on growth and regeneration for the place and there is a strong partnership board that has been set up to manage regeneration that works well currently. It is important that plans and strategies are reviewed regularly and future proofed. Regeneration is a long term business and as with most

initiatives the council needs to ensure that they stay relevant and not become outdated. It is important that pace and rigour are maintained and that buy in both politically and from partners is maintained. The officers of the council need to be ready for a change in ways of working when the current mayor steps down (as she has indicated that he intends to do in May 2018) and plan for any support and briefing that her successor will need.

The peer team found that the council has a healthy appetite for risk. This is demonstrated through the council's approach to working with partners and delivering services differently. The Riverwell project is a good example of this. There are some risks associated with this project, given the scale of the Northern Development Zone and key relationship with the NHS, but they are seen to be proportionate by the peer team.

Watford Borough Council has a reputation for delivering projects to time and is known for getting things done. The peer team feel that the council needs to be aware of the complexity of delivering on a number of large projects. There is a need for intensive programme management and senior leadership to manage the different stake holder group and this absorbs a lot of capacity. With the council's own transformation and change programme underway, the peer team recommend that the council looks at building further capacity to manage and deliver on the regeneration projects that are already in train.

The council has benefitted from stable finances over recent years through prudent budget management so the administration has not yet had to make some of the more difficult decisions other local authorities have had to consider, for example fortnightly collections, putting up council tax significantly, or charging for garden waste. These issues are going to become more prevalent as funding decreases. The peer team suggest that a conversation with members and the community is needed to understand what views are held about future priorities, what council tax is for and what it should cover. This will help with planning for post-2018 and help to build a new era and legacy for the new mayor.

4.2 Leadership of Place

There is a sense of pride about Watford as a place from members and officers at Watford Borough Council. The Mayor and Managing Director are seen to be great ambassadors of the town and are known for their leadership in managing the growth of Watford and preventing decline. This is supported by the view from the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) who recognised Watford Borough Council as being progressive and positive for the county. Both the Mayor and the Managing Director are described as engaging, credible and easy to work with. There is an opportunity for the leadership team to step up to leading on a sub-regional level basis. WBC would benefit from looking outwards to the local government sector and sharing their successes with other local authorities. They have a lot to be proud of.

Having good relationships with stakeholders and partnership bodies has meant that the council has achieved good buy in and support for key projects. Partners described the council as a 'finely tuned and lean machine that is delivering an ambitious plan for growth and regeneration'. The regeneration board is a good example of the council working well and holding its place at the table. Partners are confident and comfortable for the council to lead on key projects. The extension of the Metropolitan tube line (MXL) is a key project for the LEP and it was evident to the peer team that the strong relationship between the council and the LEP has meant a united approach when dealing and negotiating with London Underground and the Greater London Authority. The peer team believe that the council should consider their options if the extension project does not go ahead.

The council has good relationships with its business community. The representatives that the peer team met found the council's leadership to be place-focussed. Examples of this include the support to new businesses and the Big Business Connect event which was hosted by the council. This initial support and activity is important for new businesses but partners suggested that more could be done to follow on from this. If the council was to strengthen its follow up support businesses would be willing to work with and help to deliver new initiatives e.g. reinvigorating the chamber of commerce and the business growth forum.

There was also a willingness from the business community to support the council in articulating its communications and PR around the vision for the place. The peer team believe that Watford Borough Council should utilise the support and skills offered by its partners in areas where it does not traditionally have the capacity or skills itself.

The business community representatives saw the Mayor as being a great driver and influencer able to get things done. Again there was some concern about the change in Mayor post May 2018 and this suggests that some further communications with external partners in anticipation of the changes would be welcomed. Partners view the council as ambitious and progressive and want to add value to help put Watford on the map.

However, some partnerships do need strengthening in order that the council can maximise its skills and resources. The council has a strong community wellbeing agenda for its citizens. The view of the peer team is that the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) is mature and robust. There is a single plan and shared ownership of roles. To be even more effective further work needs to be done to engage operational managers from public health and social services into the Community Safety Partnership. This view was held by a number of senior managers within the council. Getting this buy-in would mean that the CSP would be able to deliver more support to residents and the community, and be more proactive and preventative rather than just reactive.

Another example is around commercial activities. The council needs to embed its approach to commercialism with partners to get their support. The first step for this is to gain some clarity on what commercialism means for the council and for the community, and then articulate the shared understanding to strategic partners.

Some high level discussion between members and senior officers will aid this and a communication piece should be planned to cascade the message to staff, members and other stakeholders.

4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

The Mayor and Managing Director have a strong partnership which is based on trust and respect. Leadership within the organisation is both visible and accessible. This is appreciated by staff and creates a positive working environment. This is then mirrored by supportive and mature member/officer relationships throughout the organisation. Staff and partners are slightly apprehensive about the changes post-May 2018 when a new Mayor will be elected. The council does have a robust governance framework in place which should help to support this transition period but the peer team think that some thought should be given to how the softer changes are managed in terms of ways of working and accessibility / visibility of the new mayor.

The peer team found evidence of good member-led strategic forums for policy development that have helped to create an open and positive culture for discussions about the future. Further to this, the senior leadership team have two away days a year with the cabinet to plan and take stock, and cabinet members meet monthly with their respective heads of service.

The vision and future plans for the organisation were understood and supported by staff who were keen for the transformational and culture change. Embedding the messages and direction within the organisation is going to be a big job, and communications and messages will need to continue to be managed and thought through to achieve a shared understanding. The peer team felt that officers and members are ready to embrace this change and saw evidence of good communications to staff on the change agenda. The peer team met with a number of staff supporting the transformation programme and were impressed by their commitment and enthusiasm for change and this was reflected throughout the organisation. The council needs to harness this support and enthusiasm over the coming months and use it to keep the pace for change on track.

There is a supportive culture at the council and development opportunities for officers and members are seen as important. The peer team spoke to officers who said that they feel valued and believe that the council is a good place to work. The peer team heard about supportive and informative management forums that ensured staff were aware of key issues. The people and digital strategies are going to be important for the council going forward and the peer team felt that they need to keep pace with the transformation programme and the culture change for 2020. They will be fundamental in looking at agile working and organisation and team development.

A cross-party working group for member development has also been set up to look at and support the training needs of members. It is clear to the peer team that the administration has looked at succession planning and were preparing for the future. There was no evidence of political in-fighting within the organisation but instead a shared commitment to the place. This was seen through the agreement on a strong community wellbeing agenda for the borough.

The peer team found good examples of where scrutiny had worked well and has provided supportive challenge to the council. The scrutiny role is seen as open and effective and cabinet will listen to scrutiny members views even if it doesn't agree. Good practice has been seen through the outsourced services panels where scrutiny has been used for oversight, governance and challenge to providers. The council has been proactive in learning from when things have gone wrong e.g. the ICT contract failure and has used these lessons when managing subsequent contracts. The council has also consistently addressed poor performance in the organisation and improved outcomes and ways of working as a result. The peer team found evidence that this approach had been used to deal with staff, contracts and shared service arrangements. To make this approach more robust the peer team suggest that the council's service plans be integrated into the performance management process. This will help the council to monitor more closely and intervene at an earlier stage if needed.

The transformation programme that the council is undertaking is ambitious and real and the right thing for the council's next phase. The peer team did have some concerns around capacity, especially at a senior level. To be successful in delivering this programme the council needs to sustain visible leadership at a high level. The Mayor and the Managing Director need to front the programme but equally they have important roles delivering on all of the ambitious external projects. The peer team suggested that the council reflects on the capacity it thinks it needs to deliver all of the programmes successfully and how and where it can build extra capacity and resilience within the organisation. There are going to be a number of crunch points over the next couple of years and the Managing Director will need some support to deliver the complex external projects on time and in budget. It will be essential for members and officers to have a visible leader delivering the internal change programme.

4.4 Financial planning and viability

Watford Borough Council is in a sound financial position and has worked hard to ensure a good level of service delivery to residents and the community. This has been aided by some successful historic investment decisions for the borough. The council has a prudent approach to reserves and borrowing, but as funding regimes continue to change and pressures increase, the council will need to continue to monitor these closely. To date the council has managed change well and has not had to use 'salami slicing' to identify savings. To help maintain this position the peer team suggested that a refresh of the financial strategy is needed, including improved profiling and forecasting. This would allow the council to more closely

specify saving and income realisations earlier on which would provide a clearer financial picture for the council as it moves forward.

The council has a shared financial service with Three Rivers District Council. Sharing across two authorities has built some resilience by sharing management responsibilities and rotating staff and reduced costs. Watford Borough Council also benefits from having a diversified investment portfolio. The peer team thought the council could benefit from reviewing the advice it gets for its investment portfolio to ensure that it reaps as much benefit as it could and invests appropriately to realise long-term income and support regeneration. The council also needs to ensure that it has effective client capacity and ambition for future asset management/property acquisitions.

Due to the prudent approach to reserves and borrowing, the council has not yet had to make any real difficult political decisions about council tax or charging for services e.g. there is no business plan to show the possible cost implications of charging for garden waste. This approach appears to have been welcomed by residents to date, but as previously mentioned needs to be looked at in the future as funding regimes change and residents wants and needs evolve.

Excellent leadership at the council has allowed for bold and progressive spending on ambitious and place-shaping projects for the area. Provision has been made in terms of a central contingency pot that allows the authority to plan for any issues that arise. The council has an ambitious yet realistic capital programme. The capital budget is big at £80-100 million with a further £20 million waiting for approval. This money is well scrutinised by a financial review board. A consistent approach to procurement and contract management is needed across the council's projects so that it can make sure that it is getting value for money. Strategic partners would welcome a financial challenge discussion to fully understand what the council's future role will be in projects and service delivery. For example the financial agreement with the NHS about the Riverwell project needs to be developed and agreed.

In moving forward with transformation the council needs to ensure that key plans and strategies are all aligned and integrated. Financial planning for the organisation needs to be clearly linked to the transformation programme and the council's objectives for change e.g. becoming more commercial. If the council was to look at these in isolation there is a danger that they will not complement each other and pose a risk to the programme. It is also important that members have the opportunity to consider and discuss the service implications of transformation and the effects this may have on service users.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

The council has committed, engaged and positive staff. They were found to be supportive of the council's leadership and plans for the future and were seen by the peer team as the council's biggest asset. Watford Borough Council is a friendly place to work and staff were engaged and motivated by future challenges facing the council. The council benefits from a low and impressive sickness absence rate

of 4.68 days. Return to work interviews are carried out to assess and provide appropriate support to staff. Watford Borough Council has been awarded with Gold Investors in People status.

Staff have access to a range of training and development programmes as well as the chance to build on and learn new skills. Training budgets have been protected to enable the council to 'grow staff' and this approach is supported by managers e.g. the Step up Programme. Practical skills development is also evident. An example of this are the cross cutting projects that the Heads of Service pick up alongside their substantive service delivery role. By developing staff skill sets the council is building resilience within the workforce. However the peer team felt that the council needed to recognise that this could cause a capacity issue for some and as a result service delivery could be affected.

It was clear that the council benefits from a collaborative working style that was demonstrated at senior member and officer level and subsequently filtered down throughout the organisation. This approach has maximised the council's ability to move forward and be progressive in its approach and its external thinking. However the peer team suggest that the council further test the understanding of staff about new ventures and approaches to ensure that there is a shared ownership and perception of what this approach means for services and for the future ambitions of the council. An example of this is commercialisation. The view of this varied between senior officers and officers lower down in the organisation. The service level agreements for HR as a trading service need to be developed to increase clarity on opportunity costs and any potential income that may be received. The council needs to ensure that the business case is robust and viable and to do this it may need to look at whether it currently has the right skill sets to do this. To ensure that commercialisation is developed beyond 'quick-wins' the council may wish to consider recruiting a dedicated resource to lead on delivering and embedding commercialisation within the organisation.

The council shares some services with neighbouring authority Three Rivers District Council. This arrangement has not always been smooth but both councils have worked on achieving a positive one team culture. Staff really care about delivering these services and are keen to belong to the arrangement and to improve the existing performance indicators for revenues and benefits. Performance indicators are monitored regularly at the Executive Leadership team attended by heads of service, the deputy managing director and the managing director.

The peer team found examples of the council having an emphasis on picking the right partner to work with rather than just the right deal. This has enabled the council to manage and negotiate contracts and work with partners to deliver good services to residents. The partnerships in place with Veolia and Kier are examples of this. The council does need to do some forward thinking in advance of the end of the Veolia contract and consider what type of waste service will be appropriate and match with future council aspirations. A full scale review would support this.

As the council is undergoing a significant change programme, the peer team recommend strengthening the programme and project management process in

key areas. There is some current good practice e.g. commissioning, re-tendering as well as the equality impact assessment tools used for the leisure contract but there are some gaps in practical skills and there didn't always seem to be the space for officers to reflect after the implementation of a project. A clearer process on evaluating ideas will help the council with future projects. The peer team believe that the risk for Watford 2020 and the transformation programme is that ambition exceeds the capacity of the organisation. Having the right skills and processes in place will help with capacity but the council also needs to be future proofing its skills and process needs so that it can continue to be a forward, bold, progressive and efficient council for the future.

It is really important that the council gets the ICT right for the transformation programme. The organisation is aware of the IT issues following insourcing and has taken steps to resolve this including a new IT manager with experience of the private sector. Going forward it will be beneficial for the council to have universal operating systems that talk to each other.

The customer service element of the transformation programme will be important and customers need to buy into the journey and plans. Part of this will be making the council more open and accessible to customers both physically and digitally. The current town hall and customer services area does not fit with the council's ambitions for the future. The building is not conducive to agile working, collaboration, hosting partners or developers. The council might wish to consider moving to a more fit for purpose building for the long-term.

4.6 Watford's place shaping & economic development agenda

The council has a strong commitment to place shaping and economic development with many examples of this already mentioned within the report. As a geographical area, Watford is one of the smallest council areas within the country and is mostly urban but with a number of award winning green spaces e.g. Oxhey and Cassiobury parks for residents. This also includes the free Harwoods and Harebreaks "adventurous playgrounds" that have been built for younger residents of the borough and are accessible to all.

The developments that have been undertaken are bold and progressive in a time when many councils are battling with a decline in their budgets. This has been strengthened by the fact that regeneration plans and ambitions of the council are understood and shared by strategic partners. Support for the arts remains strong, as does the council's commitment to environmental quality and events in the town centre. However, a watching brief may be needed for managing the growth and the ambitious plans for the place. The peer team feel that there could be a risk if growth and regeneration are not managed in a sustainable way. Pace, rigour and capacity will be key to delivering these objectives successfully. This also builds on the earlier point made about internal resilience and capacity within the council. The peer team suggest that the council reflects on how it can manage its

resources so that any concerns or issues raised by partners can be dealt with quickly and effectively at all levels.

The peer team understood that managing growth was a key priority to the council and its partners. Some bold decisions have been made e.g. Watford Riverwell mentioned earlier. The decision that was taken on moving the allotments for the success of the project was not an easy one for affected residents but does demonstrate the wider more strategic vision of the council and the strength of relationship between councillors and their constituents.

There were some issues that the peer team felt more discussion was needed between the community and some councillors, for example the lack of ownership around housing supply. This is a big issue and one that the council needs to be able to deliver on. Some conversation with different stakeholders will help the council to articulate its position and for everyone involved to understand any possible solutions.

Another example of place shaping is the positive relationship that the council has with Intu who manage a substantial retail venue for the town. Working in partnership with Intu and the successful Business Improvement District the council has supported a varied and exciting cultural programme for residents and communities including a temporary beach, a varied theatre schedule and free screenings of films over the summer. One demographic that didn't seem to be as engaged with the offer of the place are commuters. There are a number of big companies with offices on Clarendon Road as well as other sites around the town. The peer team think more thought could be given to how this important group are encouraged to stay in town after work and see it as a place for leisure and relaxation as well as work.

4.7 Community Engagement

The peer team found that community satisfaction was high which was expressed in the last engagement survey with 90% of respondents expressing this. The peer team believe that this is partly down to the role and visibility of the Mayor who is seen as the 'Mayor of the town' rather than the Mayor of the council. Elected Members were also key to the current engagement strategy with councillors seen to be taking on more of an engagement role than officers. Whilst this has worked well it is a more informal approach, the council needs to check that formal engagement routes are robust and in place. Having said this, there is evidence of some good examples of community engagement e.g. engagement of users and non-users re the leisure contract and the engagement work carried out at the Oxhey Park forum discussing and agreeing proposals for the development of the area for all parts of the community. The peer team were encouraged by the council's recognition to make this approach more consistent through their plans to work with private partners to increase communications with residents, businesses and other users. The peer team believe this will allow the council to be more proactive with decision making and provide more legitimacy for it.

As mentioned previously, communications need to be strengthened on the agenda and the priorities of the council. It can be difficult to communicate growth as a good story for all demographics, however the peer team thought that both officers and members needed to be braver and demonstrate greater leadership around the implications and benefits of growth to the community. Using partners as ambassadors of place could help the council with this objective. The relationship with the local press is not as strong as it could be and the council could reflect on how to improve this. An effective communications plan could help counteract any negative communications. Greater use of social media could help to promote outcomes and quick wins for partnership work.

A further suggestion from the peer team is to be very clear about how the community survey results have fed into the corporate priorities and what action will be taken as a result. The community need to know that they are being listened to and that their views are valued and contributing to the place-shaping agenda. A strengthened feedback loop should help the council in demonstrating to residents that it is listening to them and understands their views. It would also enable the council to review its services to deliver in a way that meets the communities' needs.

It is also important that a community element is built into the council's transformation programme. The peer team suggest that this can be beneficial on two counts: firstly, to ensure that the new digital strategy is appropriate and accessible for users, and secondly to reflect and understand what skills and capacity the community have to help deliver future council priorities and objectives. This would also help in creating further resilience for the council.

Finally, the peer team suggest that the council works with partners to create an effective community engagement plan for the future. The council may wish to look at other organisations plans to see what can be learned from others successes in this area. The LGA can help to facilitate this if required.

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. Rachel Litherland, Principal Adviser and Gary Hughes, Principal Adviser are the main contacts between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Their contact details are: Email rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk and gary.hughes@local.gov.uk

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 good 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. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 2 years.

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 Peer Challenge before 2022.