

# Corporate Peer Challenge **Tewkesbury Borough Council**

*03 - 06 March 2020*

Feedback Report

## 1. Executive Summary

This review was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the world is now a different place in many ways. Nevertheless, this report reflects the views of the Peer team at a specific point in time and the recommendations made in this report will be for the council to consider within the new global, national and regional context.

The Peer Team would like to acknowledge the level of support provided to them both before and during the onsite visit by members of the Corporate Services Team as well as the positive way in which the whole council engaged in the process.

Tewkesbury Borough Council (TBC) is a well-run organisation, with well-respected management team, officers and members. The council shows a good understanding of place and has a strong presence within it. Officers and members have a passion for their borough which is recognised and valued by partners, with whom they have strong working relationships. The council takes a leading role in developing and maintaining these relationships for the benefit of its residents and communities.

TBC benefits from the highly effective personal leadership of its Chief Executive (CEO) is unanimously well regarded and respected both within the council and amongst partners and stakeholders. The supportive leadership style he models is valued by staff at all levels. We heard of numerous hard won projects and relationships that are of significant benefit to the council and can be directly attributed to the CEO, for which he is to be commended. However, the council needs to continue to take steps to ensure effective succession planning.

Staff are dedicated, forward looking and open to change – they represent an asset to the organisation and should continue to be nurtured and engaged in taking TBC forward. The ‘can do’ attitude of staff is an enviable strength, but with the strategic and operational demands increasing as the new council plan comes online, along with the emerging work to support the Garden Town plans, there is a risk this willingness to help could lead to staff being over committed and this strength becoming a weakness.

The council could take a more proactive approach to external communication - when they have taken the lead in the past, such as press briefings on key initiatives, they do it well and this is welcomed by stakeholders, but there is a need to recognise the strategic value of effective comms and look to build specialist/dedicated capacity in this area.

In relation to Garden Town Delivery, clearly defined next steps are now needed to define the programme within the external context, to ensure the output is co-owned and co-produced with the full range of stakeholders. Effective multi-agency governance is now required and the council needs to consider how to structure and resource this.

There is an experienced and technically strong finance team and members and officers are confident that the financial position is being well managed. The council recognises their significant dependence on New Homes Bonus (NHB) funding the base revenue position and there is some visibility of the risk this represents given the likely changes coming down from government. Greater organisational awareness of this risk, its potential impact and viable mitigation options is needed. This should be prioritised in order to ensure that any alternative or additional efficiency programmes that need to be initiated to offset this income risk have time to deliver savings in advance of any change in funding approach by government.

TBC has proactively embraced the commercialisation agenda and has a well-performing portfolio which makes a valuable contribution to the Medium-term Financial Strategy (MTFS). More detailed scenario planning to map the impact of potential changes to the commercial investment regulatory framework would be beneficial. This is to ensure the council is comfortable with the level of risk being managed, rather than presupposing a change is required.

## 2. Key recommendations

These recommendations were made at a point in time, reflecting the thoughts of the team at that time, and based on the evidence gathered. As part of the LGA's ongoing role supporting our members in the region, we have seen that TBC, like many others, has responded well to COVID-19 and that the post-emergency landscape for the council will be very different. Nonetheless, these recommendations provide the thoughts of the LGA team at the time of the visit and, it is hoped, provide valuable reflections back to the council on the pre-pandemic situation that might help inform future considerations and prioritisation.

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 and are caveated in that they were made in a pre-COVID-19 world and the council will need to consider the relevance of these recommendations accordingly:

1. Build upon your effective and well-embedded budget planning arrangements into the future by ensuring that you:
  - Take appropriate steps to minimise reliance on NHB as a means of sustaining the base revenue requirements of the organisation.
  - Prepare for possible changes to commercial investment regulatory framework through detailed scenario planning.
2. Create the necessary senior leadership resilience, focus on prioritisation and overall resource requirements within the organisation going forward so that so that the council is on as sound a footing as possible to continue to meet the challenges facing the sector. As part of this:
  - Clarify roles and responsibilities of Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and Management Team in order, ensuring that opportunities for senior officers to contribute and influence are well understood;
  - Build on partnership and shared service delivery strengths to cement your 'place leadership' role and from this explore further opportunities as to how these arrangements will help build capacity
  - Build on existing corporate project evaluation mechanisms to develop a clear process for prioritisation and changing resource requirements
3. Consider ways and approaches to promote the 'Tewkesbury Brand' more effectively as part of your successful leadership of place approach.
4. Agree how you can proactively move the Garden Town delivery programme to the next phase by establishing/ developing stakeholder governance and engagement structures and processes.
5. Building upon your existing sound governance arrangements review both:
  - the timings of key meetings so that all members can contribute effectively

- the length/ style of member reports so they more effectively inform and enable better decision making.

### **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 your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed by you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at TBC were:

- Stephen Walford – Chief Executive, Mid Devon District Council (Lead Peer)
- Councillor Linda Haysey - Leader East Herts District Council
- Councillor Allan Knox – Leader, Liberal Democrat Group, Ribble Valley District Council
- Jo Yelland – Strategic Director – Exeter City Council
- Mark Green – Director of Finance and Business Improvement, Maidstone Borough Council
- Emily McGuinness – LGA Peer Challenge Manager

#### **3.2 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: are 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 consider the following questions:

- Are we set up organisationally to successfully deliver our growth plans and ambitions?
- In more general terms, do we have the ability and capacity to deliver the new Council Plan, particularly around our new priorities?

#### **3.3 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 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 4 days onsite at TBC during which they:

- Spoke to more than 120 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 220 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 5 weeks in the 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 on-site visit (3-6 March 2020). 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**

The TBC Plan, adopted in January 2020 and running until 2024, provides a sound blueprint for the future delivery of services within the borough as well as reaffirming a longstanding commitment to driving an ambitious growth agenda.

The council is rightly seen as a 'market leader' in identifying and more importantly, leading the delivery of local growth – something which is evidenced by the two Garden Community initiatives planned for the borough. This proactive approach is welcomed across the piece and the strong working relationships with partners from all sectors is testament to this. The council clearly has a strong sense of place, and its role within it – especially when it comes to leading successful growth plans.

The Council plan is a sound basis upon which to build and shape how the council supports its communities and stakeholders going forward, but there is more that could be done to ensure greater ownership of the plan and its priorities both within the council and externally with partners. The plan sets out the council priorities of:

- Finance and Resources
- Economic Growth
- Housing
- Customer First.
- Garden Communities
- Sustainable Environment

The partners and staff we met with were clear about the council's commitment to making Tewkesbury the place of choice for business and the accompanying aims of delivering employment land and housing, together with the right infrastructure and skills. There is less

clarity around the other new priority areas – understandably given their relatively recent adoption.

There is a lack of clarity around how data is used to determine priority areas and if the council wishes to see parity across the four priority areas in terms of successful delivery, a clearer narrative would be helpful, explaining the rationale behind each priority area. Similarly, whilst it is encouraging to note the council makes effective use of benchmarking data such as CIPFA and LGInform in some areas of performance management, there is more that could be done to underpin more robust service planning in terms of gathering, analysing and using customer insight to inform prioritisation discussions and decisions.

The need for a more consistent approach to using customer insight is perhaps most relevant when considering the Customer First Council Plan Priority and improvements in this area will help inform the emerging Digitalisation and Transformation Programmes, ensuring that the needs of customers are clearly understood and services reshaped or redesigned accordingly.

The council clearly understands and is well embedded in the local business community and became one of the first district councils to work with the Local Enterprise Partnership to establish a Growth Hub on the site of the council offices. This is an excellent initiative and within the first year of operation over 1000 local businesses have interacted with the Hub with some impressive examples of supporting new business that have gone on to grow their business within the borough. Stakeholders from the business community hold the council in high regard, and they have a well-earned reputation of delivering results.

The co-location of other key public sector partners such as Gloucestershire Police, Department for Work and Pensions, Citizens Advice Bureau and Children's Services in the Public Services Centre demonstrates the council's commitment to not only making the best use of its assets, but also seeking to provide the most 'joined up' end-to-end service for some of their most vulnerable customers and residents.

The council's plans to meaningfully respond to the Climate Change Emergency declared by members needs further detail and articulation. There are active campaign groups within the community, and indeed amongst elected members and how the council will meet climate-related targets alongside ambitious growth plans will be a considerable challenge, helped by the imminent appointment of a County-wide Climate Change co-ordinator.

## **4.2 Leadership of Place**

Being identified as the 'Fastest growing district outside of London' in an ONS report in 2019 is a strapline that TBC is rightly proud of, and this has been achieved through a proactive approach to leadership of place, led from the front by the CEO but supported across the council. Officers and members have a visible and commendable passion for the district which is appreciated by partners and translates well within the partnership arena.

The council clearly has a good understanding of place and a strong presence within it - particularly in relation to growth. The adopted Joint Core Strategy, working in partnership with Gloucester City and Cheltenham Borough Councils is an impressive and challenging framework for sustainable growth which seeks to deliver:

- 35,000 homes by 2031 – half will be built within Tewkesbury Borough
- 50% increase in housing to 2031
- 200 hectares of employment land – 75% of which will be in Tewkesbury Borough
- 40,000 new jobs.

Such stretching targets cannot be delivered in isolation, and the council have forged highly effective working relationships with key local, sub-regional, regional and national partners, resulting in tangible outcomes such as delivering 25% extra homes over a 3 year period.

The council is well placed to exploit the opportunities presented by City Region proposals, where they will be fulfilling the Senior Responsible Officer role, along with the Midlands Connecting Corridor plans. Their positioning in these key regional programmes is testament to the personal, and therefore, organisational credibility of the CEO. In order to de-risk any strategic reliance on any one individual, some thought could be given to succession planning in this area. Ensuring sufficient and sustainable senior leadership capacity in these areas will be crucial to continuing success.

Small and medium businesses value the communication and advice channels that exist with TBC with the Growth Hub cited as excellent innovation. Building on the knowledge and expertise developed through the Growth Hub, the council may wish to consider slightly redefining its support for local business growth – moving more towards an enabling role rather than delivery. This will help manage resource requirements whilst wishing to maintain a strong economic development focus.

The council is able to work well across geographical and sector boundaries and this enables them to exert a level of influence disproportionate to the size of the organisation. Opportunities exist to broaden and strengthen these partnership arrangements - we heard from key partners that approaches to enhance partnership working would be well received and that the council would be 'pushing on an open door'. Capitalising on the credibility of leading officers and members will help build capacity to deliver mutually beneficial ambitions within the borough, for example through more integrated working with Parish Councils.

Work to deliver the Town Centre Strategy, and in particular issues around parking, demonstrated that the working relationship between the County Council and the District Council is not always aligned – this relationship is crucial to the delivery of major projects e.g. Garden Communities and it is important that effective communication is maintained.

Nearly half of members were newly elected in May 2019, and bring with them a wealth of new skills, knowledge and experiences. Whilst members have the opportunity to engage in key policy areas through Scrutiny and the cross-party Cabinet, there is huge potential for all members to further develop their leadership roles. We mention elsewhere in this report the need for TBC to seek greater customer insight to inform key future decisions about service delivery and design, and elected members can play a useful role in this as conduits between their communities and the council. The Garden Communities projects will need careful community liaison and elected members are perfectly placed to support this and should be proactively engaged at the earliest opportunity.

External communication from TBC can be reactive and this will not serve the council well as high profile projects such as the Garden Communities move to the delivery phase. When press briefings have been held in the past, they have been well received as have website updates, press releases etc. The council has a small communications team – with only one dedicated officer who also edits the twice-yearly magazine posted to every household and leads on internal communications. A more proactive approach to external comms and branding of place would be valued by residents and businesses alike.

Given the pace of change at TBC - particularly large projects such as the Garden Town Communities and The Joint Core Strategy, there is a need for a more proactive external communication in the near future. Addressing this will require additional, specialist capacity

and expertise, but will prove invaluable as the council seeks community engagement in, and support of major growth plans.

In times of crisis, most notably significant flooding events, TBC is able to show visible and effective leadership of place, and the same is true in terms leading on the growth agenda. In order to fulfil the ambitions of the Council Plan, similar levels of leadership and energy will need to be shown in other priority areas such as Garden Communities and Sustainable Environment.

#### **4.3 Organisational leadership and governance**

TBC benefits from the highly effective personal leadership of its CEO who is unanimously well-regarded and respected both within the council and amongst partners and stakeholders. The supportive leadership style he models is valued by staff at all levels. We heard of numerous hard-won projects and relationships that are of significant benefit to the council and can be directly attributed to the CEO, for which he is to be commended. The Council, in appointing a Deputy CEO, is already taking steps to ensure these impressive gains are not risked in the future by being too dependent on any one individual. The council could be more cognisant of this risk moving forward, especially as many high-profile projects will depend on a consistent approach from the council in the medium to longer term, and ensure that clarity exists around succession planning at a senior level.

The current senior management structure works well at the CLT level, which consists of the CEO, Deputy CEO and Monitoring Officer and we heard that other officers, including the s151 are involved when considered appropriate. This provides a good forum to establish Leadership level thinking and a collective position on important issues.

However, there is some confusion amongst both the next tier of management and the wider organisation about the roles, responsibilities and functions of the CLT and how it interacts with the Management Team – a much larger forum consisting of all Heads of Service along with CLT. Whilst the view from CLT is that the majority of key decisions are taken collectively at Management Team level, some greater clarity on the respective roles of each group would enhance transparency and confirm confidence that all key officers (especially those responsible for finance and planning) are appropriately involved in decision making.

Staff hold the authority in high regard as an employer – citing the benefits of the successful apprenticeship scheme, the numerous opportunities for personal and professional development and excellent working relationships amongst other examples. This investment in staff translates into an impressively enthusiastic and committed workforce. Transformation Plans, including the Workforce Development Strategy are at an early stage, as is the Digital Strategy, and whilst staff can see the rationale for needing to adapt the organisation to meet new and emerging challenges, those leading the process will need to ensure staff are fully engaged in shaping thinking at the earliest opportunity, creating a sense of ownership. There are enviable levels of good will amongst staff and it is vital these are maintained if organisational change and development are to be meaningful and sustainable.

Middle (Operational) Managers, as a cohort, are well engaged and have considerable development potential – and are keen to develop within and for the benefit of the council. However, they are under a lot of pressure and are at risk of becoming the “squeezed middle.” They can suffer from a lack of clear direction around prioritising competing demands, for example. All the staff we spoke to appreciate and support the council’s commitment to growth, but some also felt that there can sometimes be a conflict between the ‘nice to have’ ambitions and the ‘need to maintain’ core services. The mutually beneficial relationship between income generation and the ability to continue to deliver services valued

by the community is well understood, but a better articulated rationale for project prioritisation is needed.

Elected members from all parties are positive about governance and decision-making processes, citing a particularly good approach to consensus building and collaborative decision making – the inclusion of an opposition member on the Executive Committee is testament to this. Through the Democratic Services Team, members are well supported and have an innovative member development programme that meets the needs of councillors now as well as looking at succession planning. There is an impressive Member Induction Process which was well regarded by all members and seen as setting the tone for positive member/officer relations and good working relationships.

Overview and Scrutiny has improved following changes made over the past 2-3 years; members and officers have more clarity on the role and purpose of the function and there seems to be appropriate levels of challenge in many cases. Opportunities exist to strengthen the role of Scrutiny in pre-decision and policy development work, thus creating greater capacity and eventually ownership of ultimate decisions – this will be particularly important should the council adopt the recommendations of this report and look to prioritise projects and activities in the future.

There is more that could be done to meet the needs of those members newly elected to the Council in May 2019, many of whom have work and/or family commitments which mean they find the current timing of meetings difficult to manage. Greater use of technology could promote virtual engagement outside of formal meetings and thus make better use of the skills and expertise of all members. Similarly, some new members of the council find formal committee reports inaccessible and reviewing how key information is presented to them, and the communities they serve, would be beneficial and further enhance engagement.

#### **4.4 Financial planning and viability**

The council benefits from an experienced and technically strong finance team supporting them as they address a potentially significant budget shortfall, resulting in members and officers being confident that the financial position is being well managed. However, the base revenue position continues to rely on NHB to a concerning degree. There is a likelihood that New Homes Bonus will either be significantly reduced/restructured or not be available beyond the short term. This poses a strategic risk to the future financial stability of the council. More detailed scenario planning involving members and officers would give greater visibility on various 'what if' scenarios and their impact. This will help the council manage this risk and inform wider prioritisation conversations within the council. Low Council Tax is an inherent handicap from a financial viability viewpoint, but to some extent this is now irretrievable (due to 'capping' restrictions) and other more innovative options will need to be played into the scenario planning work.

The Transform Work Group have proved a useful and successful forum for discussing savings ideas to date, although targets remain challenging e.g. £400K waste and recycling, £265K commercialisation, £500k other efficiencies. Continued, and perhaps widened, use of this group would support greater organisational input into defining future plans and in doing so, ensure the financial landscape is understood by all members and officers.

Even though the council is currently reporting a favourable variance from the 19/20 budget, latest revenue projections from Pixel are more pessimistic than those in the MTF5 and the council should assure itself that it is adequately sighted on the risk judgements being made.

Reserves have increased over past few years from a very low level and this is further evidence of sound financial planning and management. The successful approach to building levels of reserves should be documented in a formal, member approved Reserves Strategy to enhance financial monitoring and oversight.

The council has amassed a significant commercial portfolio from a small legacy investment and is now a major contributor to the revenue budget generating a net return of around £2.8m per annum. The council plans for further investment, continuing to use their 'risk versus return' decision making process. Due to a lack of investment opportunity within the borough, the council has made large investments across the country which could potentially expose them to greater risk, especially should the economic forecast shift in the future. More needs to be done to ensure there is greater organisational awareness and understanding of the risks of potential changes to the Commercial Investment Regulatory Framework to protect the interests of the council.

The Garden Town Programme represents major investment in and by the borough council, but successful delivery is dependent on Homes England funding of around £8.1 million and this is a risk to the council. Enhanced planning around alternative options – and likely impact – should these funds not materialise in part or in full would enhance financial and risk management.

#### **4.5 Garden Town**

TBC has taken a bold grasp of the opportunity to seek Garden Town Status for delivery of major projects in Ashchurch in Tewkesbury and in partnership with Cheltenham Borough Council on the Cyber Park development. These Garden Communities provide the opportunity for the council to deliver on its aims to deliver sustainable, well designed and vibrant communities.

These projects are complex and require effective stakeholder management from the outset. Tewkesbury Borough Council has made good progress to date in establishing an effective member reference group. The focus now needs to shift to the next phase and defining the projects in the wider community and sub-region. To be successful, the projects will need to demonstrate they are rooted in the community and that going forward, plans are co-owned and co-designed. In order to achieve this more effective multi-governance structures will need to be developed – the existing work has had limited exposure to other key players and this needs to be addressed before undertaking further work.

The Council needs now needs to consider how to structure and resource the various governance and delivery requirements such as:

- stakeholder panels,
- Parish Council engagement
- community groups
- strategic delivery partners,
- infrastructure groups,
- landowner forums.

Outside the capacity-funded programme team, it is unclear if wider organisational capacity requirements are fully appreciated, and therefore adequately addressed. These major projects will require specialist communication and engagement support alongside the likely impact on support services such as Legal and Finance teams. When taken alongside wider organisational capacity concerns, and the need to prioritise both current and planned work,

the council would benefit from taking time to map in more detail the likely resource implications of the Garden Towns across their projected delivery timescales.

#### **4.6 Capacity to deliver**

The council benefits from a hardworking and committed workforce which is ready to respond to the challenges ahead and to deliver the priorities of the new council plan. Staff are dedicated, forward looking and open to change – they represent an asset to the organisation and should continue to be nurtured and engaged in taking TBC forward.

The ‘can do’ attitude of staff is an enviable strength, but with the strategic and operational demands increasing as the new council plan comes online, along with the emerging work to support the Garden Town plans, there is a risk this willingness to help could lead to staff being over committed and this strength becoming a weakness.

There is a strong organisational focus on developing and retaining staff which has created a dedicated and loyal workforce. The Apprenticeship Scheme is particularly well-regarded and is a commendable reflection of the supportive workplace culture that is evident at TBC – the team heard some heart-warming stories from members of staff about the support and guidance they had received from all levels of the organisation as they developed in a series of roles. Staff recognise and value this investment in them, as reflected in the very positive 2018 staff survey responses, and this will stand the authority in good stead as it embraces future challenges.

There is a lack of clarity around priority work areas and projects, which impacts on organisational capacity to deliver. We heard numerous staff state that ‘everything is a priority’ and this, combined with a genuine desire to support the organisation, runs the risk of overloading staff and an inevitable drop in capacity. The extent, and process by which actions are prioritised is unclear and understanding is varied across the organisation. Some dedicated time spent prioritising the aims and ambitions of the Council Plan alongside available resources would go a long way to ensuring a committed, talented and capable workforce are deployed to maximum benefit and effect.

In the Corporate Project Management framework and process, the council already has a potentially effective means through which to manage change and demand. This process could be used to assess all projects and activities against the Corporate Priorities but there is a need for more organisational rigour and discipline to ensure a consistent approach across the whole organisation - it is vital that there is a focus on identifying and tracking benefits realisation, prioritising and even saying ‘no’ where resources do not permit.

There are recruitment concerns in key professional areas such as planning and legal services. Recent recruitment drives have had disappointing results, and although issues in these fields is not uncommon in the sector, when looking at the future significant growth plans for the borough, some more innovative thinking may be required to build capacity in these areas. The council benefits from the shared knowledge and capacity generated by the shared legal partnership although the partnership is now having to turn away work due to a lack of capacity. A review of pay banding may be one option to ensure the council is adequately and appropriately resourced to deliver ambitious growth plans.

The council has embraced alternative means of service delivery such as the local authority owned teckal company, Ubico Ltd, which operates the council’s waste, recycling, street cleansing and grounds maintenance contract and the One Legal shared services partnership. Given the positive relationships that exist across the sector and region, there is potential for the council to explore more commissioning opportunities, building on

organisational knowledge and expertise in this area to ensure the council is always an effective client.

There are a suite of updated policies and strategies (Workforce development, ICT, Digital and Transformation) that will provide important cornerstones for organisational Transformation Plans, as will the creation of the new Corporate Business Transformation Team. Members of this team are positive about the potential of their role in helping the council deliver efficiency savings through greater digitalisation. In order for the programme to be truly transformational, the team may benefit from spending time establishing clear baseline metrics and targets so that statements such as 'meeting our customer needs' can be better quantified and measured e.g. what are the needs of customers, to what extent are we currently meeting them and where are the gaps? A comprehensive and regular resident's survey could be an effective way of achieving this, and if the questions recommended via LGINform are used, the council will have ready access to comparative data in order to monitor performance. The work the council carried out in November 2019 through a snapshot survey and use of the Citizens Panel should prove useful foundations for this.

The Transformation Programme is well embedded in the organisation and has successfully delivered innovation and financial savings since its inception in 2014, however, taking into account the points made above about priority-setting and better management of staff resources, skills and knowledge, greater clarity around what success will look like – beyond digital enhancements – will give the programme greater longevity and sustainability. It will also ensure that the programme can be robustly managed, with benefits-realisation being key to delivering the efficiencies required to meet future budget requirements, or to free up resources to redeploy into other priority areas of work.

## **5. Next steps**

### **5.1 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 several areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Paul Clarke Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). His contact details are: [paul.clarke@local.gov.uk](mailto:paul.clarke@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 practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

### **5.2 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.

### **5.3. 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 2024.