

Corporate Peer Challenge **West Berkshire Council**

19th to 22nd November 2019

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Partners value the council for good quality delivery across a range of council services and performance indicators, the 'on the ground' joint working that it contributes to and its track record of securing external funding. The authority is using its influence effectively sub-regionally and, at a regional level, is seen as central to the very good relationships within the Integrated Care Partnership.

West Berkshire is a beautiful part of the United Kingdom, has very good transport links with the rest of the country and has a strong and diverse local economy. Partners are keen for these advantages to be built upon, involving the council stepping more fully into the 'place leadership' space. Within this, there is a need to identify West Berkshire's growth priorities and deliver a 'laser-like' honing in on the 'pockets of deprivation' and underlying social issues that exist. Also, more needs to be done to hear the voice of the resident increasingly consistently, more directly and on a wider range of issues.

Following the agreement of the Council Strategy in May, it is important that it now becomes central to the authority's thinking and understanding. It needs to act as the key driver for the organisation going forward.

The authority has a good track record of achieving savings and increasing income. The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is currently being refreshed and this provides the opportunity for the council to both challenge and reassure itself in relation to its financial position and ambition. Significant savings are required in each of the next two years. The council cites demand management, modernisation, digitisation and new ways of working as being central to achieving what is required. It is imperative that these ambitions are fulfilled in order to ensure the council's financial position is safeguarded. The careful on-going monitoring arrangements that have been put in place around social care spend need to continue, with the signs so far being good.

The council's accounts for 2018/19 have not yet been signed off by the External Auditor, with the council being accustomed to unqualified statements being agreed much earlier for many years now. There is a lot of work taking place currently to resolve the matter, although some of the factors have been outside of the council's control. This work needs to come to a conclusion soon and the opportunity should be taken by the council to draw out the learning to aid it in future years.

West Berkshire has traditionally been a very stable council both politically and managerially. A greater degree of change has been experienced recently. The changed make-up in the elected membership has generated a new dynamic, with politics now much more to the fore and many officers experiencing a more complex political make-up for the first time. It is important that the council's adaptation around these changes continues to settle down.

The council's changed Executive and managerial leadership team are both seen to be impacting positively. The Executive is seen to be forging an increasing clarity around a refined political direction and set of priorities and are being supported by a Corporate Board combining experience and 'corporate memory' with new ideas and perspectives.

People are highlighting that capacity is very constrained in the organisation and clearly the demands on it continue. The way forward on this issue seems to us to centre upon concentrating on how to make the biggest impact upon commonly agreed goals in West Berkshire through viewing and using resource as an 'enabler' and seeking to 'free up', leverage and maximise the benefit gleaned from resources. This entails implementing a greater focus on the delivery of outcomes, looking to a more medium term horizon in relation to financial planning, developing an increased risk appetite, empowering staff and facilitating the contribution of other organisations.

The council has a very extensive set of governance arrangements and controls in place, raising a question of proportionality. How much added value is gained from the extent of what exists, in a context of the council already delivering well?

Opportunities for staff engagement have increased in recent times and there is both the potential and a desire to see this extended. The staff that we met revealed their thirst for knowledge about what is happening across the council and their desire and ability to contribute thoughts and ideas. A commonly recurring theme at all levels was that of greater empowerment being sought.

'Transformation' is talked about as a concept within the authority and there are good examples of it taking place 'on the ground'. Much time and effort is going into identifying change initiatives but things can't yet be seen to be translating into a focused programme of change and transformation.

2. Key recommendations

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

- Jointly design with residents the mechanisms through which to hear their voice more
- Respond to the desire partners have for the council to lead the setting of a clear direction for West Berkshire into the future and influence the place it should be – raising the ambition, establishing clarity of purpose and sharpening the focus
- Determine West Berkshire's housing, economic growth and environment priorities, how they need to inter-relate and reflect them in the emerging respective strategies
- Make communications central to the council's thinking
- The council needs to reassure itself that its approaches to demand management, modernisation, commercialisation and digitisation will deliver the anticipated savings for the authority
- Take stock of the council's commercialisation agenda and related risk appetite

- The council's accounts for 2018/19 have not yet been signed off by the Auditor – this needs to be addressed and the learning drawn out
- The Council Strategy needs to become central to the authority's thinking and understanding
- Look at how to strike a better balance in relation to the council's very extensive governance arrangements – ensuring proportionality through looking at how people use their time
- Extend opportunities for staff engagement
- Establish a focused programme to drive genuine transformation centred on the resident and improving outcomes

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the council's requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge in West Berkshire were:

- Alison Griffin, Chief Executive, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
- Councillor Peter Nutting, Leader, Shropshire Council
- Councillor Adam Paynter, Deputy Leader, Cornwall Council
- Alex Thompson, Finance Director and Section 151 Officer, Cheshire East Council
- Jacqueline Gay, Head of Communications, Kingston Upon Hull Council
- Dean Tyler, Service Lead Strategy and Performance, Slough Council
- Matthew Hamilton, Head of Improvement Co-ordination and Strategy, Local Government Association
- Chris Bowron, Programme Manager, Local Government Association

Scope and focus

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

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of place: Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. 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?

Alongside these questions, the council asked the peer team to consider:

6. The issues, challenges and approaches relating to 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 four days on-site in West Berkshire, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 150 people, including a range of council staff, elected members and external partners and stakeholders
- Gathered information and views from around 35 different interviews and focus groups, additional research and reading that were all kindly arranged for us
- Collectively spent more than 450 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending around thirteen working weeks in West Berkshire

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team on Friday 22nd November upon the conclusion of our visit. In presenting feedback to the council, we have done so as fellow local government officers and elected members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things the council is already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority-setting

The council and its partners demonstrate a good high-level understanding of the make-up and nature of West Berkshire now and into the future plus the underlying social issues that are being faced. Such understanding sits at the heart of the partnership-based and recently established West Berkshire Vision 2036, the Council Strategy 2019 – 2023 (entitled 'Building on our Strengths') and the Joint Health and Well-Being Strategy 2017 – 2020. The Vision has only recently been established and was instigated by the council, who developed an initial outline for consideration, and ultimately adoption, by the Health and Wellbeing Board under whose auspices it now sits. The Council Strategy was agreed in May this year, links directly to the aspirations set out in the Vision 2036 and outlines six priorities for improvement:

- Ensuring sustainable services through innovation and partnerships
- Ensuring vulnerable children and adults achieve better outcomes
- Supporting everyone to reach their full potential
- Supporting businesses to start, develop and thrive
- Developing local infrastructure, including housing, to support and grow the local economy
- Maintaining a green district

To underpin the Vision 2036 and the Council Strategy, a number of additional strategies are being developed to shape how the council and partners take key agendas forward, including those for housing, economic development and the environment.

The council has a sound corporate framework for consultation to guide what it delivers. This comes in the form of a consultation toolkit and a degree of officer support made available through a small team at the heart of the organisation and used to guide corporate consultations, such as that informing the budget-setting process, and those undertaken by individual services across the council. However, we believe that more needs to be done to hear the voice of the resident increasingly consistently, more directly and on a wider range of issues. The authority no longer undertakes a residents' survey and we understand that the Residents' Panel, established as a surrogate means of gaining insights and understanding, is not adequately representative of the population.

What has been undertaken in the way of consultation and engagement through 'Building Communities Together' (BCT) represents a model potentially to draw upon and adopt more widely. BCT is a team of officers from the council and the police and works to help communities become stronger and more self-reliant. They deliver restorative practice, advice for dealing with neighbourhood issues, support for vulnerable adults and advice and guidance around preventing domestic abuse, radicalisation and exploitation. The team is

co-located in the council's offices and sits at the heart of a wider Building Communities Partnership involving a number of other agencies. The engagement delivered through BCT is integral to creating locally-derived solutions in communities.

In devising the approach to hearing the voice of the resident more, we would urge the council to avoid the temptation of seeking to deliver this through 'Building Communities Together' despite its expertise. We would encourage it instead to foster increased consultation and engagement capacity and skills through the wider organisation. It should also seek to adopt an approach whereby consultation and engagement approaches are designed jointly with residents.

Partners highlighted a desire to see the development of a more sophisticated understanding of, and focus on, 'place'. There are two main elements to this. The first is a 'laser-like' honing in on the 'pockets of deprivation' and underlying social issues that exist within the area. There was a view amongst partners that these tended to have been masked traditionally by the fact that West Berkshire is, overall, amongst the least deprived places nationally and performs well on a range of social, health and economic indicators. However, the underlying issues have been being profiled more under the council's leadership in the last few months and partners are welcoming of this.

The second element relates to ensuring a greater balance in the focus between Newbury and the rest of West Berkshire. Given Newbury is the primary urban centre in the area it is entirely understandable that its profile is significant and its critical mass draws spend and provision. However, this makes it all the more important to strive to ensure a counter-balance with other places.

4.2 Leadership of Place

As we outlined earlier, the council has been instrumental in establishing the 2036 Vision for West Berkshire. There is work to do before the Vision is widely recognised and fully bought into by partners, with the council acknowledging in the position statement it produced to inform the peer challenge that the communication of it is at an early stage – something which partners that we met confirmed.

During the course of our discussions, it became apparent that partners particularly value the council for:

- How effectively it delivers – it provides good quality across a range of council services and performance indicators, with good inspection outcomes and a step change in children's social care (which it is crucial to consolidate and then build upon)
- The 'on the ground' joint working that it contributes to, including 'Building Communities Together'
- Its track record of securing external funding, including three West Berkshire schemes being in the top five Growth Deal priority schemes in the region and with more than £14m having been secured through the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) in recent years

As can be seen with the successes around LEP funding and Growth Deal projects, the council is using its influence effectively at a sub-regional level. As another example, and whilst the social care and health integration landscape across Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is complex, the council is seen as central to the very good relationships at the Integrated Care Partnership level in Berkshire West. The council's Chief Executive is seen as instrumental in this. The challenge is in ensuring that the maximum benefit is derived from the positive state of the relationships and the work that is being done, in order to deliver improved outcomes for local people.

West Berkshire is a beautiful part of the United Kingdom, with around three-quarters of it classed as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There are very good transport links with the rest of the country and it has a strong and diverse local economy, which the concept of 'Open for Business' – one of the key themes of the Council Strategy – seeks to consolidate and enhance. Partners are keen for these advantages to be built upon, involving the council leading the setting of a clear direction for West Berkshire and influencing more heavily the place it should be. Essentially, partners wish the council to step more fully into the 'place leadership' space and this entails raising the ambition, establishing greater clarity of purpose and sharpening the focus.

What partners we met outlined shouldn't be interpreted as being about place marketing or branding. It is instead concerned with defining what West Berkshire's key characteristics and 'offer' are for the future. Place leadership is crucial in enabling West Berkshire to build upon its strengths and both to continue to thrive and to tackle underlying social issues through focusing on growth and outcomes.

Within this there is a need to identify West Berkshire's growth priorities – determining the balance between and within the spheres of housing and economic development and ensuring this is reflected in the emerging respective strategies. We gleaned through our discussions with the council's senior leadership that the housing priorities have emerged recently as being around starter homes, key worker housing and genuinely affordable housing. The economic development ambitions and prioritisation feels less clearly defined at this stage. As these agendas become clearer, they need to be captured in the related strategies. The emerging housing and economic development strategies need to work together with the equivalent for the environment to ensure the growth and climate change agendas work in tandem in order for them to become embedded in the ambitions for the place.

Thoughts amongst partners about scenarios and opportunities for West Berkshire going forward included reinforcing its offer of rural living and Newbury's position as a market town, accepting a role as a 'dormitory town' for Reading and London and developing a 'unique' offer linked to further or higher education as a centre of learning and excellence around a theme such as health and social care in order to draw in and retain younger generations. The fact that partners themselves are positing options for West Berkshire into the future emphasises the importance of collectively determining a shared direction and offer that people can unite behind and drive forward. Whilst it is beneficial to have established the Vision 2036, partners felt something much more specific is needed in order to define West Berkshire into the future.

There is an imperative around the council responding to the plea for increased place leadership. There was real concern amongst partners regarding the news that Sovereign Housing has taken the decision to relocate its main offices, employing around 200 people, from the centre of Newbury to Basingstoke. This was attributed to not enough having been done to engage organisations already invested in the area and outline a compelling future and clear ambitions both for Newbury and West Berkshire.

Fulfilling the ambitions for place entails looking across a wider geography and nurturing existing and potential partner and community relationships. The council itself indicates it has traditionally 'looked east' because of the geography of the Berkshire councils and the LEP plus the role of the capital. We would encourage diversification of this thinking, looking at the opportunities that perhaps lie in other directions. Some of this is starting to happen because of the changed social care and health integration landscape but we would encourage this to be built upon and the potential for increased dialogue with some of the local authorities and agencies lying in other directions to be capitalised upon.

We would also encourage increased nurturing of the relationship with the local voluntary and community sector and Town and Parish Councils. The strength of what they already offer and achieve is impressive, including maintaining eight out of the nine libraries in West Berkshire and a number of community centres, plus delivering a wide range of initiatives to support communities and promote and protect the environment, and there seems to be further potential that could usefully jointly be explored.

Communications also needs to become central to the council's thinking both as a leader of place and in its role more generally. As a leader of place, this entails establishing a clear narrative for West Berkshire and looking to position it appropriately so it can both bring influence to bear and capitalise upon opportunity. West Berkshire is well placed strategically within the country, has much to offer and be proud of both as a place and as a council and could look to capitalise upon this more in terms of potential investment and being a shaper and influencer within local government and at government level.

Enhancing the approach to communications also involves adopting a more proactive approach than is seen at present and engaging stakeholders locally more effectively so they know more about what is going on, what the ambitions for the place are and how they can help to shape things. We would encourage the council to think about jointly reviewing and re-designing with residents the mechanisms and channels through which the council keeps them informed.

4.3 Financial planning and viability

The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is currently being refreshed under the guidance of a newly-appointed S151 officer. This provides the opportunity for the council both to challenge and reassure itself in relation to its financial position and ambition.

The authority has a good track record of achieving savings and increasing income, delivering 92 per cent of its planned objectives across the last four years and already implementing 83 per cent of those set for the current year. Significant savings are required in each of the next two years respectively, with £5m projected to be required in 2020/21

and over £6m in 2021/22, from a net revenue budget totalling £125m based on the current year. The council cites demand management, modernisation, digitisation and new ways of working as being central to achieving what is required. It is imperative that these ambitions are fulfilled in order to ensure the council's financial position is safeguarded. This is in a context of the level of the council's reserves being marginally below the authority's own target of 5% of net expenditure.

It is positive that the authority has established a £1m Transformation Fund to help pump prime its change agenda. The use of such funding needs to align with a clear set of corporately agreed ambitions – reflected in a focused programme of change – around how the organisation needs to operate and deliver going forward

Measures have been taken to avoid a recurrence of the overspending experienced in adults and children's services in 2018/19. Overall, the council delivered a balanced budget at the financial year end but this was achieved through underspends in other areas, cost reductions across the whole council, capitalisation of costs and the use of reserves. The authority highlights the taking over of Birchwood care home, judged to be 'Requiring Improvement', as a significant contributory factor to the overspend. The careful on-going monitoring arrangements that have been put in place around social care, and elsewhere, need to continue and the signs so far are good, with a small overspend of 0.2 per cent of the net revenue budget currently projected. The £131m capital programme through to 2021/22 reflects the council's ambitions, including the building of new schools and roads, but the borrowing involved inevitably generates revenue budget implications that also need to be monitored carefully.

The council is showing an increasing commercial appetite, with it having agreed borrowing of £100m to fund investments, including commercial property, to generate a revenue return. The ambitions around the return from this investment funding seem fairly cautious, with an aim to secure a two per cent return per annum. It is perhaps now the time to take stock, to determine the authority's commercial risk appetite going forward and clarify the scale of the ambitions. This work should be overseen by the Commercial Board and what emerges should inform a commercial strategy. This would serve to bring real focus to the council's commercialisation agenda, which is cited as another key element in the addressing of the financial challenges of the coming years.

The council's accounts for 2018/19 have not yet been signed off by the External Auditor, with the council being accustomed to unqualified statements being agreed much earlier for many years now. There is a lot of work taking place currently to resolve the matter, although some of the factors have been outside of the council's control. This work needs to come to a conclusion soon and the opportunity should be taken by the council to draw out the learning to aid it in future years.

The authority has an intention of moving to outcomes-based budgeting for 2020/21. This provides tremendous opportunity, given what we outlined earlier regarding the shared desire to ensure West Berkshire both continues to thrive and to tackle underlying social issues through focusing on growth and outcomes. In addition, adopting this approach to budgeting, plus the revision of the MTFs, could usefully aid a shift away from the budget-setting process representing a major 'annual event' which absorbs much effort and attention for a significant period of time every year. It is important, however, for the

council's ambitions and expectations around adopting such an approach to budgeting to be realistic given both the complex nature of what it will entail and the short timescales being set to implement it.

Austerity has inevitably impacted and very naturally generated a focus within the organisation on the 'bottom line'. Caution and prudence will continue to be key 'watchwords' for the authority going forward but we would encourage a greater balance in the thinking. At present, finance comes across as the primary driver in the council's thinking and decision-making. Perhaps it is time to see a shift to a mind-set where resource comes to be positioned more as an 'enabler' than as a constraint.

4.4 Organisational leadership and governance

Following the agreement of the Council Strategy in May, it is important that it now becomes central to the authority's thinking and understanding. It needs to act as the key driver for the organisation going forward. Work is already taking place to ensure the MTFS aligns with it, which is a significant step, as is the development of a Delivery Plan to underpin its implementation.

West Berkshire has traditionally been a very stable council both politically and managerially. Relationships between officers and councillors have long been strong, founded upon mutual respect and aided by the council keeping elected members well informed of issues in their ward and providing good officer responsiveness to casework issues. Relationships across the elected membership have also been very positive over many years.

A greater degree of change has been experienced recently, particularly in relation to the political make-up of the council. This follows an overall reduction in the number of councillors following a Local Government Boundary Commission Review in 2018 and the elections in May this year. This sees the Conservative Administration with 24 seats now (48 previously), the Liberal Democrats having 16 seats (4 previously) and the Greens winning seats (3) for the first time. The changes have also seen a significant number of newly elected councillors join the authority and a proportion of former elected members returning.

The changed make-up in the elected membership has generated a new dynamic, with politics now much more to the fore and many officers experiencing a more complex political make-up, and what this entails in terms of the way they need to operate, for the first time. It is important that the council's adaptation around this changed political make-up continues to settle down. Recent months have proved challenging, with some disruption to the usually constructive relationships. There is much to be lost through any deterioration in the way relationships across the elected membership and between councillors and officers function and there is a shared responsibility to ensure that the environment which has traditionally existed prevails. The leaders of the different political groups, the Chief Executive and the Monitoring Officer are taking their commitments and responsibilities around maintaining what has traditionally been held dear very seriously and they need everybody to follow suit.

The council's changed Executive and managerial leadership team are both seen to be impacting positively. The Executive is seen to be forging an increasing clarity around a refined political direction and set of priorities and are being supported by a Corporate Board combining experience and 'corporate memory' with new ideas and perspectives which have been facilitated through recent external appointments at that level.

The council agreed a new senior management structure in March, which is coming into being organically. Adopting this approach of delivering change over time, capitalising upon retirements and people moving on of their own volition as such situations arise, reflects an organisation that is very loyal to its workforce. This revised structure is central to the council's ambitions of creating greater strategic capacity. However, the current period and rate of transition is generating questions within the organisation as to how such strategic capacity will be released and this needs to be worked through.

Creating the opportunities for more strategic engagement at Corporate Board level would aid the challenge of enhancing strategic capacity within the organisation. The Strategy Board, comprising all of the elected members in the Administration, has been established to provide the opportunity for regular widespread engagement in the strategic direction of the authority at that level. Mirroring this, to provide the senior-most officers with increased scope to consider the challenges and opportunities facing the council strategically, differentiating this from their activities looking at day to day matters and undertaking the preparations for important forthcoming meetings, such as Cabinet and Full Council, would help with the balance of their focus.

The council has a very extensive set of governance arrangements and controls in place, raising a question of proportionality. As an example, there is a large proliferation of Boards within the council, to which there is an extensive flow of information and the flow of reports seems often to be duplicated across different parts of the governance structure. We heard anecdotal evidence of reports, seeking authorisation for relatively minor amounts of expenditure on often traditional items of spend, being presented multiple times. Equally, Overview and Scrutiny is in the process of developing a comprehensive work programme under the leadership of a new Chair and it is important to ensure this is geared to making the greatest possible difference to the council and the place.

Linked to this issue of proportionality, currently the council's approach to risk around decision-making seems to be one of seeking to 'eradicate' it, through multiple reporting and escalating matters to the senior-most levels. At the heart of this would seem to sit issues of clarity of decision-making processes, trust and organisational confidence. How much added value is gained from the extent of the arrangements and controls that exist, in a context of the council already delivering well and capacity being constrained? We would encourage the adoption of an approach that is more proportionate and looks to hold risk at the most appropriate level. This would serve to ease resource constraints, empower people and expedite decision-making. We would encourage the council to look at how to strike a better balance through looking at and re-evaluating how people spend their time.

The council undertakes an Employee Attitude Survey every three years and attaches a lot of importance to it, as can be seen from the constructive drilling down that takes place on issues identified in given areas. Opportunities for staff engagement have increased in recent times, as seen with the 'Let's Talk' sessions held across the organisation by the

Leader and Chief Executive. These have been implemented as an additional way of both communicating to and hearing directly from staff. There is both the potential and a desire to see this extended. The staff that we met through the course of a number of focus groups, held with people at a range of levels in the organisation, revealed their thirst for knowledge about what is happening across the council and their desire and ability to contribute thoughts and ideas. A commonly recurring theme at all levels during our discussions was that of greater empowerment, with people feeling constrained by what they saw as disproportionate levels of control and a low risk threshold within the council. For many, it was the first opportunity they had had to contribute to discussions of this nature and it is clear from their attitudes and contributions that they offer much for the council to tap into.

Partners see the council as having a tendency towards modesty – 'to hide its light under a bushel'. This seems to be a natural characteristic of the organisation, with it not appearing inclined towards either self-promotion or celebrating its successes. Such a disposition will clearly make it more challenging for the council to shift its approach but we would encourage it to shout more, both internally and externally, about what is delivered and take the opportunity to enable people to enjoy what they have achieved. After all, there is much for the council to shout about. The use of digital communications, including social media, on the part of the council seems relatively limited and this might form part of the thinking about how to get its messages out more.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

People are highlighting that capacity is very constrained in the organisation and clearly the demands on it continue, both in relation to services and the need to deliver further savings. We came across several examples of people, particularly in the corporate centre and in management roles, taking on increased responsibilities when colleagues left and who, rather than being replaced, have had their functions 'absorbed' by others. We also gleaned anecdotal evidence of growing concerns regarding staff well-being and both personal and organisational resilience, with people speaking of increasing numbers of 'single points of failure' in the authority. This suggests that something has to give.

The way forward on the issue of capacity seems to us to centre upon concentrating on how to make the biggest impact upon commonly agreed goals in West Berkshire through viewing and using resource as an 'enabler' and seeking to 'free up', leverage and maximise the benefit gleaned from resources. This entails implementing a greater focus on the delivery of outcomes, looking to a more medium term horizon in relation to financial planning, developing an increased risk appetite and a more proportionate approach to managing risk, empowering staff and facilitating the contribution of others in the form of partners and the voluntary and community sector in particular. These are all themes that we have outlined earlier in this report and they coalesce here under the banner of 'capacity' and how to enhance it.

'Transformation' is talked about as a concept within the authority and there are good examples of it taking place 'on the ground', with examples including the creation of Family Safeguarding Hubs, multi-client day centres and paperless Planning processes. Much time and effort is going into identifying change initiatives, as seen with the number and breadth of initiatives within the purview of the Corporate Programme. There are two issues

here. The first is the sheer quantum of identified initiatives, whilst the second is that of the Corporate Programme seeming essentially to have purely a monitoring role. Things can't yet be seen to be translating into a focused programme of change that drives genuine transformation centred on the resident, improving outcomes and capitalising upon 'the world of possibility'. There is scope to achieve much more – ironically by developing a narrower focus on less – through capitalising on technology, drawing in learning from others who have gone before (for example in digital innovation) and ensuring the £1m Transformation Fund aligns with a clear set of corporately agreed change ambitions.

This links to a wider theme to emerge from our work – that of drawing in lessons from other places. The authority values external challenge, as seen with it undertaking three peer challenges of different types in 2019 alone. This valuing of other people's insights and perspectives is very positive and the council can clearly outline the way it has derived benefit from it. We would encourage it to look to build on this by seeking to learn more from elsewhere, both through increasingly visiting other councils and organisations who have already progressed issues West Berkshire is now grappling with, and engaging in more forums and events at the national level in local government. This applies to both officers and elected members and should equally involve the council taking opportunities to offer its learning and knowledge to others by appearing on national platforms and considering taking up opportunities to provide peer support more. This also links to what we outlined earlier in relation to the council shedding some of its modesty and shouting about its achievements.

The council has a good track record of 'growing its own' and this is being built upon, as seen with the number of apprenticeships that have been established across the organisation. We met a lot of people who have been with the authority for many years and who have progressed in their careers during their time there. As the organisation reduces in size and the hierarchy becomes 'flatter' there are inevitable challenges emerging in relation to staff being able to continue to move upwards through a hierarchy. The council is looking creatively at this, seeing part of the solution lying with enabling people to move across the organisation, by emphasising the value of transferable generic skills in addition to experience and knowledge of 'professional domains'. This has the added benefit of aiding the council with recruitment to posts that have been proving difficult to fill.

Consistency of management practice across the organisation has been highlighted as an issue and this needs to be addressed. Issues here include managers' levels of comfort and confidence in undertaking 'self-serve' on matters such as finance and HR, their willingness and ability to manage performance or sickness absence issues and their approach to valuing a diverse workforce. There are ambitions around establishing a management development programme within the council but this is intended to focus more on developing a 'coaching' approach within the organisation rather than more traditional elements of management and we see real benefit in that. It probably wouldn't be right anyway to look to address the managerial inconsistency issue through a 'one size fits all' programme, with us suggesting the council looks instead to address the challenge through a more tailored approach that identifies and supports individuals in relation to specific responsibilities and issues.

We would, however, encourage the council to think broadly in relation to people's development and look at the opportunity to create an exciting and innovative 'skills uplift'

agenda with applicability to all staff. This could offer opportunities around a range of themes, potentially involving some of those mentioned in our report. This could include approaches to community consultation and engagement, empowering staff and residents, developing commercial approaches, utilising social media as a council and increasing political acumen for officers. Such a programme would help to facilitate the necessary shifts in the way the council operates.

The council is committed to elected member training and development, delivering both a comprehensive induction programme following the elections, which was open to all councillors, and an on-going offer of specific training in such areas as chairing skills and all-member briefings on key issues like the budget. The council is also open to individuals making approaches to request specific pieces of training and development for themselves.

We suggest two things to take forward here in relation to this approach. The first is reviewing the impact of the induction programme in order to draw out learning not just for after the next elections but also to identify anything further that might be delivered additionally, or usefully repeated, over the coming months. The second is developing a more proactive approach to on-going training and development that reaches out to councillors and moves things away from a standard and programmed offer to one that aims to identify individual need and provide things in a more 'tailored' way. This reflects the fact some elected members may either be reluctant to request something, or perhaps don't even know they can or how to do so, and that people simply 'don't know what they don't know'. There is also the issue that waiting for the type of training they are looking for to come up in the programme may not fit with the timing of their need. The council is clearly keen to support elected members in their development – the approach would simply benefit from some refinement.

5. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership of the council 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 the council. 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. Mona Sehgal (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her e-mail address is mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk

Follow-up visit

We are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the council through the course of the peer challenge.

The LGA corporate peer challenge process includes a follow-up visit. The purpose of this 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 usually involves some, rather than 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 two 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 four to five years. It is therefore anticipated that West Berkshire would commission its next peer challenge by 2024.