

Corporate Peer Challenge **City of Wolverhampton Council**

30th January – 2nd February 2017

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

The City of Wolverhampton Council has been on an impressive journey of improvement. Since the last LGA Corporate Peer Challenge in 2014 it has recovered from a precarious financial position, made a rapid transformation into a 'Confident, Capable Council', and set out a clear vision and agenda for the future. The progress is recognised and respected by a range of stakeholders, including staff and partners, and has helped significantly enhance the Council's reputation. The extent and pace of transformation is notable and has rightly been recognised by external reviews and awards – including the MJ Council of the Year Runner Up in 2016. The Council is now in a strong position to respond with confidence to both current and future challenges facing the City.

The Council has become a credible and respected 'leader of place'. It is seen as a key player that is influencing the debate and decision-making across both the Black Country and wider sub-region, including the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA). There is widespread recognition for the role of the Leader and Managing Director in driving the development of the Authority during its formative stages, and their current roles as lead member for transport and Monitoring Officer. The Council is also providing clear leadership through its direct investment and actions to support the physical regeneration of the City.

As an organisation, the Council clearly benefits from strong leadership - both political and managerial – that is recognised by a range of stakeholders. Supported by good internal communications, the leadership is driving a culture of professional discipline and a sustained focus on improvement across the organisation. There is a commitment to strengthen and develop corporate governance further to ensure decision making is informed by high quality performance information and business intelligence, and benefits from timely scrutiny and challenge. There is a clear 'digital by design' ethos and a wider transformation programme that is helping to improve services, cut bureaucracy and reduce cost.

There is a genuine 'One Council' ethos where cross departmental working and professional support from a strong corporate centre is the norm. Despite the scale and rapid pace of change over the past couple of years, and the inevitable uncertainty that can bring, people clearly enjoy working for the Council and feel involved and engaged. There is a genuine commitment and investment in talent development. Officers are positive, proud and enthusiastic advocates for both the organisation and city. There is a sense of optimism, ambition and excitement about the future. This is a real strength for the organisation.

Given the risks and challenges the Council was facing, there has understandably been a focus during the past couple of years on decisive and deliberate interventions to improve services and stimulate investment in the City. The emphasis has justifiably been on regenerating the city centre (as a catalyst for wider growth), transforming children's services (to tackle rising demand) and improving education (to raise standards and expectations), while at the same time maintaining a focus on stronger financial management and organisational efficiency. The sustained concentration on recovery and stabilisation has paid off. It has created a strong platform from which to consider the next phase of evolution. This is a pivotal point in the journey.

The narrative now needs to shift from where the Council has come from to *how* it is going to deliver the longer-term ambitions set out in the City Vision and respond to new and emerging challenges. The Council's future approach is likely to need to focus more on collaboration, co-operation and co-production to design and deliver solutions. This may require further consideration of how the Council can more effectively leverage and utilise the capacity of partners and citizens, the relationships with whom may need to evolve further to enable this. A stronger and more consistent communication on the social value outcomes and impact for Wulfrunians will be needed – so there is a clear understanding of the interconnectivity between vision, financial strategy and the future operating model. That will also help strengthen the connection between the city leadership role of the council and the community leadership role of councillors.

2. Key recommendations

There are some observations and suggestions within the main section of the report that will inform further improvement and development. In addition, many of the conversations onsite provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council. They are focussed on supporting the continued development of the Council, having acknowledged the significant and impressive progress and achievements since the last Corporate Peer Challenge in 2014:

- 1) **Use the strong platform of a being a 'Confident, Capable Council' to unlock the next phase of your journey.** Shift the narrative from where the Council has come from and focus on *how* it will deliver the future vision and outcomes set out in the City Vision. The Council should be confident about considering its future purpose and the associated operating model and approaches required, which are likely to be different to what exists now.
- 2) **Consider how you further utilise the 'Wolves Workforce'.** The recent focus has understandably been on improving what the Council does. There now needs to be more consideration of how the capacity of the City - including citizens, the voluntary and community sector, public sector partners, and other stakeholders - can be better harnessed to deliver shared outcomes through more collaboration, co-operation and co-production. Leadership style, relationships and partnering approaches may need to evolve further to enable this.
- 3) **Strengthen the connection between city leadership and community leadership at a neighbourhood level.** Consider how the councillor role needs to change as the context of the place evolves. Councillors will need to play different roles in their communities, and be able to demonstrate a clear 'golden thread' of benefits at WMCA, city and neighbourhood level.
- 4) **Develop a stronger and more consistent communication on the social value outcomes and impact for Wulfrunians,** particularly in terms of the regeneration and inward investment. Citizens need to appreciate the benefits to them of the physical improvements being made to the City. Consider whether enough is being done to convey impacts and benefits for citizens and communities (people) as well as the city (place).

- 5) **Continue the focus on strengthening corporate governance further – including the investment in performance management and scrutiny.** You rightly see strong corporate governance as being critical to a high-performing council with the means to proactively identify issues and take remedial action. Consider how governance and decision-making can continue to be developed and strengthened as the organisation’s operating model evolves.
- 6) **Accelerate the pace and ambition on digital transformation to support the delivery of the City Vision aspirations of digital inclusion and ‘smart city’** in addition to using new technology and ‘digital by design’ ethos to reduce bureaucracy and cost across the organisation. Use digital as a proactive tool to drive change internally and externally. By its very nature the ‘digital transformation agenda’ is a dynamic agenda that needs to run at pace to be successful.
- 7) **Further develop the interrelationship between the financial strategy, future operating model and vision.** This should include a clearer strategic narrative about investment in regeneration, commercialisation, new ways of working and reducing demand on services as being the ways in which the organisation will deliver its priorities while remaining financially viable and sustainable.
- 8) **Continue to ensure that opportunities for commercialism and shared services are constantly considered** as part of future operating and service delivery models across the City Council, its partners and wider spheres of influence.

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 the Council. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at the City of Wolverhampton Council were:

- Dr Carolyn Wilkins OBE – Chief Executive, Oldham Council
- Councillor Clyde Loakes (Lab) – Deputy Leader, London Borough of Waltham Forest
- Councillor Alan Jarrett (Cons) - Leader, Medway Council
- Ian Leivesley - Strategic Director Enterprise, Community & Resources, Halton Borough Council
- Colin Maclean – Chief Executive, Community Links Bromley
- Patricia McMahon – Adviser (Local Government Support), Local Government Association (LGA)
- Paul Clarke – Programme Manager (Peer Challenge), Local Government Association (LGA)

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These are the areas we believe are critical to council 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?

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 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. The City of Wolverhampton Council had a Corporate Peer Challenge in December 2014 and a Finance Peer Review in June 2016. Where relevant to do so, findings from those previous peer challenges have been referenced in this report.

The peer team prepared for this peer challenge by reviewing an extensive 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 onsite at the Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 130 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, reading and site visits.
- Collectively spent more than 260 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 7 weeks at the City of Wolverhampton.

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 (30th January – 2nd February 2017). In presenting feedback to the Council, 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 the Council is already aware of, is addressing, or is a work in progress.

4. Feedback

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?

The Council has a good understanding of the local context, a good grip on the current challenges, and has set out long term aspirations for the City. These are informed by an increasingly sophisticated range of data and analysis including GIS, heat-maps and use of insight information. This demonstrates the desire and determination to adopt a more intelligence-led approach to priority-setting, policy development and decision-making. The priorities set out in the Corporate Plan 2016-19 focussing on driving economic growth and building stronger communities make sense. The Plan articulates a range of outcomes residents and businesses can expect to see and experience by 2019/20. A longer term vision for the City is articulated in the Our Vision: Our City (Vision 2030) document, which was commissioned by the Council in consultation with the City Board.

Since the Corporate Peer Challenge in 2014, the Council has made some decisive, deliberate and direct interventions to respond to known challenges and deliver against its priorities. The emphasis has been on regenerating the city centre (as a catalyst for wider growth), transforming children’s services (to tackle rising demand and cost pressures) and challenging school performance (to raise standards and expectations). As a result there has been notable improvements and developments. A focus on earlier intervention and prevention has helped significantly reduce the number of Looked after Children (from 810 in 2013 to 635 in 2016). Direct intervention through Interim Executive Boards (IEBs) and a stronger partnership with schools has helped increase the numbers of ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ schools (now 85%). The creation of development ready sites and direct investment has enabled regeneration and inward investment into the City.

The Council recognises the importance of an improved reputation of both Council and City to enable continued delivery against plans and the realisation of ambitions. It has a stated priority to create a council that is ready and able to deliver change, and has worked hard on making this a reality. A sustained focus on strengthening financial management and the continued transformation of the Council into a more professional and commercial

organisation has helped increase trust, confidence and credibility across a range of stakeholders. They now see a more confident and capable council, with a growing track record of delivery.

The Peer Challenge in 2014 suggested community empowerment and co-production might need to be more prominent features of how the Council operates in the future. While recognising the raft of community consultation and engagement the Council has undertaken since then we think that, to an extent, this observation still stands. There is likely to be a need for the Council to consider how its future approach can better harness the capacity of all partnerships and relationships – starting with citizens - to jointly own and deliver a clear set of shared outcomes. This is about creating more of a ‘shared endeavour’ ethos so people can understand their role and contributions. Currently, the Corporate Plan and City Vision articulate what the Council will do, but there is little in either about expectations on citizens and what they can do for themselves to increase independence and decrease demand and reliance on the Council. Nor was it clear ‘how’ and ‘who’ from the City Board and wider partnerships would be leading on different aspects of the ‘City Vision’.

There is a need for a stronger and more consistent communication on the social value outcomes and impact for ‘Wulfrunians’ – particularly in terms of the physical regeneration and inward investment. Citizens need to appreciate the benefits to them of the physical improvements being made to the City. The previous Corporate Peer Challenge questioned whether there was enough integration and linkage between the ‘People’ (social) and ‘Place’ (economic) focussed plans. There is still a need, we think, to consider whether enough is being done to convey impacts and benefits for citizens and communities as well as the city.

Leadership of Place: Does the Council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?

The Council has been influential in driving leadership of place across the West Midlands and is considered to be a major player in the region. There is widespread recognition for the role of the Leader and Managing Director in driving the development of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) during its formative stages. Both have key current roles as regional lead member for transport and Monitoring Officer respectively. There is a good understanding of the importance of the City within the Black Country sub-region and the Council’s participation and contribution in the Association of Black Country Authorities and Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) is recognised and well-regarded.

Within the City there are clearly well-established partnerships and relationships with a range of organisations, agencies and businesses. Key private, public and voluntary sector partners – including the University, NHS Trust, Voluntary Sector Council, College, Police and business reps - come together as a City Board to consider and oversee plans to increase jobs and employment, improve educational outcomes, tackle health inequalities and reduce child poverty. There is a strengthened partnership with schools that is helping to drive up educational attainment at various levels including Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2 and GCSE.

The Council knows it has an important role in 'place-shaping', and has demonstrated clear leadership to drive investment and growth in the city. It has delivered this through direct investment, which has acted as a catalyst for bringing forward regeneration opportunities. Creating investment ready sites, providing a responsive planning system, pro-active marketing, and the offer of appropriate incentives have helped to bring about key developments and new jobs - including the i10 office development, continued development of the i54 enterprise zone, and the re-location of businesses such as Wiggle to the City. Looking ahead, the Council has a clear intent to improve the city centre offer, and enhance the City's train and tram links to Birmingham and the Black Country to exploit Wolverhampton's USP of connectivity.

The Council recognises that key to driving further growth is collaboration with the private, public and voluntary sectors. Under the umbrella of the City Board it has established a business-led Economic Growth Board and an employer-led Skills and Employment Board – both of which have programmes of work based on collective delivery. The Council has also set up the Wolverhampton Business Champions and is currently working with partners to explore the notion of a city budget and strategic economic plan for the city. The Council will want to consider how this collaborative approach can be applied across other service areas, and how relationships and leadership styles should evolve to enable more shared ownership of delivery, building on the buy-in to the city vision. It may also want to consider whether it has a potential future role to lead on public service reform – possibly across the wider footprint of the Black Country or WMCA area – to bring about more radical co-design.

We questioned whether there is sufficient connection between city leadership role of the council and the community leadership role provided by councillors at a more local neighbourhood level. The role of councillors is changing. Council leaders and cabinet members are increasingly focused beyond council boundaries, looking at conurbations and sub-regions. At the same time there is scope to devolve responsibilities to local communities, and reset the relationship with, and expectations of, citizens. Ward councillors will not only need to play different roles in their communities, but be able to illustrate a clear 'golden thread' and articulate the benefits at WMCA, City and neighbourhood level.

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?

The Council clearly benefits from strong organisational leadership, both political and managerial. This is based on good member/officer relationships. While the personal involvement and drive of the Managing Director and Leader were cited frequently as being instrumental to the Council's transformation, there is also a strength in depth with an accomplished and experienced strategic management team (SEB) and cabinet members who have a strong understanding of their portfolios. The Corporate Peer Challenge in 2014 suggested a need for more informal and iterative engagement between the political and managerial leadership and this is now happening.

The mechanisms for internal communication are ensuring staff feel informed, involved and engaged. Ideas and suggestions are regularly sought from staff through initiatives such as 100:100. The 2016 employee survey suggests nearly 80% of employees feel well-informed (up significantly from the 2014 score). We heard about a range of channels that are helping to convey a consistent message about the financial challenge and direction of travel. The 'City People' intranet, Core Brief, and regular briefings from the Managing Director were all mentioned positively.

The Council recognises the importance of good corporate governance as a cornerstone of a high-performing organisation. It is clearly committed to this and continues to invest to strengthen it further. There have been recent developments to improve the quality of, and access to, performance management information. The new 'Qlikview' system looks impressive and is providing managers access real-time information about service performance and financial management on a self-serve basis. It is a notable development. We know there are already plans to develop the performance management approach further, with an increased focus on outcomes and impact, and more use of business intelligence and predictive analysis.

Councillor-led scrutiny and challenge are seen as important elements of the overall governance culture of the organisation. There is regular monitoring of the revenue budget by Cabinet, and involvement of Scrutiny Panels in examining savings proposals. The Audit and Risk Committee appears to be working well and is focussing more on strategic risks. A recent review of the Overview and Scrutiny function will see an increase in the levels of support to the Scrutiny Board and Panels to enable more scrutiny reviews each year. A refocussing of the work programme will enable more emphasis on strategic issues and increased engagement from cabinet members. Performance measures are also being introduced to enable the impact of the function to be better monitored, understood and communicated.

The Council continues to invite regular external challenge to reality check plans and proposals, and test progress - as demonstrated by a number of external peer reviews commissioned during the past couple of years (e.g. Libraries Peer Challenge, a regional Adult Social Care Peer Challenge and LGA Finance Peer Review in 2016). It is also committed to engaging and consulting residents and stakeholders – for example the annual budget consultation – as a means of receiving challenge and comments on savings and income generation proposals.

There are well-developed business review practices and processes that are helping to support the C3 Transformation Programme to deliver improvement and efficiencies. This includes a robust and comprehensive corporate project management approach and support from a corporate team and central resource (e.g. Business Review Share point site) which provides discipline, structure and consistency. This is a good illustration of the strong corporate council, and culture of professional discipline and continuous improvement the leadership has worked hard to install across the Council. It has been an essential part of the approach that has seen the Council recover from the key risks and challenges it was facing only a couple of years ago.

The leadership's focus and energy has rightly been on recovery and stabilisation. This has enabled an impressive turnaround. It is not surprising the underlying purpose and

role of the Council and its operating model have not fundamentally changed during that time. The previous Corporate Peer Challenge suggested there would be a need to develop the understanding about the future purpose of the organisation. Now that much of the recovery work is done, or is being progressed, it may be timely to consider this further. It is likely the Council will need to adopt a different role and approach in order to successfully realise the longer term vision during a period of ongoing austerity.

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?

There is no doubt the financial situation has been stabilised over the past two years. The recent Finance Peer Review (June 2016) stated, 'it is clear there has been a period of significant and rapid improvement that has helped to put the Council on a better financial footing'. We concur with that assessment. It has been an impressive turnaround. However, the scale of the challenge remains significant. The current projected budget gap of £54.6 million by 2019/20 is approximately 25% of the current base budget. A report to Cabinet in October 2016 describes the extent of the financial challenge as being 'the most significant that the Council has ever faced.'

The Council does, though, appear to have a good grip and continues to respond with confidence, whilst not being complacent. Since the Peer Review, work has progressed to identify the proposals which will deliver the current projected budget deficit for 2017/18 of £23.5 million. Budget reduction and/or income generation amounting to £13.5 million have been consulted on. These (and other base budget revisions and savings of £10.0million) were due to be considered as part of the draft 2017/18 budget by Cabinet. The consultation has involved engagement with a range of stakeholders including business community, voluntary sector, youth council, Over 50s forum, trade unions and local communities.

The work continues to address the £30.4 million budget deficit currently forecast for 2018/19 and 2019/20. Commercialism and income generation are considered key facets of this. Fees and charges are reviewed annually. Beyond this the Council is clearly willing to embrace commercial approaches to generate revenue streams, with the i10 office and retail block, Yoo recruitment agency, and WV Active being examples of this. A wholly owned housing company is a more recent example, albeit at an early stage in its evolution, with its commercial function and potential not yet fully established. The Council should keep reviewing and defining what it means by 'commercial' and 'income generating' opportunities. Both should be more than simply reducing internal subsidies. It has recently commissioned external consultancy support (Grant Thornton) to help identify other potential options for further exploration and consideration. The Council should continue to look at what other places are doing on this and ensure energy is not wasted on developing ideas that will never secure political buy in to deliver.

The Finance Peer Review was undertaken in June 2016. As such, many of the positive observations provided remain current – including strengthened in-year financial and budget management, and a well-respected corporate finance team supported by strong leadership. The current approach, attitude and assumptions regarding the overachieving and/or early delivery of budget reductions is still a potential issue. They may make it

difficult to understand the true cost of providing services. In terms of the level of reserves available (which the Peer Review suggested might provide opportunities to support change and transformation, in the form of 'invest to save'), we know you have done work on this, including the review of specific reserves through a Scrutiny Working Group.

The Peer Review suggested the Council take stock and reflect on its overall financial strategy. This should include a clearer strategic narrative about investment to enable economic growth, commercialisation, new ways of working and reducing demand on services as being the ways in which the organisation will deliver its priorities while remaining financially viable and sustainable. The strategy needs to focus more on the future operating model and strengthen the connection between some of the facets of that, including:

- A strategic approach to investment that better connects the outcomes of physical regeneration to the revenue budget (i.e. impact on revenue base of the growth in the council tax base, increased business rates income, and costs of borrowing) and the social value return on the investment.
- New models of service delivery and partnership approach - identifying where in the system cost and benefits are realised so solutions are co-designed and outcomes are achieved in a cost effective way and help to reduce demand.
- Changing the profile of demand now and in the future and reducing demand and reliance on services (e.g. adult social care) through changing thresholds, early intervention, prevention activity and building community capacity and resilience.
- A continued and relentless focus on Value for Money (VfM) through procurement and commissioning (e.g. ensuring that whole life costs of care packages are part of the upfront consideration).
- Opportunities for commercialism and shared services such as investing to create sustainable revenue streams, trading companies, property management and reviewing fees/charges are constantly considered.

Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the Council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

We experienced a genuine 'One Council' ethos where cross departmental working, and professional support from a strong corporate centre, is seen as the norm. People clearly enjoy working for the Council and feel involved, empowered and valued. There is a sense of optimism, ambition and excitement about the future. It feels like a good and upbeat place to work. This is impressive - and even more so when you consider the scale and rapid pace of change (the workforce has decreased in size by 29% since 2012). The staff we met were positive, proud to work for the Council and enthusiastic advocates for both the organisation and city. This is an incredible asset for the organisation.

The Council is obviously committed to creating a skilled, flexible workforce who have a 'can-do' culture and demonstrate the organisation's core behaviours (PRIDE). There is a clear commitment to diversity (approximately 22% of the workforce is from an ethnic minority background) and providing opportunities for younger people. The investment in an apprenticeship scheme is notable – with some 121 planned opportunities in the next two years. In addition, the Council participates in the National Graduate Development Programme, and has supported more than a dozen graduates in the last three years – many of whom have secured positions within the workforce after the completion of their placements.

This is an impressive commitment to developing talent and creating a workforce profile that reflects the wider population of the city. There is now a need to further develop and accelerate the work underway to support workforce planning and development ensuring it is informed by, and aligned with, the future requirements of the organisation. The planned leadership development programme, core skills programme for managers and e-learning hub are all positive developments but are still a work in progress and at a relatively early stage. As it progresses its thinking further the Council may wish to draw on the research and learning from the recent work (by LGA, SOLACE, PPMA and University of Birmingham) on defining the 21st century public servant (and 21st century councillor).

While developing the Council's workforce is obviously critical, so too is the need to consider how the capacity, knowledge and expertise of the wider 'Wolves Workforce' can be better harnessed and leveraged. There is a willingness of partners, including the voluntary and community sector to do more in terms of contributing to the realisation of the outcomes articulated in the Corporate Plan and City Vision. Visitors, businesses and citizens all potentially have a role too. Councillors have an important role in harnessing community capacity and it is important the development of their roles is seen as part of the ongoing transformation of the organisation.

The Council recognises the potential to further evolve its approach to outcome-based commissioning to better harness the capacity and expertise of delivery partners (current and potential), to enable more innovation and co-creation. Earlier engagement about the problem or challenge, rather than fully formed specifications may need to become a more common feature. There may also be scope to increase 'commercial leverage' to deliver benefits beyond the bottom line of cost and VfM – such as social value and contribution to wider strategic priorities and outcomes. We know you are already beginning to embed this into approaches – e.g. the development of a City Charter (which sets out key principles that will underpin the commissioning and procurement activities of key partners in the City) and a requirement to deliver 10% social values from contracts valued £100k and over.

There may also need to be a resetting of expectations as regards pace and partnerships. Relationships with some partners and providers may need to evolve further. There is an obvious willingness from the Council to work with others - it rightly appreciates it won't be able to deliver its vision and priorities without the support, co-operation and capacity of others. It is important that the Council allows sufficient time to nurture new relationships and approaches. Some will take time to develop and mature. Given the pace at which the Council has progressed there is a danger its' expectations may be unrealistic and patience too limited.

There has obviously been some good early progress on the use of new technology and a 'digital by design' ethos that is helping to reduce bureaucracy and cost. The introduction of Agresso to streamline the processes supporting finance, human resources and procurement was frequently cited as a key improvement. We have already mentioned the introduction of Qlikview, and the drive for better insight information. More developments are planned as part of the Digital Transformation Programme to support and enable mobile and agile working, and improve the functionality and transactional capability of the Council website. All of this is undoubtedly helping to improve organisational performance and productivity. But we questioned whether the transformation potential and pace is sufficiently connected to the wider city vision in terms of digital inclusion and the aspiration to be a 'smart city'.

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. Helen Murray, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are: Email helen.murray@local.gov.uk and Tel. 07884 312235

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.

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 January 2022.