

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Warwick District Council

11th – 13th July 2023

Feedback report



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1. Executive summary

There is much to be proud of at Warwick District Council (WDC) and the Members and officers the peer team met demonstrated a passion for improving the District. Its ambitions around growth, regeneration and climate change are particularly impressive.

In the timing of this Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) the peer team recognise that WDC is in a period of transition following the recent elections in May 2023, with a new administration now in place. This is still in the very early stages of the new Council and WDC is in the process of pivoting to the aspirations of the new Cabinet for the forthcoming period. Relationships and ways of working are forming. Whilst early work has been undertaken on developing a new Corporate Strategy, the approach being taken needs to be set out and articulated more clearly so it is understood and shared by Members and officers to ensure any preparatory work undertaken is not divergent. The process must be politically-led and supported by officers.

There are some significant factors in the recent past which have left a legacy at the Council: the Covid-19 response and move to hybrid working; the Council's long standing and ongoing commitment to an office move; and the aborted merger between WDC and Stratford-on-Avon DC (SDC). The peer team underline the importance of not underestimating the impact of these on the workforce going forward.

The Council's ambition and its commitment to the District as a key player is valued and it is clearly an important partner to those the peer team spoke to. Partners spoke very highly of the visible role which the Council has. This is an ambitious Council with a wide programme of projects which it should rightly be celebrated for. Alongside the ambition, and the scale and breadth of projects being implemented, there is a concurrent increase in the level of financial risk exposure, meaning the importance of robust and effective governance is even more important. Establishing

a clear, transparent project evaluation process will help ensure that the ambitions that the Council has are assessed, prioritised, monitored, scrutinised and delivered in a way which achieve the best outcomes whilst maintaining effective corporate grip and oversight. In such circumstances the role of statutory officers, particularly the Monitoring Officer and s151 Officer are crucial in ensuring the Council does not over-extend itself and gets the balance right between risk and reward.

WDC's financial position is complex. This is not unlike many councils but given the complexity of the work it is doing, particularly around economic growth and housebuilding, further work can be done to ensure transparency and understanding of the Council's financial position in order to facilitate decision-making and effective risk management.

The Council has recently introduced a new performance management process, and this is a first building block for providing an essential overview and analysis of WDC's service delivery. However, this is currently underdeveloped, lacks maturity in the use of information and deserves some further attention to ensure it can support the services to achieve expected standards and outcomes. By strengthening the Council's corporate core and investing in building capacity, capability and processes WDC can be assured it has "brilliance in the basics" which will fully support the higher profile projects.

In the context of wider sector workforce pressures, the peer team recognises that WDC has some innovative ideas and tools, but a more substantial intervention is required to address the challenges with recruitment and retention of staff. The peer team heard from staff how the aborted merger with SDC has had an impact on organisational stability and the predominance of remote working, whilst effective, appears to have weakened organisational connections further. The Council's plan to move to the new offices is an opportunity, and the establishment of a more balanced hybrid working model, emphasising the continuing importance of 'face to face' working, alongside remote, can be used as a catalyst for the reinvigoration of the 'heart' of WDC, and restoration of the "Warwick Way" identity and its credentials as

an attractive employer.

2. Key recommendations

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

2.1 Recommendation 1

Invest time in developing the relationships and ways of working between the new administration and the senior officer team to build a shared understanding of new corporate priorities and how they will be delivered

2.2 Recommendation 2

Consider and set out clearly the Corporate Strategy development process, with clear timescales for completion and consideration of how the organisation's 'golden thread' will be established to ensure effective delivery

2.3 Recommendation 3

Build on the existing processes to further strengthen and ensure transparent and robust governance. Ensure that there is a clear politically-led process for identifying and delivering priorities and sufficient capacity and authority to manage the level of risk of the organisation. Review the effectiveness of the Programme Advisory Boards, and replicate good sectoral practice such as establishing formal, regular statutory officer meetings

2.4 Recommendation 4

Consider how to establish a clearer narrative in reports and briefings regarding the Council's financial position which aids understanding and decision making across the organisation. Clarifying the assumptions driving good financial management, decision making and determining the need for savings are particularly important

2.5 Recommendation 5

Ensure that whatever ambitions the Council may have are balanced with the need to ensure sufficient focus and grip on the performance of core service delivery and

“brilliance in the basics”

2.6 Recommendation 6

Invest in the ‘corporate core’ establishing dedicated resource for performance, risk, project management, and policy development and transformation

2.7 Recommendation 7

Review and further develop the Council’s Corporate Performance Framework, ensuring performance information can be used effectively to support service, corporate and public needs and as a vehicle to inform decision making, celebrate success and support risk identification and service improvement

2.8 Recommendation 8

Consider the standard pay rates and the influence and impact these may have on addressing workforce challenges

2.9 Recommendation 9

Use the move to the new offices to redefine the identity of the Council, ‘the Warwick Way’ to reinvigorate the corporate ‘heart’ of the organisation. Central to this will be establishing a framework for hybrid working which provides clarity and expectations and maximises the benefits and balance of home/remote/office working

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1 The peer team

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

- Edd de Coverly (CEX, Melton BC)
- Cllr Zoe Nicholson (Leader, Lewes DC)
- Cllr Alyson Barnes (Leader, Rossendale BC)
- Lukman Patel (CEX designate, Burnley BC)

- Caroline Ryba (Chief Finance Officer, Cambridge City Council)
- Deborah Johnson (Director of Customer Services and Organisational Development, Newark and Sherwood DC)
- James Millington (Peer Challenge Manager, LGA)

3.2 Scope and focus

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

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

In addition to these questions, the Council asked the peer team to provide some thoughts on its workforce challenges: 'to recruit and retain the right people to join the Council to develop an organisation that is fit for the future'.

3.3 The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by

people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days onsite at WDC, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
- Spoke to more than 100 people including a range of Council staff together with members and external stakeholders

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

4. Feedback

4.1 Local priorities and outcomes

At the time of the CPC the recent elections had resulted in a change from a no overall control Conservative and Independent context to a no overall control Green and Labour administration. This is important background for this CPC and particularly the peer team's reflections on the Council's priorities, set out below.

The Council's Business Strategy 2020-23 which articulated WDC's vision for the District "to make Warwick District a great place, to live, work and visit, and carbon neutral by 2030" was clearly set out – with the Council's climate ambitions writ large. The change in administration following the election is still very recent but work has started on developing a new Corporate Strategy, which will be the cornerstone of WDC for the forthcoming period and central to the allocation of resources. The peer team heard how the process for developing this was not wholly aligned and therefore felt it would be helpful for the Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) to pause on the work which has been done to date, and first focus on agreeing a

process and timescale which is owned and understood by Cabinet, officers and wider Members. A clearer plan which WDC can articulate is important and investing time to do this collaboratively is vital.

Externally, WDC is viewed positively as a shaper of place which is making an impressive impact and is '*punching above its weight*' according to partners. The Council is seen as delivering for its communities and the peer team heard about the entrepreneurial spirit of WDC. This has served the Council well and officers and Members are proud of these achievements. This has included WDC taking opportunities to creatively attract funding to deliver its priorities, for instance in securing £10.7M from the Future High Streets Fund to support projects to regenerate areas within Leamington Spa, improve connectivity and repurpose the Town Hall. There is an impressive regeneration and affordable house building programme which WDC is leading on, adding housing stock to the District, which is making an important positive contribution to the place and its communities.

WDC demonstrates an appetite for rising to the challenge and taking on new and exciting projects – with 47 current projects referenced to the peer team. The Council is ambitious for the place and this should be commended. Given the scale of this, additional consideration about the capacity of the Council to deliver this is needed. The process by which projects are identified, and evaluated against political and corporate priorities would benefit from further review as this is not always clear to those the peer team spoke with. Establishing and communicating a clear process will be transparent and lead to greater understanding and assurance that WDC is not being stretched too thinly, and help secure wider buy-in from Members, officers and other stakeholders. The conversations now taking place with the new administration around priorities presents a good opportunity to do this.

The emphasis given to the monitoring of day-to-day core service delivery was less clear to the peer team. Recognising that the current system is in its first year, performance management is not as developed and embedded as it could be. For example, the peer team heard frustrations around service responsiveness from some

stakeholders around housing repairs and green space – which can be fairly typical at other councils too - but without sufficient data analysis and benchmarking it is more difficult for the Council to answer whether it is delivering a good level of performance, and to be able to communicate that clearly. A more mature and sophisticated framework would allow WDC to celebrate the things it is doing well, as well as identify those which it may wish to pay closer attention to. This will provide assurance on its day-to-day core delivery and provide opportunities to make conscious judgements about the level of service which it is aiming to provide.

The LGA's [LG Inform](#) can be utilised as part of this to explore data for benchmarking with other areas and provide important information for WDC to evaluate service delivery. For instance, reviewing the performance of [WDC services compared with its CiPFA near neighbour councils](#) (accessed Sept 2023 – figures correct at time) shows:

- WDC is performing well against the measure of the numbers of minor planning applications processed on time (98%) and is above the average for the group (86%), but is performing less well on the processing of major applications (80% decided on time) compared with the average (96%). *Figures for Q4 of 22/23.*
- The Council is performing well against the measure of the total number of households on the waiting list at 1449 compared to the average of 1745; and the numbers of households in temporary accommodation 1.2 per 1,000 households (compared with 1.45 per 1,000 households average for the group). *Figures for Q3 of 22/23.*
- WDC is a ranked third highest (5 days) for the mean time taken to process housing benefits claims and change events – the average is 4 days. *Figures for Q4 2022/23.*

Measures from this LGInform report are an example, and not all of the performance metrics in the report will be suitable, and indeed the Council may have more up to date figures to include, but WDC may wish to continue to explore its performance and benchmarking further in this way. This information and other measures can

provide a valuable contribution to the Council's performance framework and assist its approach in evaluating and improving service delivery. Also in the context of the Office for Local Government, now is a good time for WDC to ensure it reflects this in the progression of its performance framework.

The Council has a clear focus on working with community partners. The peer team heard about the valued role it has in supporting the third sector, in developing four community hubs and embedding Community Development Workers within the Housing Team. This aspect of Council work is important to it and investing in its communities in this way with partners is a good illustration of how it is collaborating well with local agencies.

The peer team consider the Council is particularly innovative and sector leading in its focus on addressing climate change. This is core to the ambitions of WDC and anchored in its declaration of a Climate Emergency in 2019. The commitment to this resulted in a Climate Change Action Programme (CCAP), where WDC undertook a 10 session Citizens Jury (People's Inquiry) to help identify the priorities, with progress reported to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Activity through this agenda is impressive and underpins a lot of WDC's thinking, permeating a huge amount of its activity. For instance, this can be seen in: the ambitions of the Local Plan for 'a climate resilient and net zero carbon South Warwickshire'; development of a hydrogen hub; an extensive 160,000 tree planting programme; development of cycle infrastructure; a planning policy requirement of Net Zero Carbon buildings; developing new low carbon council homes; and establishing an advice service for residents around retrofitting properties to reduce energy costs and carbon. There is much that the sector can learn from WDC on this and the Council should champion its approach further for others to learn from.

4.2 Organisational and place leadership

The CEX and Deputy CEX are experienced and well respected – both strategically and operationally – and the peer team heard this numerous times from colleagues

and stakeholders. The Leader has also quickly established himself as supportive and professional, and is working with the Cabinet who are keen to establish their priorities and strengthen service delivery. The peer team felt there were good ingredients in place at this formative stage of the new Council for moving forward positively and productively.

There are strong and collaborative external partnerships in place which are delivering positive outcomes for the District. When asked to reflect on the Council, partners from the County Council, VCS, Police and Health felt that *“for the size of the authority they have done some seriously impressive things”* and were *“very committed to doing things collaboratively”*. WDC is viewed positively by this range of key partners and it was obvious that the Council is making an effort to work together for the benefit of its communities. For instance, individual partners respected the contribution WDC makes to the place agenda, including through the CEX’s role as co-chair of the South Warwickshire Place Board and the Council’s role in establishing the Leamington Transformation Board – with an independent chair. These strong partnerships are making a tangible difference locally, for example in attracting Government funding.

There are also good relationships with other districts within the County and these have continued to improve since Covid-19. SDC also remains an important partner, through the Local Plan and shared services, notwithstanding the impact of the merger with SDC which did not proceed. The peer team heard a great deal about the legacy of the aborted merger during the course of the CPC.

A huge amount has happened to WDC over the last few years. This has included: the Covid-19 response and move to hybrid working which the Council has embraced; the ongoing office move which is impending; and the aborted merger between WDC and SDC. Following discussions with staff the peer team would remind WDC to not underestimate the ongoing impact of these factors on the organisation and the stability of the Council. Cumulatively these factors have created, in some areas, a feeling of a level of insecurity, and lack of connection with the organisation. For instance, the peer team heard this is impacting on staff retention as a consequence

of the aborted merger where staff have chosen to leave the organisation.

For WDC there have been many advantages in hybrid working. For staff this has included opportunities for an improved work/life balance and utilising online tools for collaboration. However, there is a consequence to this which is impacting on the connectedness and the sense of identity across WDC. From conversations the peer team had, the Council appears to feel something more like a remote working model, with occasional interaction, instead of hybrid. Staff do not feel the value or benefit of being in the office as the current office is largely vacant due to the impending move so the opportunities of working and meeting together face-to-face are lost. Staff felt there was currently a lack of a 'core' and place for officers to connect to, and with one another, and the impact of this is eroding the sense of shared identity. The view of an absence of a framework which validates the best of both virtual and face-to-face interactions is something which needs to be addressed to support both manager and staff wellbeing and ways of working. The peer team are not suggesting bringing staff back into the office and losing the benefits of hybrid working but WDC may want to consider how communications and opportunities to meet face-to-face through staff meetings, get togethers, or social events might rebuild the sense of wider community. Staff told the peer team they would appreciate this.

Connected to this, the peer team heard from staff that "*who we are and what we offer is not clear at the moment*". There is an opportunity to reconsider the identity and narrative of WDC in 'the Warwick Way' and explore this further with staff. People were expressing a diminution of the clarity of identity which WDC had previously enjoyed. This is not uncommon to other organisations following Covid-19 but does need to be considered.

The peer team heard mixed perspectives on the Council's communications – with positive views on the internal mechanisms such as the 'Five Things', Big Button and the Chief Executive and Leader's Weekly Update - but there was a suggestion that "*news can feel massaged*" and that staff feel key events are not always fully explained in a way which makes sense to them. This was most clearly expressed to

the peer team in reference to the aborted merger, where the explanation provided as to why this did not proceed was perceived by some to not be rational, with significant financial implications, and as a consequence has led to some staff expressing anxieties that WDC could be capable of making other irrational decisions in future. A huge Council effort and focus towards the merger was made over an extended period and its failure to move forward is still impacting today. Staff raised this with the peer team consistently, with some relief that the merger didn't progress but also an uncertainty in the future. WDC may want to consider the impact of this and the lessons learned to make sure that the issues which arose from this are not repeated in the future.

In moving forward on many of these areas the peer team recognise there is a clear opportunity in the significance of moving to a new building. This presents a catalyst to reinvigorate the 'heart of the organisation' and reset the corporate narrative. WDC can think carefully about how the new building can feel like a place which is the heart of the Council and how staff and residents can interact in a meaningful way.

4.3 Governance and culture

The peer team heard that there are productive and respectful Member to Member relationships, recognising that it is still in the early period since the elections and some of the relationships are new – there were 22 new councillors elected, representing almost 50% of the Council. The peer team were encouraged to hear what has worked well over the previous four year period where without exception colleagues spoke about this being a collaborative time, with activity progressed largely by consensus with efforts made by Members to move forwards together. The peer team would encourage WDC to reflect on the consensus built through the last Council and the positives of this to take forward.

The peer team heard that scrutiny has been effective and that there was positive support for chairs of committees, who are engaged in their briefs and have cross-

party support. WDC had developed Programme Advisory Boards (PABs), comprised of backbench Members from all parties to provide advice to the portfolio holder about policies, projects or work areas. The peer team heard mixed feedback on the effectiveness of these. Established in the previous Council the PAB's ambition was to forge a more collegiate approach and although the original intention was clear, now would be a good time to review how they could work and be more effective, for instance considering the political balance or a task and finish type approach. The peer team recognise this will need cross-party support and would encourage group leaders to work together to continue to foster a collaborative approach.

WDC established a Leadership Coordinating Group which identified core mandatory training for all councillors. Members were generally positive about the Council's support and also the induction process which followed the recent elections, with a sense that councillors are supported well in their roles.

The peer team heard there are good Member - officer relationships, with colleagues speaking well of how they work with one another. Good relationships are key and investing time in building these is important for any Council following a change of administration. In this early stage of the new administration the peer team would encourage the WDC Member and officer leadership team to spend time together to further develop relationships as an effective top team – by meeting face-to-face and building a shared understanding of the future agenda together. There is also value in reviewing the structure and processes to support the new Cabinet Members in their roles and understanding their expectations, including a programme of ongoing support and engagement that is necessary between the Cabinet and officers.

Important to all councils, and especially so due to the external ambitions of WDC, is strong and robust governance. This may benefit from some additional attention due to the impending departure of the experienced MO, so that it supports the new MO and the Council's relatively new s151 Officer. The Council should ensure it continues to recognise the authority and importance of its Statutory Officers in the CEX, s151 and MO. These roles discharge functions that are critical in securing good

governance for the Council and ensuring they have sufficient authority to challenge is important. With the recent personnel changes it would now be a good time to ensure this is reinforced, and widely understood. Formal meetings of 'the golden triangle' of Statutory Officers is considered to be best practice in ensuring they have time to discuss the corporate health of the organisation regularly.

The peer team heard about effective relationships with key partners and good management relationships with Everyone Active as its leisure contractor and Biffa as the waste contractor, through a joint contract with SDC. The peer team felt this could be built on further and more could be done to foster corporate connections which other parts of WDC may benefit from. WDC may want to consider its contract management arrangements are sufficiently robust and transparent for its needs, as currently there does not appear to be a formal approach for corporate or Member oversight.

The Council's ambition for the District should rightly be celebrated. However, given its exposure to debt and economic pressures this inevitably increases the level of risk WDC is exposed to compared with other councils. This finding is not to stunt its ambition but WDC should acknowledge and be clearer about this, as the peer team felt that it is not always clear how the Council can satisfy itself that it is not overreaching. There was not clarity around how the Council will know whether there is 'one project too many', making it harder to assess at which point things may become unsustainable. The peer team think there is benefit with increasing the robustness of WDC's risk management, as corporately this appears to be working well but more focus could be placed to ensuring service-level and overall management of risk is sufficiently robust. WDC will want to maintain a close oversight and overview of risk to ensure that it is not placing itself in a vulnerable position.

This is also significant as the peer team heard from staff that a key reason for why the planned merger did not go ahead from WDC's point of view was largely due to a perceived difference in culture in the two councils' approach to risk. Following the

aborted SDC merger, whilst some positive collaboration continues, there is an opportunity to reframe what happened and move the conversation away from being about the 'clash of cultures', to instead the potential for learning from each other and the experience. Staff the peer team spoke to would value this. For instance, there may be some learning around risk which WDC may be able to take from SDC and there may be other aspects of WDC's work which could be shared with SDC.

4.4 Financial planning and management

The Council has good controls in place in relation to finance and Members and officers are focused on meeting the financial challenges. The MTFS presents a likely forecast deficit of £1.290M for 2022/23 and £3.624M for 2023/24, and while it has been possible to balance the budget in these years through the use of available reserve balances, recurrent savings of £1.5M still need to be delivered, with a peak deficit of £4.334M in 2024/25. WDC has the principles agreed for its change management programme and now these need to be brought to life and put into action. The principles of the financial approach were agreed with the previous administration and will now need to be discussed with the new administration.

WDC has a strong reserves position, with earmarked reserves of £23.3M and a general fund reserve of £2.7M - totalling £26M. This level of reserves provides the Council with some assurance as to its financial resilience, but the use of reserves to balance the budget underlines the message about ensuring a sustainable future. There is good understanding of the one-off nature of reserves and plans for their use to deliver and replenishment in the short to medium term.

The Council's finances are well managed but there is a challenge around the clarity of understanding across the organisation. From the people the peer team spoke to there is no shared understanding on the financial position of the Council. WDC should consider how to achieve this and the benefits of reviewing and implementing a clear financial framework for budget setting, reporting and decision-making. Given

the Council's level of risk and exposure to debt - which is high compared to others - WDC needs to ensure there is a clarity and consistency of understanding so that Members are presented with full and relevant evidence-based information, and options and impact are fully explained. This will enable them to make good decisions. Reports that 'tell the story' in a clear, concise and simple way and support the figures with a narrative would be beneficial.

A requirement for recurring savings has been identified. However, the need for savings, as currently articulated in the MTFs, is not universally recognised and understood by those we met. WDC should consider reviewing the underpinning assumptions for MTFs development, ensuring that the impact of each is understood by officers and Members, and that the resulting savings requirement reflects the risk appetite of the Council. Scenario planning can help assist in the understanding of the level of risk within the MTFs, and to set out the range of possible savings required. Clarifying the position so it is less complex and better understood is more likely to result in good policy and resourcing decisions. As plans are not yet in place to deliver these savings, the peer team would encourage more work to be done to identify savings and plan for their delivery.

The Council's strategic delivery on growth is supporting the financial pressures it is facing and WDC has been successful through the growth agenda in securing additional income. This includes the innovative approach to income generation alongside the provision of social, affordable and private-owned and rented housing. But these recent developments, including the Housing Investment Programme and the partnership with Countryside Partnerships and Local Housing Company, Milverton Homes, to enable the building of 620 homes, has increased the Council's financial complexity and risk. On-going issues with the financial management system which has been flagged by the external auditor also add to these risks. In this context WDC should consider whether its finance function is adequately resourced, skilled and experienced to support the Council in the light of these emerging risks.

There is a lack of clear understanding of the Council's financial position and WDC

may want to think about how it handles assumptions and how finances are managed and monitored throughout the year. There appears to be inconsistency of budget monitoring, forecasting and management, with overspends forecast and near balance achieved at outturn. The peer team recognise that there are reasons for this, but it may be worthwhile considering reinforcing budget management as part of a manager's role, providing more training and support for forecasting and implementing the forecasting module of the financial management system. This may also help Members to better understand the position and provide increased clarity on the budget position.

4.5 Capacity for improvement

Staff which the peer team met were dedicated to public service – there is a strong sense of duty and commitment, and there was a highly engaged and pro-active group of middle managers who are an asset to the team and are capable to deliver and drive improvement. The peer team met with committed and knowledgeable staff from across WDC. This is the Council's greatest asset and places it in a good position for the future. There were no consistent major issues raised to the peer team around the workforce being under significant pressure and struggling day-to-day. Whilst officers are busy there does not appear to be an issue with insufficient capacity or staff being completely overwhelmed. The resourcing within teams appears to be acceptable, notwithstanding that there will be pressure points at certain times during the year which the Council will need to continue to balance.

The Council is pragmatic on the use of external support and brings in professional advisors when required to de-risk projects as part of its agenda. This was evident where WDC engaged Trowers to advise on establishing the joint venture and Bevans to advise around Milverton Homes. This demonstrates a maturity of the organisation in managing this activity.

WDC will want to keep the position regarding staff capacity and the need to bring in external support under close review, particularly in the context of its ambitious growth

agenda, the aspirations of a new administration and the desire to deliver its change programme. Consideration needs to be given as to whether the resources and requisite skills are within the Council to manage this and if not the plans for managing this.

The peer team heard that there has been investment in the ICT programme development resource at the Council but we heard examples of underused systems (iTrent) and an absence of corporate support. As part of the Council's change programme the peer team encourage WDC to continue with this transformation and capitalise on how this will support the organisation in delivering improved outcomes.

The peer team feel that in supporting WDC in its future ambitions and improvement there is an underdeveloped corporate core. This is evidenced through an absence of corporate team/group that concentrates on performance data and analysis, policy, transformation and risk. There has been an absence of this at WDC since 2010 when lack of available funding led to a reduction in this area but reinvestment in a small resource would help with the establishment of processes for the Council to keep a close hold on service delivery at the same time as delivering its big projects. There are decisions to make around this as there are pros and cons on having a centralised or more distributed support, and WDC will want to consider what is right for the Council.

As mentioned previously, WDC has recently introduced an updated performance framework and it will want to look further at building on this. This will help better inform Members and services to understand performance, and help identify capacity/skills challenges and gaps and support evidence based decision-making. The peer team has not found evidence to suggest that WDC services are not working, but equally has not been able to identify and test this sufficiently as there are challenges in the level and sophistication of the information currently used. The peer team has heard from managers and teams they are keen to do more, but are currently lacking the systems and processes in place for this. Consideration of how to: gather and present this; communicate in an engaging way to officers and

Members in order to drive improvement; and how to utilise the performance framework for multiple forums will benefit from some further thought. The use of scorecards may be helpful here.

The peer team heard that WDC is a '*comfortable place*' to work with staff valuing support they are provided with and others expressing views that the organisation is not challenging all staff equally. WDC may want to consider this further in the context of its capacity for improvement in terms of the balance between supporting the organisation and caring for its staff at the same time as having high expectations around progress and improvement. Higher expectations may exist more evidently within the delivery of projects but this appears to be less visible within services as there appears to be inconsistency in approaches to performance management across WDC. Staff felt that it would be helpful if there was a clearer direction on this from SLT.

WDC asked that the CPC team provide feedback on the Council's workforce challenges 'to recruit and retain the right people to join the Council to develop an organisation that is fit for the future'.

Culture, Morale and Ways of Working

Staff feel a sense of job satisfaction and they identify as dedicated public servants who feel a real affinity to those they serve. However, they do feel 'bruised' following the aborted merger and there has been a loss of trust as they feel it was put to them as being essential for to the financial future of WDC, yet as it didn't proceed and the Council appears financially sustainable, staff are uncertain about what the future holds.

Hybrid working at WDC has been reported to range from no one being mandated to attend the office to having to respond to deliver to business need. Staff feel that the hybrid approach is not working for everyone, the framework to work to is not widely known and they are looking for more direction. Some middle managers also felt they

were compromising on business need to meet the flexible system which a significant proportion felt was too flexible.

Staff feel that the current office space at Riverside House is tired, uninspiring and as it is due to be vacated soon is not now operating as a welcoming building. A significant proportion of staff came into the office only occasionally and found it empty and staff the peer team spoke to currently did not have a positive impression of the impact of the move to a new building.

Recruitment and Retention

The HR and Communications Team are small but dedicated and their enthusiasm, knowledge and skills are apparent. The team has a well thought out and ambitious plan to reinvigorate the organisation around recruitment and retention, as well as a wider wellbeing agenda. This excellent work needs to be continually reinforced by all members of the senior management team. WDC may want to consider whether there is sufficient capacity of HR to manage the change and support the organisation.

WDC is behind the curve in some areas, having only relatively recently moved to the iTrent platform from a paper based system. It is acknowledged that this system could provide much more for the team and the organisation but this will need development. As mentioned previously, whether sitting within the HR and Communications Team or as a wider consideration of a 'corporate core' resource there is a gap in terms of business/data analysis. It is difficult to be sure whether the actions in the plan will solve the issues identified as there is no data to accurately define them.

Recruitment and retention issues are sector wide. WDC is currently running at over 17% staff turnover. Whilst this is higher than ideal, it reflects only the top end of a normal band – current data shows around 15%. The difficulty sits below this overarching picture, where without the data and analysis which would identify if this is evenly split across WDC or whether any particular areas of service have higher rates,

it is difficult to analyse. This data along with statistics around the number of applicants for each role and number of roles with zero appropriate applicants would provide a richer picture to measure the action plan and the success it achieves. This data should become available to the Council as it develops the iTrent system.

WDC can look at how it can leverage its reputation as a good partner to work with to address collective challenges. For instance, WDC is not able alone to solve the issues around a lack of professionals in particular areas, such as Planning and there may be opportunities to address this with other districts and partners to do this collaboratively, for instance through building on some of what WDC is doing already and developing planning academies and apprenticeships.

Recruitment and Retention/People Strategy

The peer team was asked to review the Action Plan and consider if it is missing any key elements. The plan is comprehensive but the following observations and recommendations may be considered:

- **Pay** - is a sector wide issue, however WDC appears to pay a lower rate than other councils in some areas, e.g. planning. Although completed fairly recently, a further benchmarking exercise could be helpful as the fundamental basic pay will be key to showcasing WDC as an employer of choice. WDC has already done some work around incremental progression but there is more that it may wish to do to compete more effectively with others, within the boundaries of affordability and in line with the sectoral approach.
- **Staff engagement** – the importance of understanding staff voice is crucial and the plan suggests a range of ways in which WDC fulfils this. The Council undertakes a number of wellbeing surveys and this has good support and there is an imaginative tool kit for supporting recognition and engagement (e.g., Applause Box). However, the services which have the greatest number of employees are repeatedly the areas where there is least engagement in survey responses, for instance 117 employees within the Housing Service with only 21 completing the survey, which equates to 18%. It is necessary to understand the views of both Housing and Place/Arts/Economy teams and this could involve the HR team

visiting those areas. It is noted that those teams with a base in the corporate head office are those that consistently are more engaged.

- **Job families** – the reasons WDC are considering using this approach are well thought out and articulated. However, the actual categories may need expanding around the manager definition – there will be a number of levels of managers including supervisors and team leaders. This also presents a good opportunity to review naming conventions of roles.
- **Market supplements** – these are a way of trying to recruit to a role to attract candidates, however, whilst WDC would give the same supplement to anyone already occupying that specific role it could cause friction with similar but not identical roles. Also, where there is a key member of staff likely to seek alternative employment a retention payment could be considered, this should be on the basis of performance related retention, again this is more difficult where there are a number of staff in one role and a level of confidentiality when using this would be recommended.
- **Equality and Diversity** – WDC has set out that it wants to make a meaningful approach to recruiting in a way which helps it to better reflect the diversity of the community it serves. Some significant effort has been made to promote the completion of equality monitoring forms. However, it is legally something which can only be voluntary to complete and it is unlikely that any further effort will improve the number of returns. Instead, WDC can review the latest census data and use judgement as to where the Council's makeup does not match. WDC can use this to make specific changes to where and how job vacancies are advertised to attract applicants. For instance, often local community groups who match the underrepresented groups are the ideal place to forward adverts to for sharing, alongside the more traditional channels.

5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a six-month check-in session, which provides space for the Council's senior leadership

to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, Helen Murray, Principal Adviser for the West Midlands, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Helen is available to discuss any further support the Council requires via helen.murray@local.gov.uk.