

Chris Elliot
Chief Executive
Warwick District Council
Riverside House
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12th October 2018

Dear Chris,

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Follow Up visit 11th October 2018

Following the original LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in July 2016 Warwick District Council (WDC) asked the Peer Team to make a follow up visit to help review and assess progress and development in response to the original feedback and recommendations. This visit took place on 11th October 2018.

This letter summarises the main observations of the Peer Team. The peers 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 during their visit.

Process and peer team

Peer challenge is one of the key tools to support sector-led improvement. It is tailored to meet individual councils' needs, and designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. The Peer Team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.

The follow up visit included members of the Peer Team who were involved in the original CPC:

- Lorraine Norris, former Chief Executive, Preston City Council
- Cllr Paul James, Leader, Gloucester City Council
- Jackie Yates, Director of Resources, Reading Borough Council
- James Millington, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

The focus of the follow-up was to assess progress and developments in response to the peer challenge feedback and recommendations from the 2016 CPC:

1. Consider an externally facilitated Away Day event for Executive and SMT
2. Ensure Executive portfolio holders own and drive agreed priorities, and are held accountable for delivery of the strategic outcomes
3. Engage with the wider local government and public sector to explore commercial opportunities and learn more about examples of approaches and practice

4. Review the skill sets and capacity internally to deliver ambitions (including commercial, commissioning, procurement, project and contract management and customer insight).
5. Move at pace to deliver the work in progress
6. Work with local partners to agree how to work together better
7. Continue 'horizon scanning', particularly in relation to emerging regional landscape regarding devolution:
 - a) Articulate its rationale and reasoning for current position regarding the West Midlands Combined Authority
 - b) Keep a watching brief on the rapidly evolving developments and keep its position under review

To inform their findings, the Peer Team spent one day on site at WDC, during which they spoke to around 30 people including a range of council officers, councillors and external partners. The team gathered information and views from more than 10 meetings.

We would like to thank you for inviting us back to Warwick to provide further challenge to the Council and we hope that our feedback below helps to support continuous improvement.

Overall messages and observations

Overall the Council has made good progress in taking forward the recommendations that the Team made in 2016. On our visit we heard Warwick described as "a Borough with great ideas, aspirations and ambition... that punches above its weight". This includes its intention to make the most of the opportunity in being selected to host Lawn Bowls as part of the 2020 Commonwealth Games and continuing to maximise the economic opportunities it has through 'Silicon Spa'/Creative Quarter, where good progress is being made including procuring a development partner and completing a masterplan. We would encourage you to continue to make the most of what you have, recognising the strengths you have as a place and as a Council.

To make the best use of the resources available the Team would encourage WDC to focus on a smaller defined number of priorities and projects for immediate delivery impact. We know that this is recognised by the Council and we would encourage you to go through this process and ensure this is communicated clearly to staff and partners. There is a sense that, at times, projects "come from left field" and the Council "jumps at things". While it is important to consider opportunities that arise, this needs to be done as part of a proper decision-making process in the knowledge that the delivery of other priorities will be affected as a result.

The Peer Team heard from both members and officers about the supportive work environment and that colleagues are "courteous, helpful and approachable". The award of the Silver accreditation of the Investors in People standard demonstrated the Council's commitment to supporting staff to achieve their potential. There was also clear evidence of how members care about the people who live in the Borough and we heard about the strong relations officers and members have between the County and the District and there is a desire to continue to widen and increase this contact, particularly in relation to members. Good relations are also evidenced in the use of shared Legal Services between the District and County and we heard how this is working well.

The Peer Team recognised that the Council has followed through on most of the

recommendations from the 2016 CPC. This was evidenced in the reading provided to the Peer Team ahead of the visit and the conversations which took place on site. There were some areas which the Peer Team felt would benefit from an increased focus and were described in the presentation provided on-site on 11th October which made a number of suggestions and recommendations for consideration by the Council, and these are outlined in more detail below:

The Council has ambition to deliver for the District. In order to support delivery the Peer Team recommend gaining agreement and focus between the Executive and Corporate Management Team (CMT) on the key priorities and projects. This will be critical for successful delivery. A number of key priorities are articulated by the leadership team and these include Europa Way, Phase 2 of the leisure contract and the Council Office Relocation. However the Peer Team's on-site discussions suggested there were other priorities articulated at different levels within the organisation, so there may be further work to do to focus in and communicate Warwick's priority areas.

Further clarity on priorities would also assist with focussing resources. The Peer Team recommend considering how the prioritisation of priorities and projects can be undertaken at a strategic level which could then lead to a discussion on resourcing and ensuring capacity is in place. You can then be clear on the resourcing implications for projects and consequences for the existing programme of work for undertaking additional activity. This can also extend to considering the allocation of senior officers to drive forward projects. For instance, the Asset Management Strategy is still to be completed and this would benefit from ensuring resources are deployed in order to finalise this work – as continuing to return to this and restarting may necessitate retreading previously completed activity.

To support delivery, the Peer Team felt that the Executive would benefit from receiving accessible and regular reporting on the progress of key priority projects. Reports should provide high level commentary at the start, as well as the detail, to keep members well briefed. This will keep the Council sighted on delivery. The Peer Team noted that the Council makes a wealth of information available but it may want to consider how it can present this in different ways, for instance through the use of infographics. The Council may wish to consider the approach taken in other areas and Cllr James would be happy to share the experience and practice at Gloucester City Council in more detail.

To help the Council remain focused on delivery the Team recommend that CMT and SMT undertake regular joint horizon scanning to ensure you are not blown off track and to manage the pinch points in the delivery of the strategic priorities. The Team heard about the pausing of projects due to shifting and emerging priorities. Further developing the Council's approach to incorporate a gantt chart to clearly articulate dependencies and resource implications would assist the Council in its decision making. WDC may find it useful to regularly spend some time looking at their resourcing demands and where there are multiple demands on particular areas of the business, and even individual officers, it would enable the Council to consider what the consequences of this may be for delivery and what it may want to do to manage the impact of changes.

The Peer Team were pleased to hear how WDC has intentions to operate in an increasingly more commercial way. The procurement of Phase 1 of the leisure contract is a particularly good example of where this has worked well. Following on from the observations made in the 2016 CPC the Team does think that there remains a need to further define what commercialisation means for Warwick. The Team recommend that you focus on where the Council wants to position itself in regard to this and which models you wish to explore in more detail. To help with this the LGA offers Commercial Skills for Officers training and the Council may wish to consider whether this would be useful to develop your/this approach.

The Peer Team recognised that pace has picked up in the delivery of some high profile areas such as Housing - where key appointments and additional resourcing have helped to renew focus. The Council has added capacity to the organisation by bringing in expertise and this has delivered positive outcomes.

WDC has also embraced the principles of being Lean. The approach is right but the Council needs to continue to ensure that there is capacity and capability in place where this is needed and that it has resilience in key areas. Therefore we would encourage you to keep focused on the organisation's structure to ensure there is stronger resilience - as a continued focus on workforce planning will put you in a good place for future delivery. For instance, we would urge that when looking at the Finance Team restructure you ensure that the future needs and relevant skills required by the Council are met – we know you are looking into this and would encourage you to remain focused on it.

The Team noted that there has been a significant delay this year in signing off the Council's accounts. While it is noted that this is a result of technical matters, it does have the potential to be reputationally damaging and we would urge the Council to learn lessons from what has happened to ensure it is not repeated in future years.

The Council has committed members and it should consider how it can make the most of councillors and how to keep them well briefed on the delivery of key projects and make information more accessible to them. We would also urge the Council to consider how opposition members are briefed and kept up to date on key projects. The Peer Team heard where this has worked well, for example in the Leisure Group and Use of Assets Committee through cross-party working groups. However, there were particular areas such as the Creative Quarter and Council Office Relocation project where it was felt that increased member engagement / briefings would help to secure cross-party support for these projects and save time at a later stage by avoiding unnecessary questions. Warwick may want to consider how to use briefings and forums in order to do this effectively and, for example, for the Council Office Relocation project the Leaders Group meeting could be reenergised in order to ensure that all political groups are properly informed. There is also a feeling that the community could be engaged at an earlier stage in externally-focused projects and WDC may wish to review its approach in this area.

The Peer Team understands that the Council Office relocation has been controversial for a number of reasons, largely centred around the lack of affordable housing on the existing site and car parking issues. While it is not our place to comment on the detail of these matters, we would urge the Council to ensure the decisions it makes in relation to these are robust and based on sound evidence.

It was clear that economic development is important to WDC and it is very active in this area, with an enthusiastic and comparatively well-resourced team, and strong support from the political and managerial leadership of the Council. The District is well placed and taking advantage of its attractive location, has good access to the strategic road network and already has good relations with businesses in the District through the use of regular liaison meetings. The area has many opportunities for business growth, including the National Battery Development Centre and Coventry Airport. The Council is proactively seeking to hear and shape what the market needs and is pragmatic, recognising the balance between significant investment and short term disruption. There has been a period of change through the departmental restructure but the next stage is to focus on establishing clear priorities, and the Peer Team would echo the importance of this. The Council is alive to the impact of Brexit and is monitoring the affect on businesses - especially the impacts on the talent pipeline. Brexit continues to be discussed at senior management meetings to

determine what can be done collectively across the Council.

Recent achievements/inward investment have included businesses such as World of Books relocating to the District and with around 80 computer Games companies now in the District it is the 3rd biggest cluster in the UK. WDC has plans to do more in order to highlight the area, including a large festival planned in January 2019 'Interactive Futures' – to showcase Leamington and the District – as part of the 'Silicon Spa' banner. Grow-on space is recognised as being critical to continue to support businesses within the District and to support businesses to make their next steps to grow, the Council recognises this and has plans in place to do more in this area.

Crucially, WDC's economic development plans and priorities are within the Local Enterprise Partnership's plans and include creative and digital, town centres and tourism. The District's plans are also aligned to the County Council's economic plans. WDC is seeking to obtain economic data from the County Council and the Peer Team would emphasise the importance of using this to develop a district based Economic Development Strategy.

The Council has maintained a watching brief on the benefits of being within the West Midlands Combined Authority. We recommend that you continue to keep your position under review as we heard how there may be advantages for others who may benefit from your ideas and enthusiasm.

The Peer Team recognised that the CMT is incredibly busy and in order to optimise their capacity and ability to work smarter we would encourage you to review the administrative support available. This would support CMT to be as effective as possible. Having your most senior managers undertaking activity which is better delivered through administrative support can distract them from more important issues and puts them under unnecessary pressure. Having appropriate administrative support needs to be part of ensuring the authority's senior management arrangements are fit for the future.

Staff recognised and valued the visible leadership shown and made particular reference to the Chief Executive's floorwalking. This contact was appreciated and valued by staff and we would encourage you to consider how activity such as this positively impacts on the Council, creating the positive working atmosphere which the Peer Team heard about from members and officers alike. To continue to improve internal communications the Peer Team suggest that you make the most of your 'Staff Voice' group to review and shape what they feel would be the most effective ways to communicate with staff. This may include staff attending CMT and Head of Service meetings on a regular basis or CMT providing something collectively to staff and managers routinely to share achievements and retain focus on key priorities. This would provide opportunities to communicate your priorities to staff and provide clarity on what they need to focus on over the forthcoming period.

Summary of recommendations

Warwick has made good progress since the Peer Team's visit in July 2016. There is ambition and commitment to work hard for the District. Further to the feedback provided above the Peer Team have made some specific recommendations for you to consider:

1. Agree and focus on your priorities

Warwick is ambitious and the Executive and Management should invest time in focusing in on the organisation's priorities and communicating these. This would focus delivery and ensure that there is clarity across the organisation.

2. Step up your monitoring and oversight to prevent being blown off track

Having effective and proportionate arrangements in place for the Council to receive timely and relevant data and information to track and monitor progress of key priorities is important. This will allow the Council to keep an overview on delivery and help to keep on track with priority projects.

3. Increase your resilience in key areas

The Peer Team recognise that where this has been done it has produced good outcomes for Warwick and there are plans in place to look into other areas of Council business. We would encourage you to continue to review this.

4. Celebrate your successes!

The annual talk and expo of services to showcase achievements are good ways of celebrating your achievements but you may want to consider further opportunities to celebrate staff where they have achieved particular outcomes.

Next steps

We appreciate that the Council will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions with the senior managerial and political leadership in order to determine how the organisation wishes to move forward.

Your LGA Principal Adviser, Helen Murray, will be happy to work with you to identify any additional support the LGA can offer to help you respond to the points set out in this letter. Helen can be contacted on 07884 312235 or Helen.Murray@local.gov.uk.