

Corporate Peer Challenge Bromsgrove DC and Redditch BC

22-24th January and 23rd February 2018

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Bromsgrove DC and Redditch BC generally provide good and valued services to their communities. The councils are well regarded by partners having invested significantly in their ability to influence within the sub-region and beyond. Bromsgrove DC (BDC) and Redditch BC (RBC) are open to new ideas and approaches and this has allowed them to meet financial challenges to date. They have retained a focus on meeting customer needs despite falling funding. The councils now need to consider how they will structure and position themselves into the future in order to better understand and pre-empt customer needs going forward and continue to deliver services within their future budget constraints.

Bromsgrove and Redditch are very different communities facing very different challenges. It is a testament to the pragmatism of their leadership that they came together in 2008 to share a chief executive and then management team. The majority of service areas have subsequently become shared services whilst retaining their individual identities. Whilst Bromsgrove has remained Conservative controlled, since 2008, there have been several changes of council leader. Redditch although currently Labour, has also had changes of political control as well as leadership, but supported by a single chief executive they have remained steady in their support for sharing services and the benefits it has bought to each council individually.

Through working together the councils have delivered over £7.5m of savings across the two councils since 2010/11 and are continuing to deliver around £1.5m per annum. There remains scope for further efficiencies and service improvements. Members in both councils are engaged and committed and able to clearly articulate what they view as their councils' ambition and role within the community. In delivering this vision members are supported by an experienced and dedicated workforce loyal to improving their communities within a largely traditional workforce structure.

In order to meet the challenges ahead and maximise their strengths within the region the peer team suggest that the councils should focus on ensuring improved corporate ownership of financial management with tighter control of budget savings, and guarantee that expenditure is directed only towards agreed priority areas. More rigour should be introduced into developing and analysing business cases, and to their impact on priority setting. The councils should also be clearer about how they will track progress on key projects and savings and report against them. This should include identifying the consequences and mitigation if delivery does not progress as planned.

The councils also need to re-assess what they are seeking to achieve from the shared services partnership moving forward. Whilst it has delivered savings, resilience and a greater opportunity to lever influence it has not established a single workforce or culture. This means that siloes and duplication remain deeply entrenched and, combined with a need to invest in IT systems and digital solutions, all of which act as a barrier to greater efficiencies and innovation.

2. Overall messages

The peer team has significant experience of working in shared services partnership and it was striking to us that whilst the vast majority of colleagues work across both councils there is very little sense of partnership identity. A decade into sharing services the peer team would have expected a seamless workforce delivering services through a culture of collaboration to two sovereign councils operating in a single structure that would be more streamlined than two separate workforces.

The peer team found councils led by members who are extremely passionate about their communities, the role of the council, and are highly regarded by partners. Yet, we would question whether you have been able to maximise the benefits of joint working and truly embrace the benefits it could bring. We frequently heard reference to 'that's the Bromsgrove way' or 'the Redditch way' meaning staff are expending unnecessary time and energy navigating a structure and governance system that is more complex than it needs to be.

The peer team refer to this needless complexity and in some cases out of date and inferior systems and approaches as the foundations of shared services throughout this report. Our contention is that if you could improve these core services (ICT, HR and finance) that are the foundation of shared services and make them genuinely efficient and supportive you could free up space for innovation, creativity and collaboration. This could give you the opportunity to redefine your shared ambition.

3. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Councils:

- Pause and reflect on the shared service journey to date – celebrate your success – use the 10 year anniversary as a moment to do this
- Prioritise the work on tightening financial processes so that they provide the most up to date profiling, model the best in the sector and support strong decision making
- Spend more time together – introduce more joint informal meetings at political level
- Create space to have conversations about the future with your valued partners
- Redefine the shared future journey and ambition
- Define a new shared culture from the bottom up – with input from officers and members
- Share this emerging culture with partners and collectively shape the future community leadership role for the councils and partners
- Establish a single workforce and reduce duplication and time spent navigating two structures and systems of governance
- Having established the above use this re-energised culture to enable officers and members to design services to meet and pre-empt customer needs within your financial envelope.

Further recommendations can be found throughout the various sections of the report and a summary of recommendation are in Annex I.

4. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement-focused and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement plans. 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.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting this report the peer challenge team has done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit 22-24th January 2018, and a subsequent visit to explore recommendations on 23rd February 2018. Our findings, unless clearly stated, refer to both Bromsgrove DC and Redditch BC. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time.

Peers reviewed a range of information to ensure we were familiar with the Councils, the challenges it is facing and its plans for the future. We have spent 4 days onsite at Bromsgrove and Redditch councils during which we have:

- Spoken to 120 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders
- Gathered information and views from 50 meetings, visits to key sites and additional research and reading
- Collectively spent more than 300 hours to determine our findings – the equivalent of one person spending around 8 ½ weeks in Bromsgrove and Redditch

Feedback was provided to an invited audience of staff and councillors on day three of our visit and again on day four and this report will be accompanied with the offer of bespoke follow up. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

The peer team

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

- Matt Prosser, Chief Executive, Dorset Councils Partnership Serving: North Dorset DC, West Dorset DC and Weymouth & Portland Borough Council
- Cllr Paul James, Leader, Gloucester City Council
- Cllr Tudor Evans, Leader, Labour Group, Plymouth City Council
- Bindu Arjoon, Director, Exeter City Council

- Claire Taylor, Director Customers and Service Development, Cherwell and South Northants Councils
- Karen Iveson, Chief Finance Officer Selby DC and Assistant Director North Yorkshire CC
- Raj Khera, LGA programme support
- Clare Hudson, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

Scope and focus

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

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. 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?
3. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?
4. Political and managerial leadership: Does the council provide effective political and managerial leadership through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
5. Governance and decision-making: Is political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change to be implemented?

In addition to these questions the Councils asked the peer team to consider:

Whether the Councils' and partnership's direction of travel is the right one?

5. Feedback

5.1 Reflections on the Councils' progress

The two Councils have demonstrated that they are willing to respond to their customer needs and flex their service offers appropriately. To do this both Councils are willing to consider new ideas and approaches and recognise that they can best deliver for their communities by working strongly in partnership, within their own areas and beyond. The workforce is extremely long serving with considerable experience. Staff have responded to challenges by developing and introducing new methods of service delivery,

particularly guided by a systems thinking approach. The Chief Executive has been instrumental in driving forward change and is clearly the guiding voice on transformation within the Councils.

Despite this drive for change the peer team heard time and again that the councils consistently adopt too many priorities and then take too long to implement them. This has led some colleagues to fear 'initiative fatigue' and whilst there is excitement about the potential income that the new focus on commercialisation can bring there is also a weariness that 'this is the latest thing' and an 'add-on' to the day job.

Business cases are now an accepted form of developing and introducing change but they should be closer linked to financial reporting. Whilst business cases are routinely used to develop new areas it was not clear to the peer team what the approach is for de-prioritisation. This is resulting in the organisations not being able to focus in on what is most important to them, and has the highest likelihood of delivery.

This is amplified by inconsistencies in financial reporting, which has been highlighted by external auditors. Greater corporate ownership of financial management is needed. Members 'do not trust the numbers', and as a result can be unwilling to take decisions that might impact on service provision.

5.2 Reflections on the shared services partnership

'Shared services has allowed us to sharpen our skills'

Since 2008 the Councils have come to share most services resulting in efficiencies and greater resilience. The peer team heard of many cases of improved customer outcomes as a result. For staff it has presented opportunities to sharpen and deepen their skills and explore new ways of working. There are many positives to the shared work, but there appears to still be a legacy of two separate organisations as opposed to one partnership serving two sovereign councils.

Shared services partnerships are most successful when partners are viewed as equitable with a fair system of apportioning costs. Bromsgrove and Redditch are different size organisations with varying size of workforce and they rightly agreed at the outset to apportion costs and recharge accordingly. Since then the issue of recharges has been revisited at various moments, but without an agreed corporate approach. This has resulted in a consistent 'poking of the wasps nest' with recharges being viewed as an opportunity to seek to redress the balance if it is felt that one Council is paying 'less than its fair share'. The partnership should adopt a transparent policy to review recharges at certain points or times – or more fundamentally move to a single workforce.

Bromsgrove and Redditch are two Councils operating two models seeking to deliver services under one partnership. The partnership itself has very limited identity. Whilst this may be entirely appropriate from the customer perspective by having very little shared identity and culture the shared services partnership has not been able to evolve from sharing services to a truly shared partnership.

As you move forward there is an opportunity to maximise the benefits of shared working by establishing more of a joint culture and identity, and a single workforce. In the peer team's experience customers and partners are not concerned whether they speak to someone from Bromsgrove or Redditch or Bromsgrove and Redditch/Redditch and Bromsgrove. Indeed one of the most valued services highlighted to the peer team was recycling and waste collection which is one of the few services branded 'Bromsgrove and Redditch'.

6. Understanding of the local context and priority setting

'We don't stop doing one thing before we move on to the next'

The Councils have generally strong relationships with their partners and use these to inform their priority setting. This is often acquitted through well regarded projects and programmes, the Connecting Families approach was consistently praised for its impact. Community groups welcome the support provided to them and feel they are able to make a significant contribution to the community through working with the Councils. Both Bromsgrove and Redditch are viewed as highly committed and valued partners. Engagement with the youth sector appeared varied across the two Councils and the Councils should identify opportunities to share practice.

These partnerships are increasingly looking towards economic development and growth. Bromsgrove DC are widely regarded to be making good progress on economic development, following a change of policy emphasis which has been evidenced by expert analysis. There is a sense of excitement about the regeneration of Redditch town centre and plans for a potential business improvement district. The Councils must ensure that they are clear what they want to achieve with economic development and do not seek to take on new priority work streams without first considering what they will no longer pursue.

Partnership working is broad and valued but it was often difficult for the peer team to understand what the vision and ambition of those partnerships is. The vision of partnership working could be clearer and communicated more consistently internally and externally. As part of clarifying this vision the peer team would encourage the Councils to regularly appraise the added value that partnership working brings. In doing so do not be afraid to make changes to the way you work with partners.

Both Councils share six 'strategic purposes' which provide a rationale for the delivery of services, but the broad nature of them means doing almost anything can be justified by them. Consequently it is difficult to identify what is a priority and what it isn't. Both Councils need to take time to consider what their priorities are, to articulate them clearly and to decide a process for deprioritisation. Resources should then be allocated against them, and regularly reviewed.

Recommendations – Corporate

- Be clear about how you identify when something is no longer a corporate priority – and what it means

- When change is introduced guarantee that it is introduced with greater pace and rigour – with clear lines of accountability at the officer and political level
- Invest more time in considering what role all levels of the organisation contribute towards corporate aims – transformation is everyone’s role. Ensure that transformation is adequately resourced with clear programme and project governance, and appropriate skills.
- Management approaches need more consistency to support the development of a single corporate culture
- Establish greater consistency in the foundations of shared services – ICT, HR, Finance should all be enablers of change

Signpost – Adur and Worthing Councils

These two councils operated shared management and services including a single digital strategy. They have taken a radical approach to creating a technology platform which enables rapid ‘self-build’ of applications, enabling design and prototyping of new approaches at pace and with low risk. Other partners such as the county council, health and the community and voluntary sector can build their own applications on the same platform, holding all the local data in one place. The benefits of doing this across two councils, rather than one, include being able to target shared resources more effectively across a broader area. It has also created opportunities for generating revenue streams.

7. Leadership of place

‘The councils are proactive in making changes for residents’

The political and managerial leadership of Bromsgrove and Redditch Councils is perceived as positive and leaders are viewed as voices committed to improving their communities. The leaders and Chief Executive have been instrumental in ensuring that the Council’s voices are heard, and valued. There is a refreshing honesty about the relationships with the county, with all partners recognising the strengths and weaknesses in this. It was not clear to us how this relationship could be rebalanced and where and when the strategic conversations that are needed about the future of local government in Worcestershire are taking place.

The implementation of a systems thinking approach and development of strategic purposes for each council has helped to facilitate an outward focus in officers and members alike. This transformation has also impacted on partners who in turn have begun to question and appraise their own strategic purposes. The systems thinking approach has allowed members and officers to explore openly options for change – however it has not always led to change being actually delivered.

Both Councils have invested time and resource in understanding the needs of their localities, including their differences and similarities. Leaders now need to capitalise on this to drive appropriate regeneration and development. The introduction of Place Teams has established greater flexibility in responding to customer need in localities and is seen as having a positive impact. This more flexible approach to identifying and meeting customer need, and working closely with customers to shape future demand could be further explored.

The Councils have a broadly positive relationship with the local media, and the Councils' proactive approach to external communications has been critical to maintaining this. Building on this the peer team would encourage the Councils to consider what more could be done to maximise communications channels and outreach. The Councils do make some use of social media, but this can come across as a broadcast approach to communications. There is potential for the Councils to explore what greater role communications can play in their partnership working and development of the future vision of town centres.

Recommendations

- Re-examine your existing commitments and have an honest conversation about whether they are sustainable, relevant or appropriate
- Evaluate the opportunities for maximising your influence – and focus your energy and leadership on where you can be most effective

Signpost – Suffolk Coastal and Waveney Councils

In Suffolk Coastal and Waveney they have developed shared capacity with their local clinical commissioning group (CCG) to develop a joint approach to public health. By co-funding a key senior post, and having them co-located with council and health partners, they are able to reduce duplication, more closely align strategies and delivery and collectively agree a vision for improved health outcomes that they can each understand their role in.

8. Organisational leadership and governance

'We need to stop letting political posturing get in the way' - Bromsgrove
'We have seats at the table, we now need to turn that to influence' - Redditch

There are clear examples of positive working relationships between members and senior officers. However, the team were struck by numerous instances where the tone of debate has resulted in criticism of individual officers. This is not acceptable and needs to be addressed. This relates solely to Bromsgrove DC, but it has a resulting impact on Redditch.

There are strong and positive relationships between senior leaders and Trade Unions. There is a significant opportunity to capitalise on these relationships by actively engaging Trade Unions in workforce planning, and Organisational Development strategy development, evaluation and implementation.

The peer team found some evidence that systems thinking and transformation has prompted officers to think and act more responsively – though this is not universal. The peer team would encourage leaders to consider how to spread the pockets of transformation throughout the Councils and beyond with partners.

Colleagues understand that the councils' financial outlooks are challenging and that delivering transformation efficiencies and income from commercial activities is critical to securing a sustainable future. To drive this forward a clearer articulation of the ambition and expectation of service areas is needed and should be regularly revisited. Support services have not been able to consistently underpin transformation and the systems thinking approach. The quality and breadth of support has hampered implementation.

This is amplified by being two separate workforces and in some cases distinct HR policies which causes confusion.

Lines of accountability for key programmes and projects need to be clearer, from officer level to portfolio holder. Too often the response was that major projects are the responsibility of the Chief Executive. This invests too much in one role and could expose the Councils to significant risk. Progress on project delivery should be regularly reported on – not simply to committees but also internally to colleagues and externally to partners. Lines of accountability for the delivery of transformation also need to be clearer, and understood by all. This would provide an opportunity to critically challenge, celebrate success, define when projects are completed, and gives licence to de-prioritise.

Scrutiny plays a vital and active role in challenging and probing the Councils' plans and actions. Having the Leader of the Opposition chairing the Scrutiny and Overview Committee in Bromsgrove is valued. There is also a long and valued history (in Redditch) of Opposition colleagues chairing Overview and Scrutiny, Audit and Governance Committees and having places on the Council Executive. Indeed scrutiny provides the opportunity to engage positively with members to inform decision making, including agreeing when something is no longer a priority. The peer team would encourage the Councils to more proactively use scrutiny as a forum for discussing and helping to define the future of the partnership.

During our time onsite the peer team routinely heard about the negative impact that political discourse has had on delivering ambitions in Bromsgrove. The distinctive role of officers and members needs to be clarified and the agreed boundaries adhered to, both in terms of political debate and operational decision-making. An understanding on all sides of what is appropriate behaviour must be established and enforced. The role of the Monitoring Officer is key here, and must be strongly supported by senior officers and leaders.

It is felt by some members that mistakes contained within reports to council and how this impacts on conduct during debate of those reports both act as triggers for confrontational and negative debate. This must be remedied at the most senior level.

Recommendations – governance

- Take action at Bromsgrove District Council to raise the conduct of political debate so that it is constructive and does not undermine the council's reputation, as well as the local government sector
- Review processes for supporting members at council meetings, and where necessary, implement change to ensure members are well supported
- Ensure that boundaries between officers and members are publicly clarified and that their implementation is regularly reviewed
- Review Council Procedures to ensure that they can support constructive debate
- Ensure that report proofing procedures are 'watertight' and errors are not published
- Establish clearer lines of accountability for the leadership and delivery of major programmes and projects – that is appropriately dispersed throughout the organisation to mitigate potential risk in investing too much in one role.

Signpost – Dorset Councils Partnership

Since the establishment of the three councils partnership serving West Dorset, North Dorset and Weymouth and Portland Councils in 2015 senior leaders have placed great emphasis on regular, shared dialogue between members and officers on strategic issues. The senior management team meets weekly with the leaders and deputy leaders of the three councils to understand the issues they have common views on, and those they don't.

9. Financial planning and viability

'Finance is not given the importance it should be'

Shared services have delivered sustained savings for both councils. The emerging plans for commercialisation are an encouraging opportunity. In Bromsgrove specifically the £20m investment and acquisition strategy provides a base for future income streams. Having developed the strategy it must be adequately resourced and reported against. These recommendations would apply equally to Redditch should they proceed with emerging plans for an investment fund. Acknowledging the inherent risks of a borrowing backed strategy, investments must be supported with sound business cases and subject to robust due diligence - ensuring risks and opportunities are clearly understood in the context of the councils longer term financial outlook, and benefits fully realised within the required timescales. Both councils have now adopted Commercialisation Strategies and the plans for implementation and the move away from a traditional budgeting approach towards one with a more defined risk appetite now needs to be better and more widely communicated within the Councils.

Budget planning and monitoring needs to be strengthened. Senior leaders have recognised this and some improvements in financial processing are already underway including more senior finance resource. This needs to be matched with consistent opportunities for financial and budget management – at every level of the organisation. The development of a business case to introduce a new financial system that can underpin future change is urgently needed and should be hastened and delivered within the next financial year. This is critical for both officers and members to have more confidence in financial planning as well as providing an adequate response to concerns raised by external auditors.

Financial management is the responsibility of the Leadership Team and managers but the peer team found limited evidence of truly corporate ownership. Budget planning takes place within directorates but it is not clear how the corporate budget and spend is matched to agreed priorities. As a result the peer team were not assured that budget planning is adequately focused on the overall financial challenge, instead it appears to focus on meeting service needs and demands over a relatively short term horizon. A clearer focus on corporate level budgeting will enable a more strategic, long term approach to financial management. This should include more overt and regular probing of the levels of reserves and capital expenditure to ensure these are directed towards priorities and sufficient to manage the risks the Councils are facing. The councils should continually question how their resources can deliver services but can also contribute to place shaping and longer term ambitions.

Recommendations – finance

- Financial accountability needs greater ownership across the organisation
- Budget planning needs to be more focused on future financial sustainability and not simply meeting service needs and short term demands
- Be clearer about how you track progress and manage risk – on delivering savings and key projects
- Establish a transparent, regularised and proportionate system of reviewing and amending recharges between the two councils – rather than leaving it to specific service areas
- Expedite the business case and implementation of a new finance system

Signpost – 21st century councillor and public servant

These two major pieces of research explore the types of leadership roles and behaviour that are needed in a time of austerity and where the provision of local services and place shaping is more complex than ever. Councillors and officers need to move out of their traditional roles to become municipal entrepreneurs, system architects, commissioners and place shapers in order to deliver good outcomes, alongside partners, with limited resources.
<https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/>

10. Capacity to deliver

'We don't agree to stop one thing before we agree to do something else'

Change is a constant in local government and staff have welcomed the opportunity to try new things. Staff have also been engaged in shaping the way that they work – and a tribute to this is the longevity of service of many colleagues. Staff appreciate the efforts put into communicating with them through staff briefings. However change has not been adequately supported by core services such as HR, ICT and Finance. These core services needed to be more consistent and better engaged to deliver and support change.

Performance management is recognised as vital but there are inconsistencies in its implementation – both in terms of delivering services and managing people. Energy is still wasted within both councils in navigating varying approaches to HR and people management. This drains the momentum from the partnership and means that HR is not viewed as an enabler. Performance management is not used routinely enough as an effective tool for learning. There is limited evidence that staff feel the organisation learns from its past experiences, evidenced in the low response rate to the staff survey. The councils should consolidate and invest in these core services and use these refreshed services to invest in leadership development opportunities for all colleagues at all levels – political, managerial, operational.

Similarly ICT provision is mixed but more fundamentally neither council has explored the potential for digital design and delivery. Bromsgrove and Redditch have separate ICT strategies, but this is a 'foundation' service and greater economies of scale and impact could be realised by singularly defining ambition and delivering against it.

Recommendations – transformation

- Consider how to meet customer need and expectation within your financial options using the systems thinking approach. This will help you identify what matters to the customer and design efficient processes to meet this need, removing service boundaries where required.
- Consider how to re-align your customer strategy to most effectively meet customer need within your identified priorities.
- Consider the impact that digital transformation of services can have, releasing capacity whilst improving the customer experience – develop and implement a single digital strategy.
- Develop a clear plan to assess what high volume low complexity transactions can be directed towards more cost effective channels. There is no tension between this and a systems thinking approach - many customers expect and are happy to access council services by means other than face- to-face- as indeed they do for services from other public and private organisations.

Signpost – Breckland and South Holland

Breckland and South Holland councils have a shared management model and a single transformation programme. In 2015 through the LGA's Digital Experts Programme they launched a digitalisation programme to enable customers to 'access the right services at the right time and in the right way'. Since then a new online book and pay service for garden waste in Breckland has been introduced – the number of bookings have increased by 25% and 35% of all bookings are completed online. Similar growth and savings have been realised in South Holland. Customer service centres have been transformed with 'floorwalkers' using tablet devices engaging with customers and manage and channel their queries reducing the need for waits and meeting rooms. Customer self-service access points allow customers to manage their own accounts with the council and feed data to allow the council to reform their services.

11. Looking to the future

Bromsgrove and Redditch have delivered ten years of shared services despite changes in political control and austerity. Throughout this time the Councils have remained highly valued partners and delivered a wide range of valued services. The Councils have focused on moving onto the next thing without necessarily agreeing how they will finish existing projects and priorities.

The peer team suggest that the Councils need to create space to reflect, celebrate success and have open collective conversations about the future. The peer team encourage Bromsgrove DC and Redditch BC to:

Be bold... create space to celebrate success and have collective conversations about the future

Be focused...on delivering what you say you will

Be confident...develop and deliver a shared ambition with a single workforce

12. 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. Her contact details are, email: helen.murray@local.gov.uk, Telephone: 07884312235.

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 2022.

On behalf of the peer team:

- Matt Prosser, Chief Executive, Dorset Councils Partnership Serving: North Dorset DC , West Dorset DC and Weymouth & Portland Borough Council
- Cllr Paul James, Leader, Gloucester City Council
- Cllr Tudor Evans, Leader, Labour Group, Plymouth City Council
- Bindu Arjoon, Director, Exeter City Council
- Claire Taylor, Director Customers and Service Development, Cherwell and South Northants Councils
- Karen Iveson, Chief Finance Officer Selby DC and Assistant Director North Yorkshire CC
- Raj Khera, LGA programme support
- Clare Hudson, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

Annex I

Key Recommendations

- Pause and reflect on the shared service journey to date – celebrate your success – use the 10 year anniversary as a moment to do this
- Prioritise the work on tightening financial processes so that they provide the most up to date profiling, model the best in the sector and support strong decision making
- Spend more time together – introduce more joint informal meetings at political level
- Create space to have conversations about the future with your valued partners
- Redefine the shared future journey and ambition
- Define a new shared culture from the bottom up – with input from officers and members
- Share this emerging culture with partners and collectively shape the future community leadership role for the councils and partners
- Establish a single workforce and reduce duplication and time spent navigating two structures and systems of governance
- Having established the above use this re-energised culture to enable officers and members to design services to meet and pre-empt customer needs within your financial envelope.

Further Recommendations

1. Be clear about how you identify when something is no longer a corporate priority – and what it means
2. When change is introduced guarantee that it is introduced with greater pace and rigour – with clear lines of accountability at the officer and political level
3. Invest more time in considering what role all levels of the organisation contribute towards corporate aims – transformation is everyone's role. Ensure that transformation is adequately resourced with clear programme and project governance, and appropriate skills.
4. Management approaches need more consistency to support the development of a single corporate culture
5. Establish greater consistency in the foundations of shared services – ICT, HR, Finance should all be enablers of change
6. Re-examine your existing commitments and have an honest conversation about whether they are sustainable, relevant or appropriate
7. Evaluate the opportunities for maximising your influence – and focus your energy and leadership on where you can be most effective

8. Take action at Bromsgrove District Council to raise the conduct of political debate so that it is constructive and does not undermine the council's reputation, as well as the local government sector
9. Review processes for supporting members at council meetings, and where necessary, implement change to ensure members are well supported
10. Ensure that boundaries between officers and members are publicly clarified and that their implementation is regularly reviewed
11. Review Council Procedures to ensure that they can support constructive debate
12. Ensure that report proofing procedures are 'watertight' and errors are not published
13. Establish clearer lines of accountability for the leadership and delivery of major programmes and projects – that is appropriately dispersed throughout the organisation to mitigate potential risk in investing too much in one role.
14. Financial accountability needs greater ownership across the organisation
15. Budget planning needs to be more focused on future financial sustainability and not simply meeting service needs and short term demands
16. Be clearer about how you track progress and manage risk – on delivering savings and key projects
17. Establish a transparent, regularised and proportionate system of reviewing and amending recharges between the two councils – rather than leaving it to specific service areas
18. Expedite the business case and implementation of a new finance system
19. Consider how to meet customer need and expectation within your financial options using the systems thinking approach. This will help you identify what matters to the customer and design efficient processes to meet this need, removing service boundaries where required.
20. Consider how to re-align your customer strategy to most effectively meet customer need within your identified priorities.
21. Consider the impact that digital transformation of services can have, releasing capacity whilst improving the customer experience – develop and implement a single digital strategy.
22. Develop a clear plan to assess what high volume low complexity transactions can be directed towards more cost effective channels. There is no tension between this and a systems thinking approach - many customers expect and are happy to access council services by means other than face- to-face- as indeed they do for services from other public and private organisations.