

# Corporate Peer Challenge **Stafford Borough Council**

25 – 27 July 2018

Feedback Report

## 1. Executive Summary

The Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) Team spent 3 days on site at Stafford Borough Council, during which time they spoke to a wide range of stakeholders including staff, partners and councillors. The team heard a range of positive feedback about the council and the commitment of staff and councillors to Stafford as a place to live and work. There was a consistent message about the role of the Council as a proactive and supportive partner and it was clear that the organisation has strong processes in place to control its finances. A new and simplified Corporate Business Plan for 2018-21 sets out an ambitious vision for Stafford and the conditions are present for the Council to grasp the opportunity for it to accelerate its pace to deliver the necessary changes to support those ambitions.

This was the first CPC for the Council and the timing coincided with the bedding in of the new Business Plan, which sets out the Council's key objectives of growth, wellbeing and financial sustainability. The vision and Business Plan were clearly championed by the Leader and Chief Executive and the objectives appeared to be well known and understood across the organisation and by stakeholders.

The Council has delivered a number of successful outcomes for residents in the last 12 months including exceeding new dwellings targets, securing funding for the restoration of their historic Victoria Park and saving over £900k per annum on the outsourcing of Leisure and Culture Services. The outcomes have been delivered alongside a balanced budget and ambitious growth plans. There is a clear sense of pride in place consistently articulated through Stafford Borough Council's plans and this is demonstrated through the protection of valued front line services such as Street Scene and grounds maintenance. The scale and ambition of the Council's growth targets were evidenced during the Peer Team's familiarisation tour, where we were able to see the vast rural areas and the two main towns of the Borough. These are exciting but challenging times for the Council and there is a unique opportunity to identify, develop and maximise benefits of an ambitious growth agenda along with the potential of HS2 for the Borough, while remaining sensitive to the impact that current and future changes could have on communities.

During the CPC, the Peer Team heard from a wide range of staff, partners and colleagues that the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council made a strong and formidable team and this was particularly evident with their ability to influence at a regional and national level. Examples include the Leader's position on the Local Enterprise Partnership and the way that Council's leadership team have raised the regional and national profile of the Stafford Gateway and HS2 project. The leadership is ambitious for the borough and it is recommended that they should translate the business plan into tangible forward plans with clear milestones and accountability to ensure the stated objectives can be delivered. In particular a long-term forward plan of future Cabinet decisions would assist the newly restructured scrutiny function to provide meaningful pre-decision scrutiny, contribute to policy development and hold the executive to account .

The financial position of the council is relatively secure over the medium term, which provides an opportunity to consider aligning resources and developing the workforce to deliver on the ambition set out in the Corporate Business Plan. Stafford has led the way as one of the first councils in the West Midlands to engage in shared services. The

Council continues to seek benefits through sharing services and has recently undertaken a review of whether some front line services could also be shared, in addition to the current back office functions. There was a lack of clarity in respect of the future development and existing governance arrangements of the shared service arrangements. There also appeared to be a general perception that the main driver was financial, therefore the Council may benefit from proactively reviewing the existing and future arrangements and communicating the value and wider benefits that can be achieved through sharing services whilst supporting the overriding objectives of the Council.

The Peer Team found employees to be engaged and motivated. This was evidenced in the results of a recent staff survey which found that over 86% of respondents felt motivated by their job “all or most of the time” and that over 98% of respondents cared about doing a good job “all or most of the time”. Throughout conversations with staff, the Peer Team witnessed a desire and willingness to engage in a process of change, with a recognition that to achieve the ambitious objectives laid out in the Corporate Business Plan, the pace of change would need to increase.

The senior management team at Stafford have a wealth of experience and many have worked for the Council for many years. Further consideration should therefore be given to succession planning, particularly for this senior team, as the Council continues its journey. There was a desire, led from the Chief Executive, to create a “one council, one team” culture. To convert this ambition into tangible outcomes the Council will have to develop and provide resources (both financial and capability) to design and implement an organisational development programme. The Council will want to reassess potential and existing structures to ensure that they are right for its future ambition. Linked to this will be ensuring the right skills, abilities and values are realised in officers and that the leadership style adopted by Members contributes to the Council’s desire to change. There was a clear sense that change had begun, but there is now a need to accelerate that pace of change to deliver the vision.

There were several examples of the Council undertaking positive work for its communities and demonstrating the social impact of its services. The Peer Team was of the view that this was something the Council should feel proud of and encouraged it to be bold in its communication of these achievements. Communications, both internal and external, requires significant development to ensure that messages are coordinated, consistent and transparent to Members, staff, citizens and other stakeholders. There is a lot that Stafford can be proud of in terms of its approach to community wellbeing: promoting its successes and wellbeing agenda will contribute to a more engaged and informed population, whilst a consistent and proactive modern approach to communications will be required to support the on-going change journey both externally and internally.

## **2. 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, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team’s key recommendations to the Council, which have been grouped into three themes:

## Communication

- 1. Commission an LGA Communications review to support the ambitions of the business plan.** External and internal communication requires examination and coordination across to organisation to ensure consistent and transparent messages to Members, staff and stakeholders.
- 2. Develop a communications strategy to celebrate and communicate the vision set out in the Corporate Business Plan.** The Council can point to a number of achievements and examples of community work with positive social impact, however, these appear to be less visible within corporate communications. The Council should seek to more proactively communicate the positive work is undertaking for its community, alongside its growth achievements.
- 3. Maintain and enhance communications in respect of delivery of current and future plans.** As Stafford continues its ambitious journey of transformational change it will be increasingly important to communicate the vision, achievements and plans to key stakeholders to bring partners on the journey with the Council.

## Organisation

- 4. Publish an effective and measurable forward plan.** The Leadership Team have taken progressive steps towards developing a long term forward plan setting out Cabinet priorities which includes timescales and milestones. This should be finalised and published to ensure actions have appropriate accountability and that there are mechanisms in place to ensure timely and considered decisions, performance metrics and risk management including contingencies.
- 5. Review risk appetite and make difficult decisions now to transform and facilitate the delivery of objectives.** The Council has an ambitious plan of growth which relies on the pace of change accelerating. It is timely for the Council to grasp the opportunity for increasing the pace of change and review its risk appetite. This may mean taking bold decisions about future structures and direction.
- 6. Continue to implement new scrutiny structure and ensure appropriate training to enable effective scrutiny and policy development.** The alignment of scrutiny committees with the corporate objectives offers an opportunity to provide more pre-decision scrutiny and policy development. To realise the potential of overview and scrutiny, the Council should offer scrutiny Members training and support to continue to develop essential skills required for robust scrutiny.

## Change

- 7. The Council should immediately look to utilise the talent and skills of staff and Members at all levels of the organisation to deliver objectives.** The Council has a wealth of committed and motivated Members and employees with a desire to facilitate change. Consideration should be given to undertaking a skills audit of the workforce to utilise existing expertise and develop talent.
- 8. Develop, communicate and implement an organisational development programme.** To achieve the delivery of corporate objectives the Peer Team recommend the benefit of a cross-council approach to organisational change/development which aligns the Council's workforce activities and skills to the

delivery of corporate priorities. The development and implementation of an organisational development programme should include the creation and communication of expectations, values and behaviours required to support change.

**9. Continue to capitalise the goodwill and capacity of relevant partners to deliver plans.** Stafford has a proven track record at building and facilitating effective partnerships and these relationships can help the Council unlock capacity to deliver its ambitious goals. The Council should ensure that there are adequate and robust arrangements in place so that they can continue to engage the right and relevant partners in the delivery of current and future plans.

**10. Identify financial resources to support change management programme.** The Council has a consistent and stable financial outlook with a balanced budget and clean audit opinions. Financial resources should be reviewed to identify a budget to invest in a comprehensive change management programme to support the organisational transformational required to meet objectives. This may include a dedicated programme team to provide a focus and drive on key projects.

### **3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach**

#### **The peer team**

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected 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 at Stafford Borough Council were:

- Cllr William Nunn, Leader of Breckland Council
- Allen Graham, Chief Executive of Rushcliffe Borough Council
- Kathy O’Leary, Strategic Director of Resources at Tandridge District Council
- Richard Bradley, Commercial Director at Scarborough Borough Council
- Joanne Wagstaffe, Director of Finance at Three Rivers District Council and Watford Borough Council
- Helen Jenkins, Peer Challenge Manager
- James Millington, LGA Adviser – West Midlands Team

#### **Scope and focus**

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

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?

2. Leadership of Place: Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?
4. Financial planning and viability: Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
5. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to consider/review/provide feedback on the Council's Corporate Business Plan to help ensure that Members and staff are on track to deliver the council objectives for 2018-21. This was considered throughout the Peer Challenge and there are several references to the plan within the feedback report.

### **The peer challenge process**

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 3.5 days onsite at Stafford during which they:

- Spoke to more than 60 people including a range of council staff together with councillors, external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 30 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 200 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 5 weeks in Stafford.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (27 July 2018). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

Stafford Borough Council has adopted a new Corporate Business Plan (CBP) for 2018-2021 which sets out how the Council will deliver across three clear objectives: growth, wellbeing and financial sustainability. The CBP has recently been revised and updated to reflect the ambitions of the Cabinet and set a strategic vision for the Council over the next three years. The Council's vision "A prosperous and attractive borough with strong communities" is clearly branded on corporate documents and has been communicated to staff and Members via Cabinet papers, the website and staff forums. Citizens also had the opportunity to comment on the draft CBP before it was formally adopted.

Throughout the CBP and during interviews with stakeholders, the Peer Team found that there was a clarity of narrative about the vision and ambition for economic growth. Indeed, economic growth was described by one person as "centre and front" of the corporate plan. The narrative around the second corporate objective, "community wellbeing", appeared less prominent in Council messaging. While on site, the Peer Team heard a number of examples of the positive social impact of Stafford's community work, for example the investment and support to the well regarded and state-of-the-art Staffordshire Women's Aid refuge. The Council is also rightly proud of its initiatives to tackle the rise in homelessness in the Borough, which have received national praise and prompted a visit from the Speaker of the House, the Rt Hon John Bercow. However, the team found that these positive examples of work with great people-focussed social impact were not as widely celebrated and communicated in the vision and CBP. This might result in a missed opportunity for the Council to celebrate and publicise impressive work that it is undertaking for its communities. There is also a risk that the "community wellbeing" could be interpreted as a lesser priority within the CBP. To mitigate this the Council should review its approach to internal and external communication and clearly plan opportunities to be bold and proud of its work with high social value. Consideration could also be given to assigning an existing Cabinet Portfolio Holder or Member Champion the specific responsibility for communications to help ensure that limited communication resources are more strategically aligned with the managerial and political priorities of the Council. As the Press and Communications Team at the Council is small, it may be possible to consider bringing in additional capacity from other parts of the organisation on specific projects, or look to share some functions with other parts of the sector. However, this should be done in line with a coordinated and clear communications plan that is clearly linked to the CBP and corporate objectives.

There is a clear understanding of place and the importance of maintaining the balance and sense of place in the context of a rural borough with two main town centres (in Stafford and Stone). There is a sympathetic approach to balancing new developments while protecting the attractive environment which makes up much of the landscape. The continued protection of some frontline service budgets such



as Street Scene, to help maintain an attractive environment demonstrates the Council's ongoing commitment to protecting the quality of life and distinctive features that are apparent in both the Borough's towns and rural communities. There was a clear demonstration of the understanding of the importance of the attractive environment and how that also supported the needs of local businesses who are reliant upon securing continuing employment and presence within the town and region. There is also evidence of proactive effort by the Council to work with partners to change the use of some Stafford town centre buildings to residential dwellings as well as a new Southside town centre hub with cinema, restaurants and a modern shopping area. The Council recognises that this has already had an impact on other parts of the high street in Stafford and is proactively working through the Town Centre Partnership to unlock the potential for a more vibrant and well-used town centre. Stafford's role as an influential partner committed to maintaining a sense of place is also evidenced by engagement with "Friends of" groups and encouraging businesses to sign up to a "Keep the Borough Clean" charter.

The Council has adopted an ongoing process to revise the Local Plan to ensure that it remains sustainable and appropriate, particularly in light of the future HS2 developments. This was viewed as positive by the Peer Team, as priorities change and adapt, the Local Plan will remain relevant to the local context. HS2 offers opportunities to maximise benefits of high speed train links from Stafford to London, Birmingham and Manchester. While the Council had initially objected to the HS2 plans, the Peer Team witnessed a pragmatic stance to accepting the opportunities the project could bring. The vision for Stafford in the context of HS2 brings in new business, leisure and travel possibilities which will help boost town centre businesses and investment in the Borough. The Council's leadership have recognised that if HS2 is to go ahead it will be crucial to mitigate any disruption on communities, as well as invest in relevant infrastructure and housing.

Stafford's Corporate Business Plan demonstrates that the Council understands its role and function is changing in the context of austerity through its focus on growth and financial sustainability. There are questions for the Council to consider as it continues its journey, such as how far it wishes to go towards being a commissioning or outsourcing organisation.

## **4.2 Leadership of Place**

The Council describes itself as having "strong partnerships" and this view was triangulated by the evidence gathered and interviews carried out by the Peer Team during the CPC. One partner described the Borough as "...the exemplar in Staffordshire in relation to partnership working...". This view was further evidenced by the Leader's contribution and influence on the Stoke and Staffordshire LEP. This is a credit to the leadership of the Council and the value it places on building strong and effective partnerships. This has resulted in significant gains for the Stafford area, most notably the LEP has made an

investment to create the Stafford Western Access Route, which the Council has contributed £2.5m, to aid growth in Stafford town centre.

There are a number of well-established partnerships in place that support the delivery of economic growth in the Borough. These existing good relationships will be crucial to be maintained and developed so that the opportunity to address capacity issues within the Council is utilised. Stafford has an opportunity to build on its existing record of partnership working by leading on the re-convening of a formal Local Strategic Partnership to focus on the local housing and economic growth.

The team spoke to a number of the Council's partners including the County Council, Staffordshire Women's Aid and the Police and there was a consistent message about the supportive and proactive nature of their relationship with Stafford. The team heard specifically from one partner about the benefit of sharing priorities and outcomes and another stated that there was a good oversight of common priorities between Council and partners. While a number of the Council's partnerships are beneficial for economic growth purposes, the team also heard about how Stafford "understand the value of partners in delivering wider social value". There will be a continued importance on ensuring the right partners are always engaged in plans moving forward to help release capacity. To aid this the Council will need to review its communication with outside bodies, stakeholders and other partners. A number of partners that the Peer Team spoke to discussed the importance of maintaining and enhancing communications in respect to delivery of current and future plans. A coordinated and consistent approach to communication should be aligned to the Council's forward plan.

The Chief Executive and Leader are influential at a regional and national level. This persuasion and influence has helped the Council to redefine its role in the context of continued austerity and present itself as a leading partner on a regional platform. However, it was noted that to deliver the level of transformation planned at a local level, the Council would need to invest in equipping and resourcing its staff to realise the ambitious targets within the CBP.

Stafford has an impressive track record with partners and it is clear that it is a trusted partner with a strategic view of its partnership landscape. Many of Stafford's successful partnerships are in the realm of economic development. The Council also has examples of good practice in terms of its approach to community wellbeing. The ambitious housing development plans will require close working with the County to ensure a joined up strategic plan for the region. It was impressive that the Council had secured the County Council as a tenant within the Stafford Offices, and it was recognised that this could lead to horizontal integrated working in the future. Stafford has also proven it is committed to improving community wellbeing in the borough and has partnerships with the voluntary sector, schools and community groups to help keep parks, spaces and the borough clean and safe.

### 4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

Stafford Borough Council employees are engaged and motivated, as demonstrated in the recent staff survey. This engagement stems from a visible and ambitious Leader and Chief Executive, who were repeatedly referred to as a strong team during the Peer Team's conversations with staff, councillors and partners. The Council was described by one partner as "positive, approachable and dynamic": this was shown in practice through the Chief Executive's open door policy and his "floor-walk" initiative. Member's spoke of open dialogue with employees at all levels of the organisation and many referred to their relationship with officers as being "based on trust". Although the exception, there were some examples given to the Peer Team of Members being directive with officers and it will be important that Members and officers remain clear on their respective roles. The Peer Team expressed some concern that there might be confusion about priorities if Members were directly requesting work from officers. The Council may wish to review and communicate its Member-officer protocol to ensure that there is a clarity of understanding of respective responsibilities.

The new Corporate Business Plan has been driven by the Leader of the Council and his Cabinet, demonstrating clear joined up working between officer and Member leadership teams. The Chief Executive and Leader meet regularly and it may be beneficial to extend this to Cabinet and Leadership Team meetings to anticipate and prepare for any political or operational implications of forthcoming decisions.

Since May 2018 the Council's scrutiny committees have been restructured to reflect the Council's priorities: Community Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee, Resources Scrutiny Committee and Economic Development and Planning Scrutiny Committee. This alignment demonstrates a positive move towards ensuring that scrutiny is more robust and aligned with the strategic goals of the organisation. However, a long-term forward plan of Cabinet decisions is crucial to ensure that scrutiny can undertake meaningful pre-decision scrutiny and contribute to policy development, whilst also having the ability to hold the Executive to account. The introduction of a new scrutiny structure provides a timely opportunity to provide practical training to Members on the role and function of an effective overview and scrutiny function. The Leadership Team have taken progressive steps towards developing a long term forward plan which includes timescales and milestones. This should be finalised and published to ensure actions have appropriate accountability and that management, Cabinet and scrutiny priorities are translated into measurable plans.

The Cabinet consists of experienced Members with the knowledge and proficiency to speak confidently on their areas of responsibility. The next elections are taking place in the Borough in May 2019 and continued thought should be given to succession planning for potential political roles within the executive or scrutiny arenas, whilst also planning and securing any support or development that might be required to facilitate a smooth transition. Members can make use of a number of free training and networking opportunities through the LGA. In addition, the Council's recently established Member Development Working Group has scope to

review training needs and present options for Member development moving forward.

The Peer Team heard reports from several sources that communication from the Council to Members was often restricted to only formal notifications. This was evidenced in the layout of the “Cabinet digest” which is sent out to all Members following a formal meeting of Cabinet. While the sharing of decisions represents positive intentions, the team felt it would benefit from highlighting clear headlines at the outset, rather than leaving them to the end of the long document. During periods of ongoing transformation and change internal communication will be increasingly important. Updating Members through a regular channel, such as a newsletter, would provide an efficient avenue for sharing important, strategic or interesting business to help councillors carry out their roles and influence policy.

In the wake of reduced budgets, training for staff and Members has become limited. Development opportunities appear to be traditional, reactive and provided on an ad hoc basis. This was also reflected in the results of the staff survey which reported that less than 62% of respondents felt that they were offered training which was “relevant to job role and responsibility”. However, the new Employee Review process will help progress this matter by introducing more focus on aspirations and linking personal goals and performance to the Council’s objectives. To unlock the full potential of the workforce, there should be a move towards organisational development where learning opportunities are considered proactively rather than reactively. This will mean identifying the skills required to help the workforce deliver the Council’s ambitious plans and investing in a programme of planned training and development activity.

It is clear from what the Peer Team observed while on site that a period of transformational change lies ahead if the Council is going to unlock the ambition it strives for in the CBP. As part of the organisational development planning for the Council it will be crucial to create and communicate the expectations, values and behaviours required of both Members and officers. This will be particularly important for the leadership team, as the organisation looks to them to demonstrate their commitment and support for that change. Once again, this puts reliance on a coordinated and transparent internal communications process.

#### **4.4 Financial planning and viability**

Stafford Borough Council is a well-run authority which is financially sound. This was demonstrated in the continuation of balanced budgets and clean audit opinions. Further evidence was provided in the external auditor’s Value for Money opinion that stated “we are satisfied that in all significant respects the Council put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources...”. Credit should be given to the Council for its history of being able to achieve its annual budget in the challenging financial climate, alongside continuing to make improvements in service for residents. For example, despite achieving significant savings, the Council has been able to exceed

customer satisfaction targets at their contact centre (98.09%) and support the creation of 190,000 sq ft of new retail development.

There is a prudent approach to risk and the financial management appeared cautious, well-disciplined and thorough. The Council has taken practical steps to reduce reliance on the New Homes Bonus and has written it out of the budget within the next three years. A number of savings have been delivered including through a small restructure of the senior leadership team, the outsourcing of Leisure and Culture Services and Waste Services. The achievement of savings was impressive, with all planned savings met within the year. This is a credit to the Council's disciplined budget monitoring processes. It will be increasingly important to maintain the stringent financial planning, whilst continuing to build in flexibility to respond to the demands of the CPC. It will also be essential to prepare to meet the demands for further required savings as the financial landscape becomes more challenging across the public sector, therefore income generation opportunities will need to be explored.

The Council's policy is to retain a minimum General Fund balance of reserves of £1m to cover contingencies and emergencies. Small underspends in recent years have meant that the Council has been able to transfer to its reserves and the General Fund balances stood at £1.3m at 31 March 2018. It would be advisable to continue monitoring this level of underspend in order to plan savings and realign budgets where appropriate to help meet future demands. Currently the Council's financial plans deliver a balanced budget up to 2020-21. The main risks of continued delivery of financial plans are clearly articulated and include central government funding, income levels based on demand and Business Rates Retention Scheme. The Council's understanding of risk and established processes to review budgets on a monthly basis will help maintain a sustainable budget position.

The Council was described by one partner as "steady as she goes" in relation to its financial management. This was in recognition of the stable financial situation maintained by the Borough, however, it also highlighted the potential need to take brave decisions and measured risks in order to achieve the ambition set out in the Corporate Business Plan. Without compromising due diligence, the scheme of delegation should allow for finance officers to make routine decisions so that the Head of Finance can focus on strategic matters. To support this, the Peer Team suggests that a review of the risk appetite of the organisation should be undertaken and that difficult decisions regarding future structures should be taken now to help facilitate the delivery of objectives.

The CBP sets out that the Council will "continue to explore other avenues for income generation such as commercial opportunities...". There was some evidence of commercial ambition being realised, for example through sharing the Civic Centre with other organisations to reduce costs. It would be opportune to consider the Council's appetite for more commercial endeavours, including whether it wishes to move towards a commissioning model.

While there was no doubt about the economic growth ambitions of the Council, it will be important to clearly link that ambition to savings, commercialism and financial planning. It is understood that service reviews are currently being undertaken which will help align financial resources with the ambitious priorities set out in the CBP.

The skills and experience required for delivering ambitious growth initiatives might be different to those required in traditional local government accounting or finance roles. The Council's organisational development and workforce plans should seek to understand the talent and skills already within the organisation and utilise them to deliver economic growth objectives.

The appointment of a dedicated contract manager has added capacity to ensure savings are achieved from existing contracts. There is also a potential to use this resource to further assist with a review of the savings achieved through shared services and income generation opportunities. Workforce planning should consider whether the capacity and resource dedicated to contracts management is sufficient and whether skills transfer to organisational managers should be undertaken. The Council should also ensure that there are robust and measurable targets attached to contracts with external providers to mitigate any reliance on over ambitious targets within existing contracts.

#### **4.5 Capacity to deliver**

A number of processes have been introduced which should help staff recognise how they contribute to the delivery of corporate objectives. For example, performance development reviews have been rebranded and rolled out as Employee Reviews: taking a holistic approach to the review processes and referencing business objectives and individuals' aspirations. The team heard about the importance of working as "one council, one organisation", and there was evidence of attempts to reduce siloed working, such as the introduction of a "my job" section for junior and front line staff to talk about their positions at monthly staff forums. The Peer Team would encourage the Council to continue converting the ambition to be "one team" into tangible outcomes, for example through aligning specific resources and developing the workforce to provide future opportunities for skilled and ambitious staff and Members.

Stafford Borough Council currently shares a number of its back office services with neighbouring Cannock Chase District Council. The Council's maintain distinct political structures and Chief Executives, however, they share a number of heads of service across their respective leadership teams. In addition, the Council also has shared service arrangements with Lichfield District Council for health and safety and payroll services, along with some environmental health services with Newcastle Borough Council.

The team heard evidence that in some services, for example Legal, shared resources added additional resilience that has helped retain a skilled workforce. A core objective of the newly publish Corporate Business Plan focusses on financial

sustainability. There are budgeted savings of over £650k per annum related to shared services and through the conversations that the Peer Team had while on site, the general perception of the arrangement appeared to be that the motivation was primarily financial. While there are undoubtedly financial reasons for delivering services more efficiently and effectively through shared arrangements, the Peer Team also urge the council to undertake a review of how shared services can contribute to the objectives in the new CBP and communicate the value and benefits to staff and stakeholders. In reviewing shared services it is also crucial to ensure that the service level agreements remain relevant and a process for regular SLA review and monitoring should be embedded.

The team heard from a number of sources that there remains disparity between the cultures in some areas of shared services, for example, a piece of good practice that would have benefited both council areas, but was only being used at Stafford. To release the full capacity and increased resilience possible with efficient sharing of services processes should be standardised. The internal communication process could also be reviewed to ensure that good practice is shared across teams where there is a shared Head of Service.

Consideration should be given to increasing take-up of, and access to, agile working practices. For example, there was still an expectation on staff “clocking in and out” of work and the Council should review whether hot-desking, more open plan office space (within restriction of current building) and home working should be utilised. An increase in agile working may not only improve productivity and staff morale, but also help break down silos which were described in one case as “a product of the building”. The arrival of external partners into the Stafford Borough Council building through the One Public Estate programme offers a timely opportunity to consider flexible working arrangements.

As referenced throughout this report, the Council’s growth plans are clearly ambitious. There are a number of largescale projects planned for the coming years including the Garden Village and the Stafford Station Gateway. The word “ambition” was used in a number of the conversations with stakeholders, however, there was also a wariness around the Council’s existing capacity to deliver its ambitious plans. One partner specifically stated that they were “impressed as plans are ambitious, but caution with the capacity to deliver”. The Council is currently undertaking an in-depth review of services to ensure appropriate resources are allocated to deliver Council priorities. The Peer Team would support this and suggest that the Council should immediately look to utilise the talent and skills at all levels of the organisation, along with identifying financial resources to support transformation.

It is widely recognised that the Council will need to seriously consider succession planning as it prepares for its journey ahead. The senior leadership team consists of a number of long-standing employees who hold a wealth of corporate knowledge and it will be important for the Council to develop a talent pipeline for these senior roles in the future. This includes reviewing the structure to assure it is fit for purpose when delivering the new CBP. The Council should consider how it markets itself as an employer of choice, recognising the importance of place for

potential employees. The Peer Team heard from a number of sources that recruitment had been historically difficult and so a clear recruitment package which focusses on the benefits (not just financial) of working at Stafford will be crucial for continuing the transformation of the organisation. Any succession planning and recruitment campaign should also seek to consider the Council's gender balance which is strongly evidenced by the pay gap data (8.8%) and the visible lack of gender balance at the senior officer levels.

Throughout the evidence gathering process the Peer Team's view was that there was an urgent need to develop and implement an organisational development programme to ensure the Council has the correct workforce for the change of pace required. Crucial to any successful organisational development programme will be recognition of the skills needed to help the workforce adapt to changing work practices. The Council may consider undertaking a skills audit of existing employees to understand more about its workforce, such as those with project management or social media skills.

Overall, the Peer Team felt that Stafford Borough Council was at an important and exciting stage of its journey. Its disciplined financial management alongside the skills, potential and enthusiasm amongst Members and officers stands it in good stead to remain and develop as an influential and trusted council of the future.

## **5. Next steps**

### **Immediate next steps**

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

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Helen Murray, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are: Email: [helen.murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:helen.murray@local.gov.uk)

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.