

Jane Scott OBE  
Leader of the Council  
Wiltshire Council  
County Hall  
Bythesea Road  
Trowbridge

Dear Jane

### **Wiltshire Council - Corporate Peer Challenge: 23-27 September 2013**

On behalf of the Peer Team, I would like to say what a pleasure it was to be invited into Wiltshire Council to deliver the recent Peer Challenge. The Team felt privileged to be allowed to conduct its work with the support of you and your colleagues.

You asked the for the peer challenge team to focus on the Council's progress with its overarching change paradigm of 'Transforming Wiltshire through Innovation'. Within this theme you asked the Peer Team to focus on the following:

- How well does the Council empower local communities to do more for themselves?
- How can it do more together with partners to improve outcomes, transform services and deliver one shared vision?
- How well does it respond to the requirements for cultural change and transformation over the next four years?

In delivering this focus the peer team also considered the core components that all corporate peer challenges cover:

- Understanding of local context and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and has it established a clear set of priorities?
- 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?
- Political and managerial leadership: Does the council have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?
- Governance and decision-making: Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?
- Organisational capacity: Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer Challenges are improvement-focused and tailored to meet individual Councils' needs. The peers

used their experience and knowledge to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

This letter provides a summary of the feedback that was presented at the end of our September 2013 onsite visit. In presenting this feedback, the Peer Challenge Team have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. We hope this will help provide recognition of the achievements of Wiltshire Council while also stimulating debate and thinking about future challenges.

## **1.     **Headline messages****

Wiltshire Council has had a good first four years from becoming a Unitary Council in April 2009. It was guided by a strong vision of making the transition easy and seamless for customers, and using it as an opportunity to re-think how the council will (and can afford to) work with communities and partners. The asset programme, including the transformation of County Hall as one of the three 'hubs' in the County, as well as service redesign programmes are impressive examples of improving services at lower cost.

The Peer Team recognised the following as key strengths and important building blocks in continuing the transformation journey and mastering the financial challenges ahead.

- There is very strong respect and high regard for the Leader. Everyone we spoke with praised her clarity and strengths of vision, commitment and hard work. We found a strong sense of loyalty among officers and partners recognise the Leader as an effective ambassador for Wiltshire Council.
- We heard of strong and trusted relationship between officers and members with a clear appreciation that the Council is strongly member led.
- Wiltshire Council has a good reputation in the community. Its vision 'to create stronger and more resilient communities' has resonance locally. Parish and Town Councils, volunteers and voluntary sector organisations we spoke with speak positively about the purposeful intent of the council to delegate responsibilities and enable local people and groups to do more for themselves.
- The introduction of 18 Area Boards has been successful. Area Boards are well supported and attract significant numbers of local people. They are a key part of the Council's organisational plan to becoming a smaller central core with a wider web of local service provision
- Partners reported very strong relationships with Council, in particular the Police, the Ministry of Defence, Parish and Town Councils and the Voluntary and Community Sector. Partners understand and buy-into the council's vision of creating more joined up public services not only to achieve better quality services but improve efficiency and reduce costs.

- We experienced a positive and community focused organisational culture. The Council's vision for its community is permeating across the council. Staff we spoke to were very clear about the purpose and shift of the Council to becoming an enabler rather than a service provider per se.
- We found a highly engaged workforce with a real sense of pride in the organisation. Staff consistently commented that they were proud to work for the Council.
- Helped by a clear vision and strong leadership, there is an emerging single view of change across the organisation among members and staff. This reduces the risk of failure and will ensure that decisions and resource allocations are made taking into consideration the complexity and interdependence of the change programme as a whole
- Systematic programme management arrangements are emerging and the joining up with programme resources from the Police is a great example of the Council working in partnership to deliver efficiency. Strong management systems will be essential to ensure that change programmes are delivered to scope and timescales and realising the expected benefits.

The following sections present out key findings and challenge for each of the themes you wanted us to address. Section 9 provides our recommendations to Wiltshire Council in moving forward.

## **2. Transformation through innovation**

There is a strong emerging single view of major change across the organisation. Members and staff we spoke to were clear about the financial imperative for change, their vision of creating stronger and more resilient communities who can do more for themselves with the Council contracting, but to manage this contraction in a transformational and innovative way as opposed to salami slicing. The transformation programme includes several strands: asset (three hub strategy and community campus programme), working with partners, as well as organisational and leadership development and a programme of service redesigns. Senior governance is through a Members Transformation Board which has executive powers. This single view of major change will reduce risks of failure and will allow robust decision to be made about allocation of resources.

There is strong integration of transformation plans with the Police. Wiltshire Council's North Hub at Monkton Park in Chippenham now hosts the Police enquiry office team, the Neighbourhood Policing Team and police response officers. Organisations are sharing office space flexibly as well as some back office functions, and are co-operating in cross-agency service reviews to improve customer access. Co-location has resulted in better links between police and the Council's Housing and Anti-Social Behaviour teams, facilitating cross-referrals. Looking forward, we heard of significant commitment to fully integrating Police services in the new Community Campus Programme.

'Systems thinking' is the council's methodology for service transformation. The underpinning philosophy is to understand what constitutes 'value demand' from the point of view of the customer and to re-design services so that they meet this demand, cutting out process steps that add waste into the system. The Council has invested in training 'systems thinking leads' in all departments and has devised a methodology that meets the requirements of Wiltshire ('The Wiltshire Way'). This builds ownership and understanding and demonstrates to staff that the Council is serious about the fundamental purpose of systems thinking reviews, and does not see it as a 'cheap and fast way' to cut costs.

The Council has invested heavily in its ICT infrastructure to enable change. It has a robust ICT platform and a solid ICT strategy. For example, the Council is shifting data storage to 'cloud' solutions and has invested heavily in ICT to support flexible and agile working across the County. Electronic document storage systems, virtual office technologies and on line portals are all being used to enable the wider transformation programme.

Rationalising the Council's asset base from 95 office buildings pre-2009 to three main hubs in Chippenham, Trowbridge and Salisbury and a community campus for each of the 18 Area Board areas is a cornerstone of the council's transformation programme and expected to make significant savings and contribute to a planned reduction of back office support costs. The new County Hall campus is impressive in concept, purpose and design. The council has introduced a ratio of 2:1 desks for all staff and a hot desk approach which makes use of flexible working and good IT infrastructure. Staff we spoke to regarded the ability to work flexibly as a key strength, reducing commuting distances in a Council that is very large and rural.

The integration of public health into the Council was well planned and managed. Staff have been co-located since December 2012 and the transition was well handled. Staff we spoke to felt that officers and members are embracing the transfer of public health enthusiastically and that there are good opportunities to influence colleagues in services such as planning, leisure and housing. For example, public health is represented on the Military Civilian Integration Partnership Delivery Group and will have a key role in the design of the Salisbury Plain Super Garrison. Cabinet papers include a section on 'health implications' and we heard about good engagement with Area Boards through the use of JSNA data and facilitating and enabling communities to deal with specific health issues locally. This is a good base for mainstreaming health across all the Council does and to use the ring-fenced public health budget to tackle the social determinants of health.

The Council is starting to build local accountabilities into its core services. For example, the new Street Scene service includes requirements for the contractor to report back to local communities via the Area Board.

Adult Social Care is the service area with the highest spend and biggest increase of projected the demand for the Council. There is scope for the Council to explore more customer focused models of service delivery. It was identified that the personalisation agenda needs to be pursued with vigour when benchmarking it against other authorities. The Help to Live at Home Service is a good example of

enabling people to live independently and there remains further scope for re-ablement, personalisation of service and integration with health.

There needs to be a better fit between the future financial proofing of the Council and the Transformation programme. The Council faces a challenge of a £20m reduction in central government funding and an increase in service demands of around £100m, which means it needs to find and realign £120m over the next four years to deliver its priorities. Much of this will be delivered through the transformation programme. While the Council rightly states that its programmes of service redesign or sharing asset with partners are as much about improved quality than savings, the Peer Team feel that the size of the financial challenges requires there to be a stronger focus on projects and programmes underpinned by robust business cases, as with the three hub strategy which has detailed 25 year cost modelling which has over achieved against its planned savings targets, needing to deliver financial savings over a four year period to meet the savings targets in the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). Alternatively, the Council may have to revert to applying savings targets across all services which would contradict its philosophy of delivering transformation.

The council has recently reduced the strategic capacity at a senior level and at the same time strengthened the structure needed to lead the council's services to deliver the outcomes described in the business plan by aligning services in a way that supports joint working. For example, the current restructure is removing five posts, leaving the number of Service Directors at 12. Given the number, scale and complexity of internal change programmes and those with partners (for example the Military Civil Integration programme with the MoD and the Campus Programme), care needs to be taken to robustly assess the capacity needed to lead and implement these programmes and to re-prioritise these where need be. Alternatively there is a risk of poor planning or delivery, or Service Directors being unable to give sufficient management support to their Heads of Service.

The Council could do more to enable digital channels for customers, staff, partners and volunteers. The Council's website was seen as difficult to navigate and did not provide many access channels. An example from our conversation with volunteers was that there was no portal for volunteers to register an interest, find out about volunteering opportunities or network with others. The Peer Team acknowledge that plans for an overhaul of the website are in place and we understand that this will be addressed as part of a wider cross channel review to commence in November 2013.

### **3. Political and managerial leadership**

Wiltshire Council enjoys strong political leadership. The Leader is regarded as highly visible, trusted and authentic by staff and communities. Staff understand the Leader's vision and welcome its clarity. The personal commitment and involvement of the Leader has generated trusted and respected working relationships with key external partners such as the Police and the Ministry of Defence. Her stewardship ensures that partners send senior representatives to key partnership meetings such as the Programme Board for the Military Civil Integration programme or the Public Services Board.

Cabinet provides a strong political direction which is valued by officers. One member of staff told us that *'Cabinet members set clear direction – they are high calibre individuals who work effectively to drive the Council.'* Officers we spoke to had a good understanding of the vision and welcomed its clarity and coherence and its expression through 12 key actions and six objectives in the new business plan. Overall, Cabinet members are well engaged in and knowledgeable about their portfolios and, collectively there are high expectations of Cabinet members. Cabinet are willing to drive change in a coherent and systemic way. This is an enabling function for a strong member-driven Council.

The Council has high calibre senior officers. Wiltshire Council is managed by a team of three Corporate Directors who share the statutory functions between them. The arrangements were designed with external support and are enthusiastically embraced by Cabinet and the Corporate Directors.

Relationships between members and officers are supportive and effective. We observed constructive and respectful relationships between senior officers and member with appropriate challenge and support.

The Council is providing strong leadership of the place. The Leaders chairs the Public Service Board (PSB) for Wiltshire, bringing together senior executives or the Leaders of public sector organisations including the Chief Constable, Police and Crime Commissioner, the Commander of 43 Wessex Brigade and the Chief Operating Officer of the CCG. The challenge for the Council is to use these meetings to best effect through careful agenda planning and ensuring that items have a specific purpose and will result in key decisions as opposed to providing information and updates. Failing to do this may result in participants not attending meetings or delegating attendance to more junior colleagues with less authority to speak or decide on behalf of their organisations.

The leadership response to the Ofsted report in early 2012 was impressive in its decisiveness, determination and pace. Given the unexpectedness and severity of the judgement, the Leader took on the Portfolio for Children's Services for a period of time and the Corporate Director led a service review and the Council committed significant resources to Children's Services and safeguarding arrangements in particular. This was acknowledged positively in Ofsted's re-inspection in July 2013.

We saw limited succession planning for senior and high risk jobs. Corporate capacity has already reduced and is reducing further and the Council has set a target for back office support costs to be reduced to 6 per cent of the Council's total budget. The Peer Team believe the council needs to consider the number of high risk posts it needs to ensure the right management skills are available into the future. We would recommend developing a formal succession plan that can be reviewed annually and is linked to the Council's talent development work. Failing this may leave the council exposed in key skills areas or it may not have the skills or competencies to lead and manage the significant transformation programmes and projects.

Engagement with the CCG is developing well from a historically low base as a result of difficult relationships with the predecessor PCT which are being tackled. This

provides a great opportunity to align and share the vision and commissioning plans of both organisations. There are good structural links with one of the Corporate Directors having a seat at the CCG Board and the Chair of the CCG acting as vice chair of the Health and well-being Board. Using formal and informal mechanisms we would urge you to invest time and capacity in cementing relationships in order to align or integrate plans and commissioning arrangements for the benefits of our communities as well as managing the financial challenges ahead.

Management capacity is subject to a review of senior structures across the Council. The organisation is changing at pace and we feel that it is right that that pace is maintained. There is good energy in the organisation. In such a climate, to retain a nimble and responsive culture, it is important to continuously review the scheme of delegation and the right management capacity required at the right levels doing the right thing. Fewer layers bring higher levels of responsibility further down the operational management line, and those gaps in experience between the reduced layers (five aimed for as we understand it) require levels of responsibility to be understood at all levels.

The Council could engage more on the national stage to share its achievements and learning and influence national debates. Understandably there has been a significant focus on integrating five Councils into one Unitary Council over the last four years. The Peer Team feel that a greater and more visible national engagement of the Leader and Cabinet members as well as Directors and officers generally in the LGA, professional associations and other forums would benefit the Council as much as the wider local government community.

#### **4. Strong and resilient communities**

The council has a strong vision and convincing concept for Localism. 'Creating strong and resilient communities' is the Council's vision and drives its activities. It seeks to reduce its organisational core to what only the Council can do and to devolve as much as possible to local communities through flexible and localised arrangements, creating a variety of service delivery to meet variety of demands locally. There is a strong push to move from service delivery to enabling communities to help themselves and thereby reducing demand on the council. The development of 18 Area Boards and the programme of bespoke, locally designed Community Hubs for each of the 18 Area Boards provide the governance vehicle and infrastructure for this. Area Boards were introduced as part of the new Unitary Council in 2009, are part of the Council's constitution and as such as formal powers. They receive officer support from Democratic Services; they have a dedicated Area Board Manager and manage a small budget. Each Cabinet Member and Service Director act as 'link persons' to a particular Area Board. We found widespread enthusiasm among members, officers and Parish & Town Councils for Area Boards. Ward members in particular have engaged well and have put a lot of energy and effort into their roles as local area board representatives. Meetings are well attended and purposeful, and we heard many examples of how the Boards are solving local issues such as highways issue but are also involved in developing projects to tackle local issues, such as tackling childhood obesity through the promotion of more active

lifestyles. Each of the Board has a dedicated community website which acts as an information and communication hub.

The vision and direction for the Community Campus programme is impressive. It is at the heart of the council's vision and a logical adjunct to the Council's plans of reducing its out dated asset base. The council is pledging significant capital investment for the programme and is working through the Area Boards and Community Operation Boards to design a bespoke campus for each area that meets local needs. Campuses will be different in design, some may be on split sites or digital but with each campus will have a core offer such as a single point of contact, a personal care room, multi-purpose activity space and meeting room space. There is a strong commitment to working with the Area Boards and Community Operation Boards and partners locally such as the Police, local schools, leisure services or care providers, to design space flexibly.

Staff understand and embrace the Council's vision to create stronger and resilient communities. We heard from many that improving outcomes for customers is a key motivator for working with the council.

Partners welcome the Councils preparedness and efforts to customise and share its data. Examples were specific reports prepared for the MoD on military personnel, the Director of Health Annual report and localised reports, using the JSNA data, to articulate particular challenges in health. This supports partners in their evidence based planning.

A prosperous economy is an important condition to create prosperous communities. There is a need to articulate the joint economic endeavours more explicitly with Swindon to enhance the possibility of external funding which would benefit both Councils.

Roles and accountabilities of Area Boards need to be defined better to move them to the next level and still be affordable. As referred to above, the Area Boards are well regarded and are mostly making a good impact locally. We heard that in some areas more needs to be done to ensure broader attendance and managing the attendance of 'single issue groups'. We also heard that in some areas agendas are too long and tend to be about consultations and the distribution of small community grants rather than difficult local issues. The Peer Team acknowledge that some of these issues need to be challenged and resolved locally. Given the ambitious Community Campus programme and the Council's vision of devolving responsibility for the delivery of outcomes, the Peer Team considers it important for the Council to be more clear about the future roles and responsibilities of Area Boards, for example in managing the Community Campus or overseeing specific budgets or services, for example libraries or aspects of development management. At the same time, conversations need to happen at Council level about how the new Community Campus programme can deliver better outcomes. One participant articulated his concern as *'there is a risk that services decant into new buildings – and this is not what it is about'*.

Our conversations with Parish and Town Councils highlighted good commitment in taking over specific services. However, a common theme was that they require



better support from services within the Council, such as Property and Legal Services. For example there have been delays in agreeing lease arrangements for community asset transfers which have had an impact on partners and their perceptions of the Council taking this issue seriously.

## **5. Working with partners**

Relationships with external partners are very strong and respected and work at strategic and operation levels. We referred to the work with the Police on sharing assets and back office functions earlier in this letter. A more practical example with the MoD is the contribution of the Council to a recent 'Transition Fair', attracting 800+ soldiers and families and hosting some 80 exhibitors from a range of agencies including colleges, employers, housing and welfare. Another example is the integrated children's safeguarding referral unit with the Police. Although the Wiltshire has a large number of schools who have transferred to Academy status, the Council is continuing engagement through the regular engagement with head teachers in order to monitor, support and influence schools on attainment and skills development and to facilitate planning to create skills for the future.

The Council recognises the significant opportunities for economic growth, skills and employment through the Military Civilian Integration programme with the MoD. It includes the military rebasing plan which envisages the creating of new military bases (including 2,400 new homes) for over 14,800 military personnel on Salisbury Plain, and the creation of a new Defence College of Technical Training in mechanical and aeronautical engineering at MOD Lyneham. These developments have a timeline until 2020 and programme management arrangements are in place. There is a good recognition of the wider opportunities, such as designing healthy living into the new housing developments and working with colleagues and schools to maximise training and job opportunities. This is well reflected in the eight programme strands, one of which is the City Deal 2, which focuses on unlocking the economic potential of the military presence to free up surplus MoD sites and using the skills of ex-military personnel to support business growth.

There is an appreciation of the need and a desire to continue improving relationships with the CCG. Given the importance of these relationships in the context of aligning commissioning plans to integrate health and social care, this is welcome and needs to be pursued with purposeful intent and speed.

The Council is working effectively with the voluntary and community sector to promote volunteering. Future design models, in particular for the Community Campus programme, envisage much greater use of volunteers. The Council is effectively tapping into the expertise and networks of the Voluntary and Community Sector to develop its approach to volunteering as well as recruiting and training volunteers. Effective supply chains have been established via contracts with the Voluntary Sector to source potential volunteers. The volunteer community is seen as a core part of the Councils future workforce and effective policies are being established on how to engage with and manage volunteers. There was, however, some evidence that these policies were not yet being applied consistently across the organisation.

Volunteers we met with were positive about their engagement with the Council. All of the participants had received training and on-going support to their roles which they felt was appropriate and they valued. They commented positively on being welcomed and appreciated by 'staff on the ground'. This is a good basis from which to develop the council's approach to using volunteers further.

At present relationships with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) could be developed further to exploit opportunities for Wiltshire.. This relates to the need for a better articulated joint vision for economic growth as well as building on the existing mechanisms, resources and skills to create an effective delivery mechanism. The Peer Team acknowledges that the LEP is still a developing stage, but given the significant growth programmes referred to above, including City Deal 2, we believe that this needs to be accelerated. There may be an opportunity for Wiltshire Council, perhaps jointly with Swindon Borough Council, to host the delivery mechanism for the LEP. This may be an effective way of creating high level support while at the same time providing the LEP with access to a variety of skills and expertise. Hypothetically, if the City Deal is secured, this could offer fresh impetus and opportunity for the LEP.

The Peer Team would challenge whether the Council can do more to engage with partners outside Wiltshire. Our discussions with members and staff were inwardly focused. Although we heard about sub-regional working arrangements, for example with other councils in the South West on adoption, it required us to probe as opposed to being part of the organisational mindset. Our challenge would be to encourage officers and members to be more aware of and engage in 'cutting edge' thinking beyond Wiltshire, for example the introduction of Social Impact Bonds or the opportunities of eco tariffs helping to tackle fuel poverty in poor quality housing. It doesn't mean that Wiltshire will engage in or adopt all ideas but it is important for the Council to be tuned into innovative thinking on a national stage so that it can pursue ideas as and when it could benefit Wiltshire.

Not all volunteers are enabled to work to their potential abilities. For example, we heard that some volunteers were keen to be trained on the Library IT system, enabling them to undertake book searches or similar activities when the professional library staff are not on-site or busy. There was a significant minority in our focus group who felt that some professional staff were not appreciating the background or skills of volunteers. Looking forward towards developing staff models that include volunteers there are great opportunities in defining roles and responsibilities that are building on the skills and professional expertise many volunteers will bring and will want to apply to their voluntary engagement. It will require the development processes which identify motivations and skills volunteers bring and how they can best be applied. It may also require a re-think about the levels of professionalism that are needed in specific services.

## **6. Financial planning and viability**

The Council has maximised the opportunity of moulding five organisations into one to a distinct financial advantage. Many of these were a result of removing duplications such as reduction of staffing and management, the number of elected members, duplication of licenses for IT systems and joint up procurement. Asset management continues to deliver significant savings as well as improving working conditions for staff and maximising new technology and communication channels. The Council is moving from 95 offices buildings to three 'hubs' with long term savings of £85 million and creating capital receipts. This has placed the Council on a good footing for the challenges ahead.

Looking forward, the MTF5 requires a further realignment of £100m over the next four years. These are divided into three key savings lines: staff reduction costs, transformation and innovation and savings through procurement. The recent Voluntary Redundancy process contributed £6.2m to staff savings. The process was well managed and meant that all staff had an opportunity to consider whether they wanted or could be part of a different type of Council. Some 60 per cent of applications were accepted and provided scope for a comprehensive re-organisation of teams and services, resulting in staff re-focusing the work they are doing and many taking on new responsibilities. With the new Business Plan as well as a new series of behaviours and values many staff felt that this was a significant step forward towards in establishing a more modern and customer focused Council.

Like other local authorities, the on-going savings requirements for Wiltshire Council are significant. Although there is good awareness of the budget gap amongst the Senior Management Team and the council has delivered £100m of savings over the last three years, the Peer Team felt that the profile of long-term financial planning to meet the savings requirements in the MTF5 beyond 2015/16 should be higher. The council is currently documenting its approach to making its required savings, using its three savings headings in the MTF5 and new Business Plan. While we appreciate that there are not fully developed ideas for the entire period, we strongly believe that there needs to be one overarching cost reduction plan for 2015/16 onwards. It is natural that the plan will flex and develop continuously. Without a documented overarching organisational plan, a corporate and systemic analysis of which savings can be realistically achieved and when will prove difficult.

A significant amount of the savings is attributed to 'Transformation and Innovation, in particular asset management and a programme of service redesigns. We understand that the Council has adapted its 'systems thinking methodology' to facilitate quicker reviews in transactional services such as benefits to reduce cost, as opposed to the systems-thinking philosophy which says that making services more efficient will result in less costs as a matter of course. However, given the degree of savings required we would challenge whether the transformation programme needs to have a more explicit purpose to deliver savings. The alternative would be applying a higher savings target on base budgets across all or some services which may defeat the purpose and principles of a systemic transformation programme as services are likely to make cuts from their service perspective without taking into the account of their implication on other services.

The Peer Team suggest that the above challenge is even more important given the level of reserves and debt repayments. In 2011/12, usable reserves stood at just

under £30million, placing the Council in the bottom quartile and have dropped further since then.

We mentioned excellent relationships with partners, particularly the Police and MoD earlier in this letter. Building on these and the existing and future plans of sharing services and estate we feel that the Council could do more to act on the information about the 'public purse' available to Wiltshire and how this could be deployed effectively. This would be a high profile project for the Public Service Board.

## **7. Governance and decision making**

The Council has a strong leader and Cabinet model. The Cabinet works effectively as a team and meets regularly to act corporately. The Leader is well-supported by her Cabinet members, who in turn are supported by portfolio councillors. There was a strong sense of agreement from the councillors we met regarding the challenges ahead and general future direction for the Council.

Area Boards are part of the Council's constitution and the Council can discharge executive functions to the Board provided that they operate within the Council's policy and budget framework and within the requirements of the constitution. This provides the Board with formal powers and status and is regarded as a particular strength by local members and communities. It enforces the commitment of the Council to elevating them from pure local consultation boards.

The council's scrutiny function needs reviewing as it is primarily focused on process rather than outcomes. There has been a focus on scrutinising internal plans and strategies, including the recently approved Business Plan, financial management and staff morale. While focused internal scrutiny continues to be an important role, its remit ought to be much wider focusing on outcomes for citizens, wider policy agendas and the impact they have on local communities and their resilience. Examples could be the impact of welfare reform, demographic changes or perhaps the impact and future direction of Area Boards, Community Budgets or a specific local issue. This will use the resource of scrutiny in a more proactive, forward looking and developmental way.

As the organisation gets leaner, in its bid to retain a sharp customer focus, it needs to ensure that decision making close to the customer is as empowered as it can be. As the organisation transforms and redesigns its services in a highly localised fashion, the scheme of delegation needs to be consistently driven by a strong corporate leadership.

Particularly in the context of the Community Campus programme, there is a need to clarify governance arrangements between the Community Operations Board (COBs) and the Area Board. COBs will have an important role in developing the detail of the emerging campus in terms of their scope, design and how they are run. Our discussions highlighted that not everyone is clear about the degree of freedom of COBs and who is ultimately deciding on the business cases that will be put forward to the Council's Cabinet for approval.

As a general point and not to underplay the important of face to face discussions and engagement, there was a general sense among the Peer Team that the Council was operating through very many meetings, some of which may not be required to the extent or formality. They are an expensive way to conduct business.

## **8. Organisational culture and capacity**

Staff understand and are committed to the organisation's focus on communities. In our discussions we heard repeatedly that '*meeting the public*' and '*wanting to deliver for communities*' were key motivators and the reason staff were working for the Council.

The Peer Team found staff to be very committed, positive and highly engaged. They enjoyed the flexibilities the Council are offering and many articulated that they were proud to work for a Council that prides itself on being innovative. Staff also articulated a palpable sense of pride in how far the Council has come since April 2009. We conducted a number of focus groups with front-line staff and managers and heard similar messages throughout. These are real strong building blocks for the councils approach to delivering outcomes for and with communities locally and based on their individual needs.

Partners were positive about the Council's staff and valued their support and engagement. Examples are the 'Transition Fair' where the input from Wiltshire staff exceeded the MoD's expectations, as well as engagement with planning over the big MIC schemes.

Internal communication systems are very effective. The intranet is well developed, comprehensive and easy to navigate and well used by staff. There are regular e-mails and information bulletins and the corporate directors have a blog each. Staff indicated that they would welcome regularly face-to-face group briefings from managers. Achievements are celebrated, for example through the monthly staff award ceremony which is planned and conducted professionally, turning it into a memorable occasion for individual staff or teams who receive such an award. Staff who are based in the new hubs value the modern and well-designed accommodation.

The Council's behaviour framework is well embedded. Staff and managers find them easy to understand, practical and appropriate and many we spoke to felt that they provided good hooks to have difficult conversations with staff, they would have previously found difficult to conduct. Staff are supported through e-learning packages to reflect on and develop the behaviours through a mix of questionnaires, cartoons, vox pops and activities, bringing the behaviours to life.

The Council is data and insight rich on its workforce metrics. Good systems are in place to capture core workforce data. The Council have developed an intuitive database of workforce information from a variety of sources, including the on-line appraisal process, staff surveys, quarterly performance reports and exit interviews to use at service and Council levels. This supports the HR and service managers to have focused discussions about current and future issues.

Workforce planning and talent development is very strong. We were impressed with the Council's focus on organisational learning and development initiatives. Examples are the availability of leadership modules ('management matters') attended by over 1,000 managers, the development of a coaching programme and NLP bitesize workshops. We heard staff and managers speak very positively about organisational commitment on personal development and learning.

The new culture is not embedded across all services. During meetings and focus groups we found there some services (eg Housing) where staff felt did not feel engaged and supported in the cultural change programme as in other services. The scope of our work was too narrow to meet with staff from all services but this highlights that there are likely to be pockets or services who are not engaged in the cultural change as others.

Concerns about high work pressures were expressed by some staff. Given the reduction of staff through the recent VR process, staff and managers will need to be supported in prioritising and re-prioritising their work and the work of their teams. Many staff we spoke to were enthusiastic about the opportunities this offers, but a consistent message to us was that many staff are working at a considerable pace already and are concerned about making mistakes or not being able to do a good enough job.

There is a perceived 'two-tier status' between staff located in the new Hubs and those who are still based in the old buildings. This does not only apply to the working environment but also to the way staff feel communicated with. For example, there was a perception that Corporate and Service Directors are rarely seen outside the Hubs or south of the Salisbury Plain. In many ways this is an inevitable consequence of the phased approach to asset management, but efforts need to be made to explain to staff the rationale and planned sequencing so that staff appreciate the Council wide rationale for decisions. Balancing work pressures and the need for managers to be and be seen outside County Hall means that they need to set expectations and maximise opportunities to meet with staff outside the main Hubs. The Council's Leader and senior managers already use twitter and blogs and may want to roll this out more systematically across the Council.

With the need to define key service parameters and governance arrangements for the new Community Campus programme, we felt that staff needed more support to appreciate that these are not about relocating services but about delivering outcomes to communities. We found staff were keen to engage in these concepts but did not know when and how to do this.

The appraisal system is paperless and has a strong, measured focus on behaviours. It is suggested that a stronger focus is placed on aligning individual performance to the new Business Plan – the 'Golden Thread', and that employees are held to account for their outcomes and deliverables. A number of employees in the focus groups commented that the Council '*needs to get better at identifying and addressing poor performance*'.

There is a need to accelerate the development of the Council's volunteer workforce as part of the core workforce. The Peer Team recognise that you have plans to do this but there is a need to accelerate this work, particularly with a view to the Community Campus programme as well as many services such as Libraries who are delivered with help from volunteers.

The Council could challenge its own practice more. '*We are a bit too nice*' was a quote the Peer Team heard repeatedly and some of our challenge, for example at workshops with managers, was received with a notion of defensiveness as opposed to interest. Openness, curiosity and active pursuit of challenge are essential ingredients in maintaining a culture of innovation.

## **9. Key recommendations**

Based on the peer challenge teams' findings we recommend that the Council considers the following actions. They actions we believe will help improve and develop the Council's effectiveness and capacity to deliver future ambitions and plans.

1. Address the budget gap of 15/16 and beyond
2. Clarify the outcomes you want Area Boards to achieve and their relationship with the Centre
3. Prioritise work with the CCG now to ensure shared vision and plans
4. Work with LEP partners to develop a stronger vision and delivery mechanism for the future
5. Strengthen performance management arrangements and align to organisational priorities and outcomes
6. Realign scrutiny to focus on outcomes for the public
7. Continuously review your corporate capacity to deliver major transformation programmes

## **10. Next steps**

The Council's political leadership and senior management will undoubtedly wish to reflect on these findings and suggestions before determining how the Council wishes to take things forward. As part of the Peer Challenge process, there is an offer of continued activity to support this. We made some suggestions about how this might be utilised, for example a follow-up visit after 9-12 months. I look forward to finalising the detail of that activity as soon as possible.

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council through the Peer Challenge to date. Andy Bates, Principal Adviser (South West) is the main contact between the Council and the Local Government Association. Andy can be contacted at [andy.bates@local.gov.uk](mailto:andy.bates@local.gov.uk) and can provide access to our resources and any further support.

In the meantime, all of us connected with the Peer Challenge would like to wish the Council every success going forward. Once again, many thanks for inviting the Peer Challenge and to everyone involved for their participation.

Yours sincerely

Anne Brinkhoff  
Programme Manager – Peer Support  
Local Government Association

Tel: 07766251752  
[anne.brinkhoff@local.gov.uk](mailto:anne.brinkhoff@local.gov.uk)

On behalf of the Peer Challenge Team:

Jim Graham, Chief Executive, Warwickshire County Council  
Cllr Martin Hill, Leader, Lincolnshire County Council  
Gillian Hibberd, Strategic Director (Resources and Transformation),  
Buckinghamshire County Council  
Paul Masters, Interim Chief Executive, Cornwall Council