

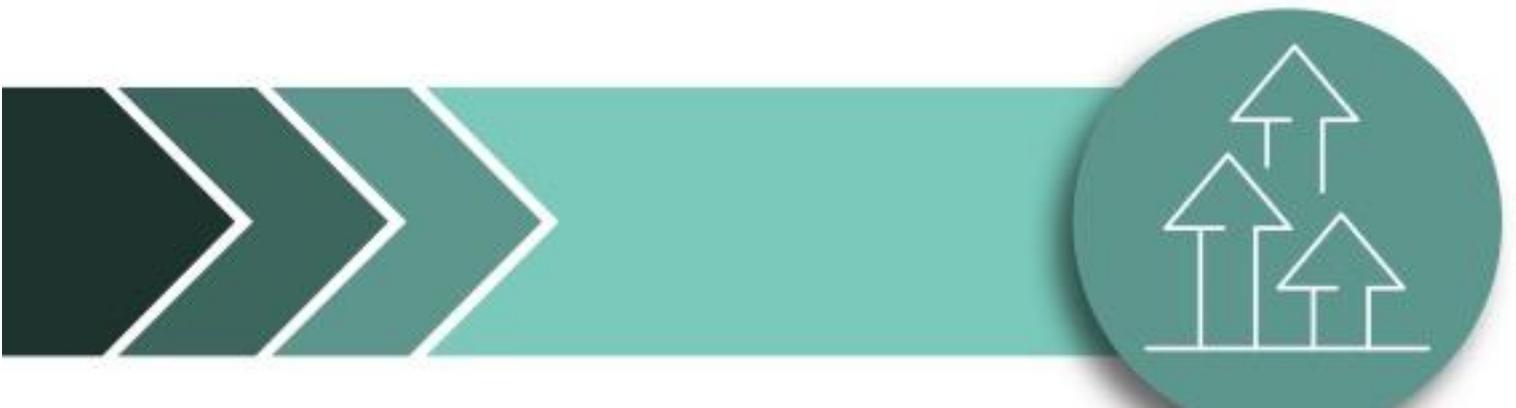


# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Wiltshire Council

8<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> November 2022

Feedback report



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# 1. Executive summary

Wiltshire Council is clearly, and proudly, a values led organisation with senior members and officers committed to delivering the best possible outcomes for residents. This ethos modelled by the Chief Executive, Senior Members and Leadership Team is permeating all levels of the organisation. A collaborative, open and transparent organisational culture has developed under the stewardship of the current Chief Executive, where challenge is genuinely welcomed between both officers and members.

The council serves a large and mostly prosperous county which has a rich diverse heritage. With a population of nearly 510,000, including around 30,000 military personnel and their families, the council is also the fourth largest unitary council in England. With these and other key factors in mind, the council utilises a strong data and insight capability and focus to underpin and inform its recently adopted Business Plan, a plan which seeks to reflect and meet the needs and aspirations of the communities it serves.

The recently agreed Business Plan is visibly providing organisational direction and is quite clearly owned by members. The plan covers a ten-year period and so provides an important clarity of vision and purpose into the medium term – transcending political terms of office. Through this plan, the council articulates a mission to ensure:

- The people of Wiltshire are empowered to live full, healthy, and enriched lives
- Communities continue to be beautiful and exciting places to live
- The local economy thrives and is supported by a skilled workforce
- The council leads the way in mitigating the climate changes ahead.

In pursuit of this mission, the council is working hard on a place-shaping agenda and embedding an integrated place-based approach. Developing a wider Economic Strategy for Wiltshire, led by the council in collaboration with public and private partners, will be an important next step towards achieving this. Partners stand ready and willing to engage in a more structured way with the council and build on the existing good practice that often occurs at a service level currently.

The council's work to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change is impressive, with many activities that would be considered exceptional in other organisations being seen very much as the 'day job'.

There are many improvement success stories within the council, not least within Children's Services - a service which has embraced a wide-ranging improvement journey resulting in the team being the first in the South West to be rated as Good across all judgement areas. The learning from this improvement journey is now informing transformation in Adults Services and the wider performance management approach across the council.

The council has in recent times worked hard to ensure that there is a corporate approach to financial management and planning. This is much more developed than was the case during the last Corporate Peer Challenge – there is a more collaborative approach to the budget setting process in place, with members being provided with a range of budget scenarios and cross-council dialogue on budget and financial planning scenarios. This is an evolving picture that needs to continue to embed, especially as there will need to be some challenging conversations over coming weeks and months around delivering Business Plan priorities in the context of sectoral financial pressures and increased demand (and complexity of cases) within people services.

The council has developed a visible corporate approach to transformation, with a strong narrative that the purpose of this activity is to drive service improvement over delivering financial savings. The whole organisation is conversant with this approach but the balance between efficiencies and service improvement may need to be revisited as financial pressures will become increasingly prevalent.

Following unitarisation in 2009, 18 Area Boards were introduced in Wiltshire to provide a forum for multi-agency engagement at a community level. These Boards continue to be valued by members, but their role and remit would benefit from review and refocusing to enhance the council's Place Shaping Agenda.

Wiltshire Council has impressive and strong internal governance with clarity around process and function, which contributes to the overall internal improvements that have been delivered at the council in terms of organisational culture and governance.

The breadth and depth of these internal improvements are evident and provide a

sound foundation for senior leaders to develop a more outward looking focus, seeking to engage more locally, regionally, and nationally to promote the interests of Wiltshire Council and create opportunities for external collaboration to achieve the aims and ambitions of the council.

The Council's Local Plan is currently under review, and whilst the peer team appreciate there are concerns at a political level about the relevance and impact of national planning policy for Wiltshire, the Local Plan should be seen as a pivotal vehicle for delivery of the council's key ambitions for place. It is important that the council works with, rather than against national policy and seeks to make the plan work for Wiltshire and all its diverse places over the next 15-20 years. At a practical level, and as government thinking continues to evolve in this area, the absence of an updated Local Plan increases the risk of unplanned development, thus limiting the council's capacity to exercise place-shaping powers, such as securing relevant infrastructure, to maximum effect.

In common with the rest of the sector, the council is experiencing recruitment issues in some areas. A proactive approach to Organisational Development including refreshing the Workforce Strategy is part of a planned approach to address this – the fact that staff rate the council so highly as an employer means the council is better placed than some to face these challenges.

We found a council that has many strengths – resulting from a period of sustained focus on internal improvements – that, combined with the benefit of a Business Plan, can begin to complement a strong organisational core with a more outward-looking focus in pursuit of delivering 'services that are over and above their statutory obligations for the people of Wiltshire and ensure that the council is the highest performing in the country'.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Key recommendations

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

- Develop a more clearly articulated strategic narrative of place, using the Local

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Business Plan introduction.

Plan as key spatial narrative. Making the Local Plan work for Wiltshire will be important, and ensuring this work is delivered at pace to agreed timescales will be important.

- Seek to take advantage of the fact that the council's internal improvements are now paying dividends to provide space and time for senior leaders to focus on wider external partnership opportunities to help take Wiltshire forward in line with the Business Plan.
- Consider how to celebrate the successes of Wiltshire Council where it is important and where it contributes to raising the council's external profile e.g., Climate Change and Children's Services.
- Create a county-wide strategic partnership board to oversee the Economic Strategy for Wiltshire and underpin the Wiltshire Public Service Board with appropriate officer groups that bring partners together to share resources and deliver on common priorities.
- Consider how developing a comprehensive Asset Management and Capital Investment Strategy could support future transformation and place-shaping ambitions and inform future budget decisions.
- Review the role and function of Area Boards so that they add maximum value to your Place Shaping ambitions.
- Use continuing work with VCS around the emerging framework to ensure opportunities to involve them (and other partners) in developing strategies and policies are maximised.
- Continue to ensure that your approach to transformation is embedded and understood across the organisation.
- Continue to build on the collaborative approach you're developing around budget setting to ensure clarity on all options given the inevitable difficult decisions that lie ahead (e.g. prevention/place).

## 3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

### 3.1. The peer team

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

- Councillor James Jamieson  
Chairman, Local Government Association
- John Hewitt  
Chief Executive, Durham County Council
- Lorna Baxter  
Director of Finance and s151 Officer, Oxfordshire County Council
- Andrew Hunter  
Executive Director of Place, Planning and Regeneration, Bracknell Forest
- Emily McGuinness  
Peer Challenge Manager.

### 3.2. Scope and focus

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

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

**5. Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

In addition to these questions, the council asked the team to look specifically at organisational resilience and capacity to deliver an ambitious agenda for place.

### **The peer challenge process**

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

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. Over the course of 3.5 days, the team:

- Engaged with nearly 180 councillors, officers, and partners across 3 days of interviews in addition to further research and reading.
- Collectively spent over 200 hours to arrive at our findings, the equivalent of one person spending 5 weeks with Wiltshire Council.

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

## **4. Feedback**

### **4.1. Local priorities and outcomes**

The Business Plan adopted by the council in February 2022 is providing a clear set of objectives for the council and is clearly owned by members, with officers and the wider organisation well sighted on its content and purpose. The Plan has four key themes: Empowered People, Resilient Society, Thriving Economy and Sustainable

Environment, which resonant throughout the organisation and partner organisations. The fact that the Plan covers a ten-year period until 2032, stretching beyond the political term, is positive and demonstrates a long-term commitment to improving outcomes for the residents and businesses of Wiltshire. The Plan has well-articulated aims and activities, which sit below each intended outcome; members and staff are conversant in how performance will be managed and driven, and are clear that the priority is very much to secure improved outcomes for residents. The level of organisational focus provided by the plan, and supported by a rigorous performance management approach, will be increasingly important as the council works to address the challenges they face, along with the rest of the sector, in terms of reducing resources and increasing demand. Service Delivery Plans sit below the Business Plan and together they form the basis of an annual cycle that sequences service planning and budget setting, and provides a framework for services to describe how their activities are contributing to delivering improved outcomes for residents.

Nowhere is a focus on improving outcomes for some of the most vulnerable in the community more evident than in Children's Services at Wiltshire Council. The council has delivered a successful improvement programme, with their last inspection report in 2019 noting that the determined and well-focused leadership, combined with the corporate resolution of key elected members, has paid dividends for the children of Wiltshire. The council is currently rated as 'good' – the first in the South West to achieve this rating across all judgement areas – and is now clearly in pursuit of an 'Outstanding' rating. The council is also a Sector-Led Improvement Partner in Children's Services. Strong performance, both in terms of service delivery and financial management in this service area, is against a national trend and is a result of a long-term improvement programme, which is paying dividends and shows the impact of maintaining preventative activities. Inevitably because of national funding challenges, the council will need to closely examine all spending over the coming months and ensuring, where it can, that it is able to understand the balance of any savings across people- and place-based services – particularly to understand the impact of any changes to preventative services that can influence longer-term costs to the council and balance the impact of this against other Business Plan priorities.

It is positive to see that the successful transformation approach used in Children's

Services is now being implemented across the People Directorate in Adults Services, ensuring that improvement plans are owned by the whole organisation. The transformation programme in this service area is comprehensive and includes a focus on strategies, reforms, delivery of efficiency savings and continuous improvements. It is important that the council ensures corporate focus is maintained on this challenging change and improvement programme in the face of national reforms and resource pressures/requests from across the council.

The Area Boards, which have been an important and defining part of the council's community engagement framework since its' inception in 2009, continue to allow the council to have a visible presence in 18 clearly-defined localities. These Boards usefully provide a structured engagement forum for elected members, and it is positive that grants awarded by Area Boards are now clearly aligned to the Business Plan. Whilst the Area Boards are largely well regarded, as the council moves forward with a stronger focus on delivering the ambitions of the Business Plan, there is a need to review their role and function, taking onboard lessons learned through the pandemic when the council successfully, and impactfully, adopted a more community convenor type role, by providing structure and guidance as well as mapping activity. The Council recognises that they do not need to step into spaces where they are not needed, but can instead add value through providing advice, guidance, and structure. Through the Business Plan leading members are clearly committed to a strong place-shaping agenda for Wiltshire, and the existing Area Boards could support these ambitions through a more clearly defined role as convenors of partners from all sectors at the local level.

There is a wide and diverse voluntary sector in Wiltshire – which reflects the nature of the area. The sector is well mobilised and there are examples of where the council works well to deliver improved community outcomes such as the Wiltshire Wellbeing Hub and it is positive to note the VCS is represented in the ICB arena. Work is already underway to review and develop a framework for a more consistent approach for engaging the VCS at all levels of the organisation. The sector would particularly welcome greater engagement in the early stages of some strategy development. This could be an important opportunity to ensure community capacity is maximised and that the good practice, which can be found at an operational level in terms of working alongside voluntary and community organisations, is replicated

across the council. We saw positive relationships between senior officers and VCS representatives - where challenge was welcomed and heard, and this constructive engagement will be important in developing an effective VCS framework that meets the needs and expectations of all stakeholders.

The relationship between the Council and Stone Circle (a wholly owned company of the council) is maturing well and there are sound governance arrangements in place. The council continues to face a number of strategic housing needs that cannot be easily addressed through traditional approaches e.g. the lack of key worker accommodation is impacting on the availability of services in some parts of the county. Stone Circle is working to meet the needs of the residents of Wiltshire through the purchasing (and ultimately development) of homes that are available at sub-market rents. The provision of homes for homeless people and those on whole life pathways is commendable and has greatly reduced the council's use of temporary Bed and Breakfast accommodation.

Wiltshire Council is a valued partner and is working well in specific projects, such as working with UK Health Security Agency and Ministry of Defence at Porton Down and delivering spaces to support innovation in this location, as well as working in partnership to deliver a community café for tenants, often at an operational level. We heard that the Business Plan was very much developed with a focus on what is in the gift of the council to deliver, and the council is rightly proud of what has already been achieved. However, as financial pressures become more prevalent, looking to deliver through partnerships could be beneficial. Developing a strategic level Partnership Plan that sets out how the council plans to engage with the whole spectrum of partners could help establish shared priorities and vision across all sectors and, importantly, identify opportunities to share resources. This is particularly pertinent when it comes to an ambitious place shaping agenda.

Building on this, a focus by the Chief Executive on strengthening the internal organisation has paid dividends, as is explored in later sections of this report. There is now a stable basis that should allow the Chief Executive and Leader to continue to adopt a more proactive and outward looking approach, locally, regionally, and nationally. This will ensure both the offers and the asks of Wiltshire Council and its residents are clearly articulated and heard in the right places and by the right people.

## 4.2. Organisational and place leadership

There has evidently been a cultural change at Wiltshire Council, driven by a Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) who model leadership values and the principles of the 'Our Identity' Framework. The framework was launched in 2021 and now consists of seven elements forming a blueprint for an inclusive, high-performing council and is underpinned by a genuine and commendable desire to make life better for residents, which is shared by the members and officers from across the organisation that the team met with.

The 'One Council – public servants building stronger communities together in Wiltshire' element of the framework is prevalent throughout the organisation, and we saw many examples of positive collaboration on key projects across service areas, from pan-organisational transformation projects to support for the Performance and Oversight Boards/Groups. This approach is enabling the council as a whole to work collectively on delivering the outcomes stated in the Business Plan, unfettered by traditional service and professional boundaries.

Constructive challenge and discourse are genuinely welcomed between senior officers and members – and between senior officers. The shared commitment to securing the best possible outcomes for residents provides a clear framework, but as these discussions move into the inevitably more challenging realm of allocating increasingly reducing resources, this level of open and honest challenge will be even more vital.

The depth and breadth of internal changes ranging from regular staff surveys, bootcamps<sup>2</sup> to review the council's employer brand and the deployment of staff brand ambassadors is impressive and means that the council has laid strong foundations for organisational resilience. This, coupled with work to empower staff to take decisions at the most appropriate levels, means that senior officer capacity can look to develop a more outward focus – both in terms of the Wiltshire partnership agenda,

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<sup>2</sup> Our Identity bootcamps were launched in 2021 to review and make changes to the employer brand to ensure a more coherent framework, aligned to the council's identity that staff could identify with and help the council create a brand to support future recruitment.

but also promoting the council at a regional and national level. The Council has a good story tell in so many areas and the sector would benefit from hearing, and learning from, their experiences.

Whilst progress in organisational development has been good, the council is self-aware and appreciates that it is not the yet the finished article. There remain some challenges around workforce reforms, but the right building blocks are in place and there is positive organisational energy and commitment to continue the journey.

Place leadership is clearly an important focus for members at Wiltshire Council and their ambitions are well articulated in the Thriving Economy and Sustainable Environment themes of the Business Plan. Members speak with passion about their desire to positively shape their communities. However, delivering an ambitious place-shaping agenda has significant resource implications for the council and as budgetary pressures grow, there will need to be some challenging discussions about resource allocation, ensuring the right balance is maintained between people and place priorities, and that the impressive performance in areas such as Children's services is not jeopardised. Exploring alternative delivery options through enhanced partnership working could help build capacity to achieve place-shaping ambitions.

Area Boards are well placed to facilitate leadership on local issues, and the Place Board<sup>3</sup> model is allowing all partners to coalesce around vision and delivery for specific geographies – the next stage is to review the role and function of the Area Boards and the part they should play in a more strategic and collaborative approach to place-shaping.

The Council is taking an active lead and is well respected in the ICB/ICS space – The Leader of the Council is the first Chair of the BSW Integrated Care Partnership, and the Chief Executive is a member of the BSW Integrated Care Board. The fact that the Corporate Director for People is the first Chair of the new Wiltshire Integrated Care Alliance, means that the voice of children is heard in this increasingly important and high-profile arena.

Wiltshire Council is excelling in work to address Climate Change. The council has declared a climate change emergency, which commits them to cut council carbon emissions and achieve carbon neutrality by 2030, seeking to also achieve the same

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<sup>3</sup> Place boards have been established for key settlements, chaired by the local MP

for Wiltshire as a whole. The Climate Strategy, which was informed by a Scrutiny Task and Finish Group, has good levels of corporate ownership amongst officers and members, to the extent that climate change work is seen very much as ‘business as usual’ and is integrated in the day-to-day operations of the council, and is aligned to the delivery of the Business Plan. The team saw and heard work in this area that they feel the wider sector would benefit from and would encourage the council to be more proactive in sharing best practice regionally and nationally – there is a lot to be learnt from the approach they are taking.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for the council in terms of place leadership is the lack of a single narrative of place for Wiltshire. Given the geographical spread and diverse nature of the county, maybe a single narrative would be an artificial construct. Having said this, being the “Home of the Market Town” is a USP – as is the role the council plays in supporting community identity. However, there are times when the council needs to own its unitary role, leading and advocating for the special features of the county as a whole, and taking a more strategic view to positioning Wiltshire regionally and nationally, looking to lead the place agenda and bringing willing and engaged partners with them.

Prioritising the Local Plan as the council’s spatial narrative is key - this would also provide cohesion and act as a way to pull together what the council is already doing to drive the council’s place-shaping agenda. The Local Plan is currently under review, and whilst we appreciate there are concerns at a political level about the relevance and impact of national planning policy for Wiltshire, the Local Plan could and should be a pivotal vehicle for delivery of the council’s key ambitions for place. It is important that the council works with, rather than against national policy and seeks to make the plan work for Wiltshire and all its diverse places over the next 15-20 years. At a practical level, the absence of a 5-year land supply is putting the council at risk of unplanned development in inappropriate locations, thus limiting its capacity to exercise place-shaping powers to maximum effect.

Whilst the commitment to the place-shaping agenda is evident across the council, how to achieve the ambitions in a strategic and planned way is less clear. The concept is recognised by officers in the Economic Development and Regeneration team as relatively new, with some good local projects underway. The joint project between the Council and the Environment Agency to create a green waterside park

that acts as a flood defence for Salisbury is a good example of collaborative working to solve a problem, whilst also improving the quality of the environment for residents, and is a good example of what is being achieved in partnership. The emerging Economic Strategy will be a vital corporate document to frame place shaping intent and activity – and this strategy should include a narrative of place and ‘brand’ for Wiltshire in terms of economic growth, providing the cohesion that will better enable the council to meet its economic aims and objectives.

A more strategic approach to place shaping may help with prioritising activity across the council. Identifying key locations and projects for growth/regeneration, with clear rationale, being unapologetic and as part of a strategically planned approach, will enable the council to marshal increasingly limited resources and manage the expectations of internal and external stakeholders. The council can continue to work at a more macro level and through enhanced partnership delivery in other areas. This could, for example, help to address how the viability of smaller rural communities can be resolved.

The council is not currently engaged in any meaningful devolution discussions with Government, primarily as there are no immediate proposals that are felt to be in the interests of the residents of Wiltshire. We would urge the council to be clear on the risks of not actively entering into a devolution discussion, and to agree a strategy for how and when they will engage moving forward to ensure opportunities are not missed and the council continues to shape its own future – particularly as this is a government policy area that continues to be a focus for future investment opportunities at a local level.

Community Asset Transfers are an integral part of the council’s place-shaping agenda – between 2010 and 2022, 202 such transfers have been made. Whilst the Cabinet have recently agreed a revised Community Asset Transfer Policy, we found no visible strategic overview of all assets owned by the council and how these could be used to help shape place, and to deliver some key ambitions and meet needs. Developing a comprehensive Asset Management Plan that is aligned to the emerging Economic Strategy, feeds into the emerging Local Plan, and which identifies the assets of partners that could contribute to shared place shaping ambitions, would help contribute to achieving important Business Plan objectives.

### 4.3. Governance and culture

A truly positive organisational culture pervades all levels of the council, where collaboration and challenge do appear to be genuinely welcomed and encouraged. There is a shared commitment to the One Council ethos with everyone working for the benefit of the residents and communities of Wiltshire. This is also shared by Cabinet members who demonstrate a strong desire to improving outcomes for the most vulnerable people in Wiltshire. The work we have outlined in previous sections in terms of organisational development has evidently contributed to this. The Team heard from staff that the fact that senior leaders are seen to model organisational values and behaviours has contributed significantly to a positive organisational culture.

The council has impressive organisational governance providing good levels of rigour and consistency in corporate decision-making, there is clarity around roles and responsibilities, and member/officer relationships are strong and productive. This extends to the Stone Circle wholly owned company where governance improvements now appropriately balance risk and benefit. Effective governance is seen as an enabler for the delivery of Business Plan objectives and the council should be commended for the improvements it has made in this area.

As already mentioned, as the council continues to implement some aspects of organisational development, there can be at times challenging dialogue with recognised trade unions. Representatives of all trade unions were invited to meet with the Peer Team, and the one that we spoke with reported having a good relationship with key officers and members, and that they felt able to raise issues formally and informally and are listened to.

The peer team found Wiltshire Council to be a modest and humble organisation, which is to its credit as time and energy is spent improving outcomes rather than self-promotion. However, continuing to build a profile regionally and nationally based on tangible successes is important in terms of staff morale and making sure the council is best placed in an increasingly competitive recruitment market.

The Extended Leadership Team is recognised by staff as a positive forum for cross-organisation collaboration (and challenge). We saw a passionate and engaged group

of leaders who embody the One Council approach to addressing challenges on a pan-organisational basis and who stand ready (and able) to embrace a more empowered style of leadership, allowing more senior leaders to continue to function at a strategic level and adopt a more outward focus where appropriate.

The pervading culture of the council is testament to the leadership of the Chief Executive, who has led on instilling a strong public service ethos and invested in developing a more empowered model of leadership, where people are encouraged to make the right decisions at the right time and in the right place.

Scrutiny at Wiltshire Council is well resourced, and members feel they are able to challenge and influence the policy agenda. There are effective mechanisms in place to co-ordinate activity on an annual basis between Scrutiny and the Cabinet, ensuring that there is a balance between overview and scrutiny. However, members recognise that there is scope for them to continue to develop the value they add through engagement in the early stages of policy formation, perhaps through Task and Finish Groups.

The recent improvements to the Audit and Governance Committee, such as the appointment of independent members and carrying out a member skills audit, have had a positive impact on both the efficacy and profile of this committee. As these changes embed, it will be important that members and officers continue to ensure the challenge provided by this committee is sufficiently rigorous and provides the necessary levels of assurance and reassurance to internal and external stakeholders

#### **4.4. Financial planning and management**

It is positive to see that improvements have been made in terms of collective ownership, understanding and responsibility for financial management and oversight since the council's last Corporate Peer Challenge. Officers and members that we spoke with were able to articulate how and when they engaged in both budget setting and financial monitoring, and many stated that this year's budget setting approach has been much more collaborative and inclusive than in the past. This is an evolving picture that is continuing to embed into organisational culture and will no doubt be tested by the inevitable difficult decisions that the council (like many others within the

sector) will be faced with in the coming weeks and months. However, the council has created a much better – and supportive – environment for these discussions than has been the case previously.

Financial management and members of the finance team are now much more integrated into the day-to-day business management of the council, for example through collaborative budget setting processes and formal engagement in the Transformation Board, further strengthening a more inclusive approach to finance and performance management.

There is an opportunity to use the financial management code to help shared understanding of financial management responsibilities across CLT and Cabinet and the wider organisation. Local Authorities are expected to demonstrate that the requirements of the Financial Management Code are being satisfied and so being able to demonstrate this will be important for the council.

As part of the current budget setting process, scenarios are being considered that articulate both pessimistic and optimistic positions, providing members with a range of potential options. Going forward, there will need to be some challenging discussions to ensure a balance between Business Plan Priorities (i.e., political priorities and ambitions) and the provision of statutory services. By way of example, the council has maintained spend in preventative services within Children's Services, which has enabled them to manage demand more effectively, a decision to reduce spend in this area in preference for a Business Plan priority would risk an increase in demand. The more collaborative and participative approach to budget setting and financial management across senior officers and members should ensure the council is better placed than ever before to resolve these questions.

As part of the budget setting, consider creating a corporate contingency budget rather than build in all demography/increases in demand services. This will help manage budgets in more challenging financial situations and not always seeking to build in maximum increases in demography/costs.

Wiltshire Council is bucking a national trend in reporting that its Children's Services are managing within budget and this year's Quarter Two budget monitoring was showing an improved forecast outturn position, which staff vacancies are helping to achieve, and this is positive for as long as they are able to manage demand with less

resource. The position remains challenging in the face of national increases in demand, complexity of cases, and recruitment and retention issues, but the successful improvement programme within the service has resulted in impactful and sustainable service improvements. Maintaining organisational focus – and spend – will be crucial in sustaining this relatively positive position.

Wiltshire Council has adopted Performance and Outcome Boards as an effective mechanism for driving continuous improvement and ensuring organisational oversight of performance. The approach was initially piloted as part of the Children's Services Improvement Programme and is now part of the organisations' performance framework. In some areas they are relatively new and need to continue to embed, but they offer a valuable opportunity to review, and importantly, challenge performance and improvement across the council, and are structured to drive the finance conversations not vice versa, which works well for the Council. The council recognises the importance of having a coherent corporate approach so that performance and risk are not undermined. Oversight of risk has only recently been included as part of the remit for the Boards and this needs to be embedded across the organisation too. Member involvement in the process adds another important dimension and the team saw an organisation that is conversant in the principles and mechanisms of performance management – and where the focus is very much on driving service improvements for residents.

The council has recently established stronger capital governance processes through a new board, but an enhanced focus on capital programme oversight, delivery and financing would be beneficial. A clearer understanding and assessment of the full financial implications of commercial / asset investment decisions (such as refurbishment of industrial estates and asset transfers) alongside capital financing implications (such as the borrowing costs of new leisure provision) would help in maximising financial benefits and in decision making. Linked to this, a broader understanding of the implications for treasury management and the treasury management strategy would enhance understanding of the costs of financing the capital programme.

Wiltshire Council's Transformation narrative is very clearly about driving service improvements and improved outcomes, rather than prioritising the delivery of substantial savings, which aligns with the organisational culture of the council. As

financial pressures in the sector increase, the need to secure financial benefits through transformational activity may need to be more of a focus for the council.

The team were impressed by the extent to which Portfolio Holders were well briefed and aware of the High Needs issues and financial risks facing the sector as a whole and the council specifically – for example the fact that the Adults Portfolio Holder has SEND within her remit to reflect the whole life pathway for some shows the priority given to the issues. It is important that organisational focus is maintained in this area to mitigate future risks.

The council is currently implementing a new ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) system - a significant project which is intended to help improve financial control processes and is expected to bring about savings that are not yet included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy. The introduction of such a system has obvious organisational benefits, but given the size and nature of the project, the council should be careful to ensure sufficient resources and capacity are allocated.

#### **4.5. Capacity for improvement**

Staff at Wiltshire Council are motivated, energetic, and committed, who genuinely share the 'One Council' ethos and are driven by a desire to improve outcomes for the residents of Wiltshire. The council takes a proactive approach to Organisational Development through initiatives such as 'Our Identity', which sets out a shared vision of how the employees are expected to work together to deliver services and priorities. The council is also reviewing its People Strategy and a refreshed Workforce Strategy is due for to be launched imminently – both strategies are designed to ensure that the council has the right people in the right place at the right time with the right skills to deliver the Business Plan. Staff we met spoke with passion and energy about the evolving PDR system and internal talent management and leadership programmes. This positive approach to supporting and developing the workforce, as well as sound data and insight, has resulted in staff who are loyal and dedicated to delivering the ambitions of the council.

Whilst the above measures mean the council has done much to ensure they are an employer of choice, national and regional recruitment and retention challenges exist

across the organisation. Staff are working hard to ensure these capacity issues don't impact on service delivery to some of the most vulnerable residents (for example those who engage with Adults and Children's Services) as well as other high demand areas such as Planning. However, there are inevitable impacts on capacity to deliver in challenging national circumstances and against an ambitious Business Plan. Discussions around how deliverable long-term plans and aspirations are when short term budget pressures could be about to land would be beneficial moving forward.

The council has set out a broad range of transformation and business change activities, which are co-ordinated through the Transformation Planning Group and through various measures such as setting up a dedicated Transformation and Change Directorate and including People and Change team representatives, have ensured that practical steps have been taken to help marshal resources and that interdependencies and efficiencies are identified and maximised. These arrangements are new and evolving and have significant potential, but need to be understood across the organisation so that this potential is realised. The council has a strong track record in service-specific Transformation in People Services. In Children's Services the operating model resulting from the improvement programme is ensuring that Looked After Children Numbers are sustainable, and the transformational approach led by the Chief Executive in Adults Services is valued and provides strong oversight of the workstream.

Opportunities exist for Wiltshire Council to continue to work with partners from a variety of sectors (Health, Third Sector, Military, Businesses etc.) to explore how resources can be shared in the pursuit of shared priorities and ambitions. Wiltshire Council is a respected partner, and by developing a more cohesive narrative of your place shaping agenda, has the opportunity to develop a framework for shared endeavours and building capacity to deliver Business Plan priorities that go beyond the delivery of statutory service.

## 5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss, and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a six-month check-in meeting. This will be a short, facilitated session which creates space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for South West, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Paul is available to discuss any further support the council requires. [paul.clarke@local.gov.uk](mailto:paul.clarke@local.gov.uk)