LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Oadby & Wigston Borough Council

Monday 24 January to Thursday 27 January 2022

Feedback report

1. Executive summary

Since its last Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in 2017, Oadby & Wigston Borough Council (OWBC) has undertaken a variety of work to improve its services and ways of working. The majority of building blocks are now in place to best deliver the council's work and serve its communities.

The council also responded well to the initial challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic from March 2020, eg through developing the community hub response with local partners and volunteers, supporting the borough's most vulnerable residents, and local businesses as the economy started to open after lockdown. Additionally, OWBC worked well with Leicester City Council and the county's public health colleagues to address their sustained high Covid-19 transmission rates further to the summer of 2020, which drew much national attention to both areas.

OWBC has an agreed corporate plan, which teams and individuals recognise, understand and base their work on at service and individual level. This forms a clear 'golden thread', identifying how each member of staff contributes to the plan. Members feel however that they did not fully own the objectives and priorities of the plan at the time they were set but need to, and those objectives and priorities need sharing more widely with staff and external stakeholders. The plan was mainly produced by officers and presented to members for comment and sign-off as a completed piece of work. Opportunities were missed for members to fully steer and own the plan's direction, and not all stakeholders know what the council's ultimate goals are. Stakeholders therefore are not sure how best to work with the council, and on what projects. Members and officers should therefore together refresh the corporate plan, or draft a new one, based on members priorities, and agree how it is monitored, then jointly communicate and promote the new plan internally and externally. This will help ensure residents, local businesses and members are all clear about the council's objectives and how they can interact with the council on shared aims.

The peer team observed that there was not a wider vision for the whole borough, or place, which involved local stakeholders beyond the council, eg partners and residents. OWBC therefore needs to plan and communicate a long-term, member-led

vision for the borough, with residents, partners and other stakeholders that includes the council's corporate plan as well as other stakeholders' plans and contributions to that wider version. This will ensure all the council's and partners' work contributes jointly and strategically to the needs of the borough. As part of this and refreshing the corporate plan, the council should further develop its positive relationships and work with neighbouring authorities and local partners to also drive efficiencies and effectiveness.

To further assist the corporate plan's refresh, development of the borough's vision and other projects, senior management should further engage with its communications team early to plan communications and consultation about such activities, and to promote OWBC's successes. This will help ensure all stakeholders are fully aware of what the council's latest services are and can engage with them on projects from the outset.

One of the key building blocks remaining is for the council to develop its capacity further. This will ensure that OWBC, through its Senior Leadership Team, works as strategically and effectively as possible, that staff undertaking additional work as a result of vacancies do not become overwhelmed, and change and innovation are driven throughout the council.

Member and officers have high levels of awareness of, and are undertaking a range of work to enhance OWBC's financial position. The council is increasing financial capacity through a newly appointed Section 151 Officer, as part of a new finance team with a clear vision, which it now needs to deliver. The council knows the related challenges, difficult decisions that may need making, and the need to develop the budget so it continues to be balanced and sustainable for future years. Much of OWBC's work on this has been in response to the LGA's financial health check of the council in July 2021 including its recommendations. This work needs to continue to strengthen the council's budget position and avoid potentially significant problems. Additionally, amongst other peer team suggestions, the council needs to align and maintain its Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) to the corporate plan and projects to ensure resources are in place to deliver them.

Channel shift to more digital services, particularly throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, has resulted in many positive service improvements. Vulnerable residents however

have lost a degree of the face to face and written information and support that they need, which could impact negatively on their circumstances, health, wellbeing and perception of the council. Everyone understood at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic why face to face services had to stop. Almost two years on however, members and residents are starting to get frustrated with the council citing Covid-19 for not providing certain face to face support and meetings. This could impact on their trust in the council and on individual residents' circumstances, potentially requiring more expensive responses by the council that could be avoided by providing a wider range of support to those who need it at an early stage.

The council has notable ambitions, eg through its strategic growth, corporate and other plans, but as a small council has limited funds to deliver these ambitions. OWBC should therefore explore and apply for all relevant funding opportunities, increasing its bid writing capacity and effectiveness to do this successfully.

The council should also pick up pace on key areas outlined throughout this report, notably around delivering its communications strategy, business support and engagement. Whilst OWBC has made a lot of progress since its last CPC, it has been slow on some of those recommendations that are relevant to this CPC. The peer team also heard various examples generally of slow decision-making, and vacancies hindering service delivery. The council has opportunities however to make the most of recent increased staffing, new strategies around communications, and corporate plan ambitions around business support and engagement. These new staff and opportunities will increase general momentum, pace of change in service delivery, customer engagement and strategic planning such as the development of a new long-term vision for the borough.

There are some significant relationship issues between members and senior officers that need resolving at the earliest opportunity. Many members and officers for example do not fully understand or follow their roles and member/officer protocols, and it is not always clear who makes what decisions. Subsequently, it is not always clear how those decisions are communicated, who needs to action them and in what timescales. In addition, there appears to be issues around how meetings are organised and operated. Members often do not feel empowered or confident to make strategic or difficult decisions; they perceive, as do some external stakeholders, that committees are not operating to full effectiveness and efficiency. Such issues are

creating difficult working relationships between members and officers that urgently need resolving so they can best deliver council business. Externally facilitated themed workshops for members and officers together would bring an independent view to help resolve these issues.

The council's member enquiry system faces some problems, although there are examples of it working well. Members do not always receive notifications of how their enquiries are progressing and therefore do not necessarily know who to ask for updates. Additionally, the system does not differentiate between routine and urgent queries. This poses the risk that urgent queries may not be addressed in a timely way. As a result of such issues, some members are circumventing the system, approaching officers directly to resolve their queries, which is taking up more time and reducing the system's use and efficacy. Members and officers need to resolve these issues together to ensure the system works for members and in turn saves time for officers.

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:

2.1.   **Recommendation 1 – plan, develop and communicate a long-term, ie 10 to 20 year, member-led vision for the borough with local stakeholders including residents and partners. This includes working with neighbouring councils and the local Member of Parliament (MP), informally and formally** - the absence of this vision means missed opportunities to engage with residents and partners to improve the borough beyond the council's corporate plan. The council has good relationships with many local partners and should therefore further these through developing this vision and to refresh the corporate plan (the council's part in delivering the wider borough vision). Developing this vision with stakeholders will help ensure they are engaged, own and contribute to the borough's needs, and that all local resources are used to full effect.

2.2.   **Recommendation 2 – establish ways for members and officers to work**

more effectively together, especially to:

- **refresh the corporate plan, or draft a new one, and agree how it is monitored –** members do not feel they genuinely own the plans' objectives and priorities, the plan is now into its third year, and officers are looking to refresh the plan's key performance indicators (KPIs). There are therefore timely opportunities for members and officers to work together to refresh or draft a new corporate plan, based on member priorities, and agree how it is monitored, so that progress can be continually tracked, and any issues addressed

- **review the member enquiry system –** problems are hindering the system's effectiveness, eg the system is not differentiating between routine and urgent queries, and is not always notifying members of receipt of their queries or their progress, with members therefore approaching officers directly to resolve their queries. Members and officers must resolve these issues together so the system works for members and in turn saves time for officers

- **organise externally facilitated themed workshops for members and officers together, eg political awareness, making and actioning strategic decisions, committee programme forward planning and performance management** - significant relationship issues between members and officers are negatively impacting on working relationships, trust and the speed of the council's work. These must be resolved at the soonest opportunity so members and officers are clear about their and each other's roles and responsibilities, and can work together and progress council services as effectively as possible. External facilitators would bring an independent view to these issues to help resolve them through workshops that could provide a positive and non-threatening environment.

2.3. **Recommendation 3 - communicate and promote the refreshed corporate plan internally and externally** – members and some external stakeholders are not sure how the plan's objectives and priorities were developed. After

involving members more in the refresh or drafting of a new corporate plan, consultation of the new plan will help promote it to external stakeholders. This will help to ensure residents, local businesses and members are all clear about the council's objectives and how they can interact with the council on shared aims.

2.4. **Recommendation 4 - Corporate Management and Senior Leadership Teams should further engage the communications team on projects early to plan communications and consultation about what that council is looking to do, and promote the council's good work** – this will make the most of the communications team's new manager and strategy, eg to improve service take-up, communications and engagement with members, staff, local businesses, community groups and residents. There is a willingness by the business community to support the councils work, but they feel disengaged at this time. This particularly applies to the recommended work around the corporate plan refresh, developing the vision for the borough, and promoting the council's successes. Such work will help ensure all stakeholders can influence, are bought into and can make the most of what the council is doing from the earliest stages.

2.5. **Recommendation 5 - align and maintain your MTFP to the corporate plan and projects to ensure resources are in place to deliver them** – the council has a number of sizeable projects and activities that need allocated resources to deliver them properly. OWBC therefore needs to clarify how it will deliver its ambitions and new big projects, and manage them through robust business plans that identify allocated resources including capacity, and manage risk to avoid costly failures.

2.6. **Recommendation 6 - pick up pace on key areas, eg recruitment, communications strategy, business support and engagement** – OWBC has made a lot of progress since its last CPC in 2017 but progress has been slow on some of the recommendations that are relevant to this Challenge, and in other areas. The council should therefore pick up pace on key areas, especially where increased staffing capacity enables this. **These key areas include clarifying the role of the unfilled Strategic Director post and filling all vacancies, including appropriate interims as soon as possible,**

especially human resources staff to reduce pressure on staff and increase pace – this will drive strategic and operational change throughout the council. Some teams are stretched as they cover for vacancies, which is not sustainable. All vacancies therefore need filling as soon as possible, especially that of the Human Resources Manager to assist the recruitment of other posts.

2.7. **Recommendation 7 - plan to ensure that all residents can access the services, information and advice that they need** – many council services are now run digitally, which are more efficient. Vulnerable residents however who cannot access these services have lost a degree of face to face and written support and information. This could impact negatively on their circumstances and require more expensive interventions. These could be avoided by providing a wider range of support to those who need it.

2.8. **Recommendation 8 - explore opportunities to attract external funding to deliver council projects, including increasing your funding bid writing capacity** - the council has notable ambitions, eg through its strategic growth, corporate and other plans, but as a small council has limited funds to do this. OWBC should therefore explore and apply for further funding opportunities. This includes increasing bid writing capacity and effectiveness, which will be assisted by the increase in director-level staff resources and the development of a new/refreshed corporate plan.

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:

- David Blake, Managing Director, Worcester City Council
- Cllr Emily Smith, Leader, Vale of White Horse District Council
- Chris Leslie, Director of Resources, Maldon District Council
- Mary Morrissey, Director of Economy and Infrastructure, Solihull

Metropolitan Borough Council

- Vicki Goddard, Peer Challenge Manager, LGA
- Suraiya Khatun, Project Support Officer, LGA.

3.2.   Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes, which form the core components of all CPCs. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement, and were further tailored for OWBC.

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 and achieving improved outcomes for all its communities? How effectively is the council consulting, engaging and communicating with its communities on a two-way/directional basis, eg virtually and through its Citizens' Panel?

2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide and enable effective local leadership and resilience, especially through members' community leadership roles, eg via its community hub, social media, etc (over and above what the council can provide)? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities, including with the County Council and its district and borough councils in relation to combined authority/devolution discussions? Is the committee model and its decision-making, forward planning, meetings and processes fit for purpose and proactive, eg responsive to key challenges and opportunities, making necessary 'difficult' decisions, and enabling change and transformation to be successfully implemented? Is the Leader's role within the model clear and purposeful?

3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of respect, challenge and scrutiny? Are member and officer roles and working protocols clearly defined, understood and adhered to by all, including what decisions members should make? How are member/officer relations? How effectively is the Senior

Management Team working, especially statutory officers?

4. **Financial planning and management** - Financial planning and management: Does the council have a clear understanding of its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a clear plan to address its financial challenges? How well have members and officers understood and progressed the recommendations of its LGA financial health check, particularly around the capital programme and strategy, and any asset strategy, management and action plan?

5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve, especially relating to finance and the Senior Management Team? How effective is the council's project planning board that reviews, plans and progresses internal systems? How can the council improve customer services, especially revenues and benefits and online services, further to the council's review on this? What more should the council be doing on agile working and what are the limits, eg maximum service hours? Should the council consider further shared services?

3.3. 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. The team then spent three and a half days onsite at OWBC, with one of the team participating wholly online, during which the peer team:

- gathered information and views from more than 32 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
- spoke to more than 67 people including a range of council staff together with

members and external stakeholders.

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

OWBC's corporate plan is the 'golden thread' for all its work. There are strong, regularly reported performance and project management processes across the council, which various service and corporate teams mentioned. Service teams make changes to their work to improve performance, and regularly monitor and address their performance against the corporate plan's KPIs and individual performance appraisals. Committees scrutinise performance reports and make decisions as required. All this is helping OWBC deliver its services to maximum effect.

The corporate plan is viewed by many within the council and the peer team as an ambitious, positive basis for the council's work. Staff also recognise that three years on, it contains too many KPIs - 94. This makes it potentially unwieldy to monitor and progress them all. Service teams are therefore starting to review their KPIs to refine and reduce them, especially as achievements are delivered. Such work needs to include members and continue to ensure the council delivers, scrutinises and improves the right activities to deliver the corporate plan's intended achievements. A careful eye should be kept on the review process to ensure KPIs measure the right things; outcomes and the impact on the community should not be over-looked by applying too great a focus on operational process targets.

Members and external stakeholders are unsure how OWBC's corporate plan's objectives and priorities were developed and consulted on. Some local and neighbouring stakeholders are unsure what members' long-term vision and goals are, so are not sure how best to work with the council and on what projects.

The peer team heard how the corporate plan was mainly produced by officers and presented to members for comment and sign-off as a completed piece of work. Members possibly felt obliged to agree to it and because of this, they do not feel they genuinely or fully own the plans' objectives and priorities but should do, and opportunities were missed for members and other stakeholders to fully steer the

plan's direction.

Given that the corporate plan is now into its third year, officers are looking to refresh its KPIs, and members need to lead and own the plan's objectives and priorities, there are now timely opportunities for OWBC to establish ways for members and officers to work together to refresh the corporate plan, or draft a new one, based on member priorities. The agreed plan will then need consulting on/engaging with, communicating and promoting internally and externally at the earliest opportunity. This will ensure that members consider the views of all stakeholders including partners, residents and council staff when making their decisions about the priorities and aims for the council to include in their corporate plan. This will also enable all local stakeholders to be clear about the council's objectives and how they can interact with OWBC on shared aims. Members and officers can then agree a revised process to monitor and performance manage the plan, which can also be used to inform each committee's work programme.

OWBC also needs to plan and communicate - with its members, staff, local stakeholders including residents and partners - a long-term vision for the wider borough, or place, to which the corporate plan contributes. This should be member-led, and involve local stakeholders beyond the council, eg partners and residents, to help ensure that all partners' work, plans and contributions, as well as the council's, contributes jointly and strategically to the borough's needs, using all local resources to full effect.

To further strengthen members' involvement in the corporate plan, the vision for the borough and the council's wider work, committee chairs must be fully engaged in the plan's creation and performance management. Allocated senior lead officers need to support each of these chairs so they can best undertake their roles. The peer team heard how committee chairs do not always receive or read their meeting papers in sufficient time, there are not always pre-meetings to prepare committee meeting business, and support for such meetings can differ from committee to committee. These inconsistencies and lack of clarity as to what each chair should expect, has resulted in chairs not feeling in best control of their committees and timely decision-making being impacted.

OWBC's community and customer services teams' performance are particularly

strong. They are continually enhancing service delivery, responding to customer needs and improving customer satisfaction, which the peer team heard from many council staff, external stakeholders and customer representatives. OWBC received a national Customer Service Excellence Award in December 2020 and continues to progress this work. Other positive performance examples, from OWBC's [LG (Local Government) Inform Headline Report](#), include the council processing 100 per cent of its planning applications within set/agreed times, and improvements in household waste recycling.

The Headline Report also highlights areas relating to this CPC whereby performance is reducing. Council tax and non-domestic rate non-collection for example was 3.58 per cent and 12.94 per cent respectively in 2020/21, compared to the mean for East Midlands district councils of 3.11 per cent and 4.53 per cent respectively. OWBC therefore needs to address issues like this as part of its plan to improve its long-term financial stability, and recognises this in its corporate plan.

Channel shift to more digital services, particularly throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, has resulted in many positive service improvements, eg increased process speeds via more cost-effective, automated forms. Many staff and stakeholders identified however that vulnerable residents and tenants have lost a degree of the face to face and written information and support they need, including 1:1 support, community events and leaflets, which could impact negatively on their circumstances, health and wellbeing. Vulnerabilities include frailty, isolation, worsening mental health, poverty, lack of digital devices, skills and connectivity - all of which could be exacerbated if any required support is not in a resident's first language. Vulnerabilities are especially prevalent in parts of the borough like South Wigston, where OWBC has funded the Helping Hands Advice Service to provide legal, financial and other practical support – digital, face to face and written. Vulnerable residents cannot however always access the services they need, especially if they are only available digitally, and do not address their specific questions and requirements including being in their first language.

Everyone understood at the beginning of the pandemic that face to face services had to stop to minimise transmission of Covid-19 whilst alternative service delivery developed. Almost two years on however, the peer team heard, particularly from community representatives and members that they are frustrated that the council is

still citing Covid-19 for not providing certain face to face support to its most vulnerable residents, and certain face to face meetings with members. The lack of such support could impact on trust in the council and on individual residents' health, finances and housing, potentially leading to more expensive responses by the council that could be avoided by providing a wider range of support to those who need it.

The peer team heard little about the current use of demographic data breakdowns, eg ethnicity, religion, deprivation and digital access to monitor and improve service delivery and customer engagement. When they asked officers about this however, staff recognised that collating, analysing and responding to such information could help address residents' needs and engage with them more, especially at a more preventative stages, and that work is commencing on this through the communications, customer services and other teams. The council's ordering of GovDelivery, a recognised communication tool, should further progress how OWBC targets and communicates with a wider reach of customers. GovDelivery should be implemented by March 2022 and its impact will be regularly reviewed.

4.2.   Organisational and place leadership

The council's Senior Leadership Team, especially the Chief Executive, understands, is accessible and responds to the needs of council staff. The peer team heard this throughout its visit, it is much appreciated by officers and forms a supportive basis on which the council is delivering its services. Examples include increasing staff resources where services require them, and staff able to approach senior managers.

Community, customer and street scene services are particularly well regarded, especially by external community stakeholders. These services' work includes continuously improving engagement and service delivery with their customers.

External partners throughout the peer team's visit also spoke very positively about their work with OWBC, and the council's honest and open relationships with them, especially through the Leader and senior officers. Even when the council has different views to partners, council representatives remain professional and constructive. This enables the council to further its work with others, making the most of what each partner can offer to enhance the borough and ways of working.

OWBC is also working well with neighbouring councils, eg via the county-wide member code of conduct that Leicestershire councils including OWBC developed and agreed, and shared climate change officer, town centre manager, environmental health officer, and shared resilience partnership officer posts with neighbouring Leicestershire district and borough councils. Another key example is the Lightbulb service that helps support Leicestershire residents to remain safe and well in their own homes; it involves Leicestershire's borough, district and county councils as well as health services. OWBC is also part of the Leicestershire southern alliance, a group of the four south Leicestershire councils that considers how best to deliver services and align/join up their Local Plan. Through these and other projects, OWBC is working with others to best deliver work such as its strategic growth plan and site development. This puts the council in good stead to develop a vision for the borough and make the most of council assets, eg to deliver new housing, improve local transport, digital and other infrastructure.

Local businesses, community groups and residents did however raise poor communication with and capacity within OWBC to work with them effectively. These groups understand the constraints the council is working under, particularly as a result of the pandemic, and so appreciate there is a limit to what staff can do. The council nevertheless needs to improve its communications throughout the borough, not least because not all residents can access services digitally and therefore need to otherwise be kept informed about the council's plans, service changes, etc as outlined above. Local businesses are still struggling as a result of the pandemic so need council support, which they feel they are not receiving to the level required. Support for local businesses on OWBC's website for example is dated and not easy to navigate.

The council should pick up pace on key areas outlined throughout this report, notably around delivering its communications strategy, business support and engagement. OWBC has made a lot of progress since its last CPC in 2017. This includes progressing its performance framework and prioritising channel shift to digital services. The peer team observed however that progress has been slow on some of those recommendations relevant to this Challenge, eg building into the communications plan a confidence about the council's achievements and celebrating its successes, and finalising the structure at the earliest opportunity to free the Chief

Executive from operational matters. The peer team also heard examples generally of where decision-making has been slow, and vacancies have been hindering service delivery. There are therefore opportunities for OWBC to make the most of recent increased staffing, new strategies around communications, and corporate plan ambitions around business support and engagement to increase general momentum, the pace of change in service delivery, customer engagement and strategic planning such as a vision for the borough.

Corporate Management and Senior Leadership Teams should further engage with the communications team on projects early to plan communications and consultation about what that council is looking to do, and promote the council's good work. This will help ensure all stakeholders are fully aware of what the council's latest services are and can engage with them on projects from the outset.

There are also opportunities for senior and service teams to engage with the communications team to enhance the borough's demographics data - especially of vulnerable groups - to re-imagine service delivery where necessary, improve service take-up, communications and engagement throughout the council with members, staff, local businesses, community groups and residents. This particularly applies to refreshing the corporate plan, developing the vision for the borough, and to promote the council's successes. Such work will help ensure all stakeholders and partners can influence, are bought into and can make the most of the council's projects from the earliest stages.

4.3.   Governance and culture

OWBC is a small council, serving a population of 57,300 in an area of about nine square miles. Most of the current 183 staff are based in the council's main offices and depot when not working from home, making it easier than in other councils to get to know each other. The peer team heard throughout its visit that staff feel they can approach their managers easily, and teams similarly approach other teams as necessary. The general atmosphere at OWBC is supportive and productive, whereby issues and ideas to take the council's work forward are resolved and progressed.

Members and officers are passionate about supporting their communities and residents, as particularly evidenced through the council's community, customer and other frontline services, and by members and officers generally engaging with their

communities and customers to respond to their needs and improve services.

OWBC has made significant, bold decisions through the corporate plan to enhance service delivery and the borough, eg introducing a selective licensing scheme for all private sector housing rentals to improve general house conditions across the borough, bringing its information technology provision in-house, and is building, then will be relocating to the council's new headquarters in Brocks Hill Country Park. This new building's state of the art specification includes agile and green (eco-friendly) working considerations.

There are however significant relationship issues between members and officers, which the peer team heard throughout its visit, that are negatively impacting on working relationships, trust and the speed at which decisions are made and actioned:

- members and officers do not always fully understand or follow their own roles and protocols and/or those of the other. There is a lack of shared understanding and communication between members and officers as to how each committee is organised and what members have asked for and can expect. These are similar issues to those relating to committee chairs, which are outlined above. As a result, some members do not feel fully supported by, or trust the officers they work with. A number of officers however work significant additional hours and evenings to support committee members. As a result all round, a culture of blame and a lack of trust has developed between members and officers, not only through democratic services due to their central involvement in committee administration, but also through other service teams where issues emerge through committees. This is hindering effective decision-making and working relationships, so needs resolving at the earliest opportunity to ensure the council works as effectively as possible

- there is a lack of clarity between members and officers about who makes what decisions, including no clear distinction between political/strategic decisions made by members, operational decisions made by officers, and who accordingly communicates and actions each decision. The peer team heard several times that members thought that officers had presented/made the decision to stop publishing the council newsletter to save money, which was then carried out. Some members who learned of this afterwards did not know whether this decision

had been taken by officers or members. Examples like this highlight consequences of unclear protocols, including the breakdown of trust and confidence between members and officers, and potential delays to decision-making and backtracking where decisions should have been made by others. It also raises the need to communicate to members, in a clear and timely way, what forthcoming decisions need making, when, by whom, what those decisions were, who needs to action them, when and how, so everything is clear to all, avoiding unnecessary issues that require further attention

- as a result of the above, members' and officers' behaviour and beliefs are negatively affected. The peer team heard for example that some members do not feel empowered or confident to make effective strategic/difficult decisions through committee processes, eg because they are not invited to make such decisions or to get involved in related discussions or consultations. The peer team also heard various instances of low committee meeting and training attendance, which may be signalling members' lack of confidence or empowerment to make decisions or improve their decision-making. Officers, on the other hand, feel that that their efforts, particularly their additional hours and commitment to supporting members, are disregarded, impacting negatively on their morale.

The impact of these serious relationship issues is that members perceive, as do external stakeholders working with the council on related matters, that committees are not operating in the most effective and efficient manner, and therefore trust and confidence in such decision-making is not as high as it should be. These issues must therefore be resolved and roles and protocols clarified at the earliest opportunity so members and officers are clear about their and each other's roles and responsibilities and can best work together and progress council services as effectively as possible. For example, there is a need for a greater understanding of the scheme of delegation, and clear work programmes for each committee, so that members and officers can prepare in good time for decisions to be made.

As part of this, OWBC should organise externally facilitated themed workshops, via the LGA for example, for members and officers together, eg on political awareness, making and actioning strategic decisions, committee programme forward planning and performance management. These could provide a positive and non-threatening environment to address these issues. There are also opportunities within the council

to clarify how these and other governance issues are agreed, eg through the Policy, Finance and Development Committee, the Audit Committee or elsewhere.

The council's member enquiry system aspires to answer members' questions quickly and efficiently. The peer team heard examples of how the system is working well but also heard how problems are hindering its effectiveness. Members for example are not always notified how their enquiries are progressing. This is especially problematic when they do not get a response for weeks, and their query is on behalf of a resident or other stakeholder, who is expecting a quick response. It also means that members do not always know who to follow their query up with and how long to wait.

The member enquiry system also does not differentiate between routine and urgent queries. This potentially means that all queries are processed the same way in the order the system receives them. There can therefore be substantial delays to urgent queries. A key example quoted by several members was a broken pavement posing a risk to public safety. This may not have been the council's responsibility to fix, but the delay meant that members did not know what the situation was and therefore how to respond to those raising the issue.

The peer team heard how such issues have resulted in members circumventing the member enquiry system by approaching officers directly to resolve their queries. This is how members used to raise queries, and why the system was introduced, so they could be responded to in the most efficient way. Circumventing the system however is taking up more officer time and reducing the system's use and efficacy.

Setting up notifications and categorising queries into levels of urgency will significantly improve the member enquiry system and help give members the information they need in a timely way. Members and officers need to resolve these issues together so officers can best provide members the information they need.

4.4.   Financial planning and management

The LGA's financial health check outlined key observations about the council's financial situation and recommendations to address them. These included identifying that the council's general fund reserve was projected to be £753,000 by the end of the financial year, close to the recommended minimum level of £700,000. Projections needed to be extended to cover several years to ensure the medium-term financial

position could be better understood and addressed.

The check also identified significant issues with previous, ambitious capital projects. Plans for substantial unsupported borrowing designated as self-funding were for example not supported by adequate detail. This raised questions as to their affordability, how they would be achieved, and the need for further due diligence before making any commitments to spend. The MTFP, capital programme, treasury management strategy and a forthcoming, required capital strategy needed to align with the corporate strategy. Capital financing was initially identified as overspending by £163,000 without explanation, and service and capital financing overspend was identified as £178,000 by Quarter 3. The 2021/22 approved capital programme needed thorough reassessment, and the 2022/23 budget needed rebasing to reflect volatility and the impact of capital and other decisions.

Since the health check, OWBC has published an updated MTFP and presented it to the Policy, Finance and Development Committee in February 2022. The committee report showed the projected year-end balance had improved to £1,189,000, and the 2022/23 budget was balanced without the need to use the general fund reserve. The report also however forecasted a £797,000 gap for 2023/24, further increasing to £836,000 in 2024/25. If the general fund reserve were required to fill this gap, the council would then fall below the minimum level by the end of 2023/24, and that level would further deplete during 2024/25. The report recognised the council's financial position and highlighted that it "must find ongoing savings and/or ongoing new income streams" to ensure the council continues as an ongoing concern.

Members and officers have high levels of awareness of OWBC's financial position, challenges and the need to address the council's budget. This is not only through the council's usual day to day financial work but through its positive, proactive response to the LGA's financial health check. The council has subsequently commenced a range of work, which needs to continue to ensure the council's budget continues to be balanced and is also sustainable in future years.

Most significantly, the council is addressing its financial capacity. The newly appointed Section 151 Officer took up her role as this CPC took place. A new finance team is also being created with a clear vision, which it now needs to deliver to address the council's immediate and longer-term financial issues and enable the

effective delivery of advice. The finance team must ensure the most strategic direction of the budget across the council's services. It must also robustly challenge the council's corporate and service team budgets, especially business cases and capital projects. This robust challenge should be emphasised as part of general project management systems, as this will help ensure the council has considered every avenue to keep the council's budget balanced and sustainable in future.

Service managers across the council, as well as the central finance team, regularly monitor and discuss their respective budgets to address issues and make savings. OWBC has significantly scaled back its capital projects but still needs to considerably focus on this to ensure remaining projects are delivered to budget and time.

Members and officers recognise that difficult financial decisions may need making at any time and it was made absolutely clear to the peer team that nothing is off limits. Staff are encouraged as part of this to put forward ideas that could for example generate income, save money and make services more efficient. These ideas will not only enhance the council's budget but help ensure everyone at the council owns it.

Corporately, OWBC's MTFP must clearly align with the corporate plan and projects to ensure resources are in place to deliver them. The council has a number of sizeable projects and activities, especially large-scale capital projects, which need allocated resources to properly deliver them and avoid previous issues. This could be in the form of some additional fixed-term resources to ensure projects are delivered on time, to budget and to the required quality. The LGA financial health check also highlighted the need to assess the capacity to deliver programmes. OWBC therefore needs to clarify through this financial work how it will deliver its ambitions and new big projects. The council needs to manage those ambitions and projects through robust business plans that identify allocated resources and manage risk to avoid costly failures.

Given the range and amount of work that OWBC is undertaking to address and sustain its finances, the council's new finance team, with service managers and members, needs to develop an overall plan. This should include aligning the council's finance structure to meet the council's needs at operational and strategic levels, and developing a sustainability plan to address the budget gap. This will ensure all financial issues are being addressed in a co-ordinated, efficient and strategic way.

4.5. Capacity for improvement

Overall, staff like working for OWBC, which enables a positive, proactive and productive working environment. Reasons for this are outlined in section 4.3 but additionally, because of the friendly, family-like atmosphere cited, staff know where to get help and seek it to address issues and make improvements. Many staff commented on senior managers openness to innovation and improvements, so staff put forward and discuss their ideas within their teams and then with managers for their consideration and action.

Customer services' transformation programme is driving real change in service delivery and customer engagement, including specialist advisers in areas such as homelessness/housing and benefits, and 'how to improve' surveys taking place to enhance non-digital dissemination. Key to this is having staff capacity, outside of the usual day to day work, to consider what the service and its impacts could look like in future. The wider council transformation work being undertaken by this team is also landing successes across all areas. Consideration should therefore be given to increasing such resources on an 'invest to save' basis throughout the council where there is the business case to do so, as not all teams have capacity to consider how to improve their services and what they could look like in the future.

There have also been notable staff increases in key areas of the council's work, eg within its finance, communications and economic development teams, which are making a positive difference. The communications team for example is considering how local demographic and service take-up data can be further developed, monitored and used to enhance service delivery and customer engagement. The new finance team will additionally help secure and improve the council's finances. Such staff increases provide opportunities for change and innovation, as well as further capacity for day to day work.

Some teams are however stretched to deliver their day to day work as they cover for vacancies over time. Staff can cover the additional work in the short-term but the peer team heard from several sources that this is not sustainable where vacancies remain. Staff covering such posts are feeling the strain and could be overwhelmed, impacting on their health and wellbeing. They therefore need support, for themselves, through interims as needed, and the vacancies need filling permanently as soon as possible. A priority vacancy to fill is that of the Human Resources

Manager, who once in post will be able to help recruit to other vacancies. OWBC recognises this and is already in the process of recruiting to this and other posts throughout the council.

There are also opportunities to develop succession planning as part of the council's wider workforce/people strategy. This includes scaling up the use of apprenticeships and graduates throughout OWBC, further to successful schemes already taking place, eg in the Chief Executive's department. Succession planning would also benefit the Senior Leadership Team, so that as and when senior managers leave, the council is best prepared to address those vacancies.

The latest proposed Senior Leadership Team structure, including the vacant Strategic Director post, will bring in capacity at strategic level to drive change and innovations throughout the council. It will also free up the Chief Executive to take on further external relationship and other work. The Senior Leadership Team needs to clarify and communicate the role of that post, as well as who reports to it, so it can be advertised and recruited to as soon as possible.

Agile working, eg flexible hours, remote working, the use of information technology, is being embedded throughout the council, including its depot. The new in-house IT service will further support and embed these flexibilities, and improve service and financial efficiencies across the council. The peer team heard how staff welcome and use such flexibilities through Team Charters developed around the work requirements of each service team, eg the hours that services must be staffed. These charters mean that agile working is used in some teams more than others. Where such differences are not fully justified or clear, staff see these as unfair, which is creating some resentment within and between teams. Service managers should therefore review their Team Charters with their teams to ensure maximum agile working is available within the parameters of the work required, and that differences across teams and the council are clear, transparent and evidenced as appropriate. Managers should also be empowered to bring staff together in the office for team building and work planning activities. This is particularly important where new staff have recently joined the organisation.

The general, positive progress that the council has made on agile working however will support the move to the new council offices in 2022. Some staff will continue to

work remotely and will therefore be more isolated from colleagues than others. The council will therefore need to continue engaging with its staff to ensure that their wellbeing is considered and supported before, during and after the office move.

The council also has many opportunities to further its already positive relationships, partnerships and work with neighbouring authorities and local partners. This will help drive efficiencies and effectiveness, and improve the lives of residents and the local economy. It will also help refresh OWBC's corporate plan and develop a wider vision for the borough with its partners, including local businesses, universities, the police (particularly with regard to the local Community Safety Partnership), its local MP - Neil O'Brien MP – not least because of his role as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities – the local integrated care system and health and wellbeing board.

The council has notable economic development ambitions and ideas through its strategic growth, corporate and other plans. These include possible joint ventures, new road infrastructure, enhanced use of council assets and modular housing. Given the size and complexity of some of these projects, OWBC will need to recruit specialist resources, eg finance, legal and technical, to support council officers. This will ensure that all these projects are undertaken and financed in the most robust, evidenced and consulted ways possible.

The council should also explore and apply for further funding opportunities to assist such large scale projects. Whilst it has already applied for such funding through various means, OWBC has not always been successful in doing so, and it is understood that competition is fierce for limited funding. This not only results in not acquiring the funding requested but is also disheartening for officers who have invested their time in these bids. To improve the success rate of these bids, the council should increase its writing capacity and effectiveness to bid for such funding, eg via training or bringing in additional, external expertise, which will be assisted by the increase in director-level staff resources and the development of a new/refreshed corporate plan. OWBC is Priority 2 for Levelling Up funding. This, coupled with the local MP being the Levelling Up Minister, presents timely opportunities that have not been available previously.

The council should additionally promote its successes more, eg receiving a national

Customer Service Excellence Award, being awarded external funding and installing electric car charging points. This includes internal promotion to members and staff, who did not necessarily know of all such achievements and therefore could not signpost residents and other local people to such resources and good news. The council should similarly promote such successes externally, so that local partners, businesses, residents and visitors to the area can use such facilities and further engage and work with the council accordingly.

There was little evidence or conversation around OWBC's ambitions around climate change. Given the national spotlight on this area, this will need addressing in terms of communications with local stakeholders on how the council and those stakeholders will deliver ambitions in this area.

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

In the meantime, Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser for the East Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the North East, is the main contact between your authority and the LGA. Mark is available to discuss any further support the council requires at mark.edgell@local.gov.uk or by telephone via 07747 636910.