



**Corporate Peer Challenge – Follow Up
City of Wolverhampton Council**

10th and 11th September 2018

Feedback Report

1. Overall messages and observations

The City of Wolverhampton Council has continued to make good progress over the last 18 months. This progress is recognised by a range of stakeholders, including staff and partners, and was validated in June 2017 when you were named MJ Local Authority of the Year. Another significant achievement is the 'Good' judgement provided by Ofsted for children's services.

This progress is underpinned by the energy that can be found across the workforce and the obvious pride that people display in working for the Council. They are committed and enthusiastic about what they do and intent on delivering the best possible services for the citizens of Wolverhampton.

Since July 2018, the Council has a new managing director and quite rightly there is a focus on continuity, building and developing the things the Council does well. The change in leadership also provides an opportunity to take stock of this progress, refine the approach and provide fresh impetus and a stronger emphasis on key future priorities.

Great strides have been made to embed your approach to social value and to articulate and promote the benefits of what the Council is doing and the impact this has on citizens. Through real stories told by real people there is now a very visible and shared narrative that evidences and describes social value outcomes.

It is clear from the people that we spoke to that the Council has a strong sense of what it is trying achieve, where it is making progress and those areas of development that are more challenging. This self-awareness alongside your increasingly embedded approach as a learning organisation, is key to your ongoing improvement.

2. Summary of the peer challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The peer team was drawn from those officers and members that delivered the Corporate Peer Challenge in Wolverhampton in February 2017 and their participation was agreed with you. The peers who delivered the Follow Up Visit were:

- Dr Carolyn Wilkins OBE – Chief Executive, Oldham Council
- Cllr Clyde Loakes – Deputy Leader, London Borough of Waltham Forest
- Ian Leivesley – Strategy Director, Halton Borough Council
- Richard Cooke – Programme Manager, Local Government Association (LGA)

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the eight recommendations that they made in February 2017, the progress that has been made in delivering against these and the impact of this. The eight recommendations were:

- Use the strong platform of a being a 'Confident, Capable Council' to unlock the next phase of your journey.
- Consider how you further utilise the 'Wolves Workforce'.
- Strengthen the connection between city leadership and community leadership at a neighbourhood level.
- Develop a stronger and more consistent communication on the social value outcomes and impact for Wulfrunians
- Continue the focus on strengthening corporate governance further – including the investment in performance management and scrutiny
- Accelerate the pace and ambition on digital transformation to support the delivery of the City Vision aspirations of digital inclusion and 'smart city'
- Further develop the interrelationship between the financial strategy, future operating model and vision
- Continue to ensure that opportunities for commercialism and shared services are constantly considered.

In addition, the peer team was not constrained by these eight recommendations and took a wider view of the Council and identified further strengths and areas for improvement.

The Follow Up Visit process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. It is improvement-focussed and designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement strategies. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared for this follow-up corporate peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents, including a 'you said, we did' document, to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent two days on-site at the City of Wolverhampton Council and spoke to more than 80 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings and builds on the initial feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (10th and 11th September 2018).

3. Feedback

Use the strong platform of a being a 'Confident, Capable Council' to unlock the next phase of your journey

The Council has detailed its ambitions through a range of strategies and there is evidence of the progress that has been made, across a number of priorities and initiatives, to deliver these ambitions. This includes job creation, regeneration, educational achievement, investment, housing development and many more.

In many instances, the Council has delivered these priorities and initiatives at pace and where this has been the case, progress has been effective. This appetite to push forward continues and the pace needs to be maintained, but this must be aligned with a very clear sense of purpose and robust, embedded activity to evaluate the impact.

A significant theme from this review is that the Council and its partners have stopped talking about the past and the difficulties of five/ten years ago. This is now a forward looking organisation and there is an energy and buzz across the City and a focus on what is possible and what can be achieved.

Relationships with public and private sector organisations are good and whilst all acknowledge the challenges that lie ahead, they speak positively about the constructive dialogue and challenge that exists within the Council and how this is often able to realise shared priorities and approaches. The voluntary sector is also positive about the relationship it has with the Council but is less certain about what this will look like in the future. The diversity of the voluntary sector is a significant asset and should be a real partner as the Council continues to develop its thinking to enable strong and resilient communities.

The Council is currently looking to refresh its corporate plan, and with the change of managing director, this provides the opportunity to clearly redefine the future focus and approach. Setting out any points of difference that the new leadership wants to establish will support the next iteration of their improvement journey.

Consider how you further utilise the 'Wolves Workforce'

WV Insight can be a massive asset to how you shape and target resources around those communities that need it most and make decisions using real time data to provide a timely and effective response for citizens. This should also be considered alongside aspirations for how you create the environment that enables citizens to take responsibility for themselves and for those around them.

The Council will need to provide leadership and direction to ensure you can mobilise the wider workforce to achieve key and shared outcomes. This can build on the good examples of joint working that have already been developed such as the co-location of health and social care teams and the establishment of a Joint Intelligence Team across the CCG, Trust and Council.

The way the Council communicates and engages with the Wolves workforce will be a key part of how you better utilise this resource and there is a strong track record that can be built upon. Employees have provided feedback that communication is good and they feel informed and valued. Regular staff briefings and updates through 'City People' are just two of the range of engagement mechanisms that work well. The Council now need to think about how it extends this engagement to the wider Wolves workforce.

Strengthen the connection between city leadership and community leadership at a neighbourhood level

The Council recognises that the connection between city and community leadership in neighbourhoods is an area that needs developing and will form a part of your next steps as an organisation. The positive relationships the Council has with partners has already been highlighted and the Council is seen as a partner of choice, which is a good platform to build on. In doing so, the Council could consider how it is able to engage with the public and stakeholders earlier. Taking steps to ensure that you engage with stakeholders before the consultation stage, so that they can help to shape and inform proposals, delivery models and structures will deliver better policies and outcomes.

Develop a stronger and more consistent communication on the social value outcomes and impact for Wulfrunians

The work the Council has developed to embed a social value approach is good. Lots of examples were seen and these are now being communicated through some creatively produced and powerful messages. There is now an opportunity to take stock, bring together the various strands of work that have been developed around social impact and transform the relationship with citizens through one single Council approach.

Good progress has also been made to embed social value across all procurement processes and contracts and this is now seen as business as usual.

A question the Council might want to consider as part of its next steps is whether it can extend the progress that has been made around social value outcomes to its wider partnerships and spheres of influence.

Continue the focus on strengthening corporate governance further – including the investment in performance management and scrutiny

Employees feel they have good access to the senior leadership team and that decision making is timely, particularly through the Strategy Executive Board and the 0900 meeting. However, the leadership team is keen to develop and embed a more enabling leadership style that allows staff to make the judgements and decisions appropriate to their experience and expertise. This would help to distribute leadership at all levels, right across the organisation and reducing the need for all decisions to be made through the leadership team.

The development of WV Insight is positive and must now provide the platform for managers to make informed and timely decisions and building on this the Council is keen to develop a more sophisticated assurance approach.

Cabinet members have good relationships with officers and are engaged in the day to day detail of their portfolios. There is now an opportunity to develop different approaches to wider cross cutting issues such as Brexit or priorities such as digital transformation agenda which require political leadership across directorate boundaries.

The management of risk and communication through the Audit and Risk Committee is good and has ensured that audit and risk are an integral part of the functioning of the organisation. Where risks have failed to be managed effectively a thorough 'lessons learnt' exercise has been implemented and recommendations agreed and monitored.

Accelerate the pace and ambition on digital transformation to support the delivery of the City Vision aspirations of digital inclusion and 'smart city'

The Council has begun its digital transformation and recognises this is about behaviour change and service redesign and there are some good examples where digital solutions have been implemented, have worked well and have changed behaviour. These include the new online systems for school admissions and taxi licensing. However, there is now a need to complete this work and turn off the other channels that citizens can still engage with and still have to be resourced by the Council.

There is also a need to increase the pace around digital transformation and you may find it helpful to look at some of the other places where this works well and take on board the lessons they have learnt. The LGA would be able to identify some of these places if that would be helpful.

Further develop the interrelationship between the financial strategy, future operating model and vision

The Council has a track record of managing its finances effectively and despite the challenges that exist you continue to remain ambitious and have clear plans in place for what you want to achieve for the city. As part of your Medium Term Financial Strategy you have identified a number of one off savings but you need to assure yourself of the potential risk that such savings may pose to securing longer term budget reductions. The Council also has a number of large scale transformation programmes in train, most notably around children's and adult social services, and it will be important that you continue to monitor these closely, taking action when necessary to ensure savings targets and outcomes are realised.

The Council has been analysing the demand for the services it delivers and is starting to develop new models of delivery that change the way this demand is

managed, for example through the contact centre. Alongside these plans you want to accelerate your thinking around how you can change the profile of demand.

Continue to ensure that opportunities for commercialism and shared services are constantly considered

You are developing commercialism and shared services as part of the future operating model, but you recognise that there is much more you can do to maximise the opportunities that exist. Good progress has been made through programmes such as WV Living, Yoo Recruit and WV Active and you want to build on these successes and embed a more commercial approach across services, land and property. The appointment of a Director of Commercial Services should provide the focus and capacity to enable this.

The Council is widely regarded by partners, and other councils in the region, for delivering a number of high quality services and you have identified a small number of areas where it makes sense to collaborate and deliver shared services. You may want to consider whether there are further opportunities to promote and sell what the Council does well.

4. Next steps

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support and sustain your improvement journey. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Helen Murray, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are: Email helen.murray@local.gov.uk and Tel. 07884 312235.

We will also endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the opportunities we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.