


# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council

18 – 20 October 2021

Feedback report





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# 1. Executive summary

The LGA first visited Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council (WHBC) to deliver a corporate peer challenge in January 2019. The global coronavirus pandemic prevented the team from revisiting during 2020 to review progress against the council's action plan. When we looked to reengage during 2021, the council was under new officer leadership, had transitioned from no overall political control to a conservative majority, was emerging from the pandemic, had made a self-referral to the social housing regulator and was still trying to deliver a sound local plan. As such a second corporate peer challenge provided the opportunity to reflect on these changes, along with the progress made since 2019 to help the council pause, reflect and plan for the future.

WHBC is a good council with committed officer and political leadership. A dedicated staff and councillor team pulled together to face the challenges of the pandemic, with the #OneTeam culture consistent throughout. Teams from across the council said how much they enjoyed working with people from different services, being part of a wider leadership team and that wellbeing had been at the forefront of the council's leadership during this time. The council was described to peers as a partner of choice, who it's easy to do business with. Comments such as "they should blow their own trumpet more" and "punching above their weight" were made on several occasions.

Throughout the pandemic the council continued to deliver on its modernisation programme #OurFuture, corporate peer challenge action plan and capital projects. The peer team were impressed with the progress made given the other competing priorities during this time. The modernisation programme has started to deliver additional capacity and efficiencies in the form of new posts and £600k savings. A large consultation exercise with communities, partners and stakeholders has led to the development of a place narrative and revised corporate plan priorities. The restructured communications and marketing team is bringing much needed capacity, skill and experience to the council and a newly approved community engagement strategy and action plan is in place. Governance reviews have led to a reduction in committees, greater transparency and efficient political decision making. Delivery on capital projects, including Hatfield town centre, the new multi-storey car park and

Splashlands have all helped to publicly demonstrate the council's investment in its place during such an uncertain economic period. Staff and councillors voiced that clarity around the purpose of #OurFuture, its scope and direction had weakened over time and there was now an opportunity to reset and refresh the programme with targeted communications and additional resources to increase pace.

WHBC has continued the good track record of financial management seen in 2019. The government's income and support grants have been used efficiently to offset most of the losses during the pandemic, with £0.665m to meet through healthy general fund reserves. Progress against the 2019 recommendations have been made with a review of underspends, a budget reset and reserves earmarked for priorities including modernisation. A £3m budget gap exists over the next three years and despite being informed of early plans to close the budget gap, peers were concerned there were not specific financial targets for these to ensure a clear structured savings and income plan is in place.

In May 2021, WHBC made a self-referral to the Regulator for Social Housing. This related to the duty to meet statutory requirements that provide for the health and safety of occupants in their council-owned homes. The peer team were confident the council has made significant progress with this issue, provided tenants with good transparent communications and methods for engagement and has a structured plan for moving forward.

The council is not unique in having recruitment problems across planning, environmental health and other professions. However, vacancies are now increasing across the council and although there have been attempts to address this, a new approach is required that needs WHBC to market itself and the benefits of working for the council – identifying the unique selling points. There is also scope to work within county structures with other councils. Senior officer capacity is considered a risk requiring immediate attention. It was recognised that temporary roles have been recruited to in the housing property team and planning service. Consultants have also been used to provide advice on the leisure and cultural services. However, the senior management restructure should be delivered as soon as possible with consideration given to temporary strategic capacity as required.

Whilst the council is part way through an ambitious regeneration and development

programme, the uncertainty over the council's position on achieving a sound local plan is beginning to have an impact. Peers could sympathise with the council's position, most had direct experience, but without a local plan the council will struggle to meet its targets for housing delivery, prevent speculative applications, achieve the quality it wants in building and greenspaces and deliver on affordable housing. It is crucial the Council prioritise the delivery of their local plan.

## 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

**Identify senior strategic capacity, clarify future structure and communicate widely** – some staff are concerned and want to know more about when the structure will change, and what the implications for them will be – communication is key to embedding the new approach.

### 2.2. Recommendation 2

**Reset, resource and refocus the modernisation programme with a refreshed communications strategy** - Building on the feedback from staff and Councillors, relaunch the modernisation programme and clarify its ambition, resources and expected outcomes.

### 2.3. Recommendation 3

**Address recruitment and retention** - review the approach to recruitment and implement new advertising across the borough in prominent positions, discuss opportunities with the education providers and universities. Work with the other Hertfordshire councils as appropriate to develop a coordinated approach to resourcing particular skills and roles. The council needs to develop and market its unique selling points.

### 2.4. Recommendation 4

**Adopt a Local Plan** – Without this, performance will drop, it will impact on the council's ability to deliver its regeneration and housing ambitions, and the council will be at risk of speculative development that lacks quality.

### **2.5. Recommendation 5**

**Develop an income and savings plan for the MTFS period** – Whilst key plans and direction is set out in the councils MTFS, there wasn't a clear structured savings and income strategy detailing the financial targets for these and when funds would be found to address the budget gap.

### **2.6. Recommendation 6**

**Continued focus on housing compliance** – continue to work with the regulator, implement the improvement plan and address resource issues in this service.

## **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:

- Paul Shackley - Chief Executive Peer, Rushmoor Borough Council
- Cllr Duncan McGinty - Member Peer, Leader, Sedgmoor District Council
- Cllr Steve Sankey – Member Peer (shadow), Cabinet member, East Staffordshire Borough Council
- Natalie Wigman - Officer Peer, Corporate Director Strategy, Eastleigh Borough Council
- Steve Capes - Officer Peer, Director of Regeneration and Policy, Derbyshire Dales District Council
- Tim Mills - Officer Peer (shadow), Head of Economy, Planning & Strategic Housing, Rushmoor Borough Council
- Kirsty Human - LGA Peer Challenge Manager
- Rachel Stevens - LGA Project Support Officer

### 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?

### 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 days onsite, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 130 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

WHBC have fully embraced the 2019 corporate peer challenge recommendations, to develop a long-term vision and narrative for the borough developed through engagement with residents. By developing a “customer first” approach to its development, the council were able to engage with over 1600 residents, businesses and stakeholders through the “your Welwyn Hatfield” survey, social media and targeted communication to gather rich data from across communities to inform the corporate plan – all delivered throughout the pandemic. Seizing the opportunity of the annual Welwyn Hatfield Alliance (Local Strategic Partnership) the council worked with over 40 stakeholders and an experienced facilitator to develop a place narrative and vision for the borough which all partners have recognised and adopted. Through discussions with staff, peers recognised that further work is required to embed the new corporate plan, plan on a page and priorities internally. This has been difficult during the pandemic, with a dispersed workforce, but moving forward it is hoped the council will address this, in part, through the new internal communications strategy.

It was evident to peers that the council has a good understanding and knowledge of the borough, its wants, needs and future demands. Improved engagement and communication with residents, tenants and stakeholders have all contributed to and increased this understanding. Although not at the forefront of resident’s minds during the “your Welwyn Hatfield” consultation, the council has declared a climate emergency, produced an action plan and has an ambition to be zero carbon by 2030. Positive action is being taken on the action plan, particularly in relation to biodiversity, tree planting, business grants linked to ERDF funding, decarbonisation (£2.2m grants awarded for Hatfield Swim Centre, Campus East and Campus West) and by working with the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability partnership (HCCSP).

Decision makers are more aware of the community involvement in developing services, through amendments of the committee report template to include a section on community engagement. Service areas are also committed to delivering for



residents. Recognising strategic issues such as a shortage of housing; projects looking at site appropriation (conversion from D1 to housing), asset grading and right sizing are taking place with the aim of making best use of council homes and increasing the benefits to tenants both socially and financially. Peers did hear some concerns about the quality and speed of customer service in relation to general housing repairs and maintenance of the estates around council homes – including new builds. WHBC recognises it has resource issues in this service and that it must improve on tenant satisfaction. The peer team encourage the council to resolve the issues and provide the clear leadership required to achieve this.

The council has an impressive regeneration story to tell. The Hatfield Renewal Partnership (HRP), with its shared vision, Hatfield 2030+ is a model of partnership working the council should be proud of. Nominated for and successful in winning numerous awards including “best new housing development” - Lime Tree Court, “best woodland” - Sherrardspark Wood, “National Parking Awards - Special Projects” - Hatfield Multi Storey Car Park (MSCP) and “National Landscape Award” for the Splashlands wet play facility.

WHBC has good processes and IT solutions (Clearview) for performance management, with a quarterly “performance clinic” overseen by the leader and chief executive. Any remedial actions are reported by exception to the Cabinet. Regarding procedure, the risk assessments accompanying these reports, didn’t appear to reflect the severity of risk peers expected and further work to understand risk scoring may be required. For example, there were no risks in leisure, yet income/contract fees are difficult to predict but lower than usual. The ability of the council to maintain an economic development function also appeared higher risk than delivering a Local Plan and maintaining a five-year land supply (almost double the score).

Councillors have access to performance information via the “members hub” an IT platform containing corporate performance indicators and progress against them, which Overview and Scrutiny review quarterly to provide review and challenge. Peers saw great value in the member hub and were disappointed to learn it wasn’t well used. With better understanding of its use to drive performance and service improvement and timely information, peers believed this would be a valuable tool for the council. Performance overall is good when compared with statistical near neighbours (See [LG Inform Headline Report](#)). The areas where benchmarking shows

improvements could be made include housing delivery (Housing Delivery Test result 63% - position 18 in the country) and council tax collection (approx. 5% not collected compared to a peer average of 3.18%). Peers understand the council took the decision not to enforce council tax collection during the pandemic, but this was also an area of performance noted in the 2019 corporate peer challenge and many other better-performing councils took a similar approach during the pandemic.

An equality and diversity action plan has been adopted by the council, driven by the equality and diversity steering group. Whilst new measures have been introduced, including simplifying the approach to equality impact assessments and including EDI implications on committee reports, there appeared to be an inconsistent approach to integration across the council. Parts of the council were consistently using equalities and demographic data operationally but not strategically to inform policy, practice and service planning.

#### **4.2. Organisational and place leadership**

WHBC is well led by officers and councillors. Peers heard internally and externally of the commitment and dedication shown by its leadership to their staff, communities, partners and place. The early adoption of webcasting council meetings broadened public access and engagement and brought local decision making into the home. In November 2020 the Corporate Director (Resources, Environment and Cultural Services) was appointed as the interim Chief Executive and following an external recruitment exercise, was appointed permanently in July 2021. Much of her leadership has been focussed on leading the council through the pandemic and into recovery, supported by two Corporate Directors (the Resources Corporate Director was not backfilled) and nine heads of service. A broadened corporate management team (CMT+) was established during the pandemic and was highlighted by staff who welcomed the opportunity to be involved at a strategic level in planning and decision making.

The political position has changed from a two-seat conservative majority in 2019, to conservative led no overall control in 2020 and then an eight-seat conservative majority in 2021. Throughout this period the leader has been a constant figure, working hard to maintain cross party collaboration and drive the modernisation agenda. Of the 48 councillors, eight are also county councillors, with one cabinet

member also on the county council cabinet. Through these positions, the council has built upon its strong relationships with the county council. Both the leader and chief executive chair workstreams of the Hertfordshire Growth Board. There is an opportunity for the new chief executive to build on this position and develop more external relationships.

The council is a partner of choice, easy to do business with, works collaboratively and is not afraid to step up and lead when required. The leadership of the HRP and Hatfield 2030+ is viewed as exceptional and a model for further partnership working. The pace of delivery impressed peers, some of whom remember sites being allocated for development back in 2019, which have now been developed, opened and won awards – Hatfield Multi storey car park. Partners involved in this project, praised the council in stepping forward to lead this, involving many stakeholders and communities to develop a vision they could all be proud of. In order to continue working on this scale, peers questioned whether there were enough place building skills at a senior level to deliver the councils ambitions? They also picked up a perception from some parts of the community that improvements are town focussed rather than housing. A review of how projects and benefits are communicated may help to overcome this.

The Local Plan has been at the examination stage since May 2017. The planning inspector has said the plan can be made sound by allocating sites in the green belt to meet the full objectively assessed housing need (FOAHN) of 15,200 homes. Peers were sympathetic and recognised the difficulty councillors have in justifying development of the green belt but they also understand the implications of having an unsound plan. The council has already lost appeals due to the lack of a five-year housing land supply and its performance against the housing delivery test is currently at 63%. Without an adopted local plan, performance is likely to drop to below 45% and the council will be at risk of intervention. Not having a local plan will also impact on the council's ability to deliver its regeneration and housing ambitions, for example at Gosling Sports Park not to mention reputational damage with partners, developers and communities. Peers urge the council to adopt a local plan bearing in mind that longer term strategic planning across Hertfordshire will help deliver the required numbers in years to come.

WHBC works with many organisations through varying contractual arrangements. It

has several outsourced contracts with Sopra Steria, Urbaser, GLL, Mears and others. Shared services for internal audit, building control and waste and recycling. Other partners include the community safety partnership (CSP), Welwyn Garden City BID, Hertfordshire Growth Board, and Dementia Action Alliance. Throughout the discussions with peers, quotes such as “great partner to work with, responsive and helpful”, “need to blow their trumpet on work at Hatfield Town”, “small authority punching above its weight” and [CSP] “unparalleled in Herts” were echoed by all.

The development of a new community engagement strategy and action plan with a dedicated officer group to oversee implementation was seen as key to increasing engagement with borough residents. Work undertaken during the pandemic has increased the council’s awareness of underrepresented groups, especially around vaccine uptake and young people. Although the council recognises more work is needed in this area, peers heard good examples of where it had worked with partners to reduce inequality and deliver services to harder to reach parts of the community. The pathway for rough sleeping and complex needs (ReStart Project) is one example where the council adapted, developed and delivered a service in rapid time to support vulnerable people. Using government funding for “Everyone In” and “Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP) a service has been created to support outreach, accommodation and case work/development. Partnership working with Resolve, the drug and alcohol charity ensured homeless clients had the shelter and support required during lockdown and beyond. The sustainability of this project is testament to the staff, partners and service users working together to gather real-time intelligence and data to assist those most in need. The strong foundations in community engagement at the operational level can assist the council in developing a more consistent corporate approach.

There is active leadership on climate change across a range of services and with partners, businesses and communities. Officers and Councillors meet bimonthly to progress the action plan and make decisions. Working with the HCCSP, the council has signed-up to working on county wide action plans across transport, water, biodiversity, low carbon and behaviour change. However, the volume of information and work coming from the county group, government initiatives, local campaigns and the forthcoming environment bill is becoming excessive for officers, who have this responsibility in addition to their day jobs. Peers reflected that there is an opportunity

to pause, take stock and refresh the action plan, prioritise projects that will help the council to meet its net zero target and consider the resources allocated to ensure WHBC can keep pace with the other Hertfordshire councils.

### **4.3. Governance and culture**

It was immediately evident to peers that WHBC had progressed and delivered on the governance actions from the 2019 corporate peer challenge. The establishment of a cross party Constitution Review Group (CRG) to oversee significant changes paved the way for improvements across the governance spectrum such as a new petition scheme to enable better online engagement, meeting timetable changes to create greater flexibility and forward planning and a review of delegations particularly with regard the sealing arrangements which overnight saw document signing expedited to keep up with the agility of the organisation – e-signing and e-sealing will further enhance this when implemented.

A significant and coordinated approach to appraise the role and process of scrutiny began in the autumn of 2019. Engaging the expertise of external consultants, the council reviewed ways of working that had been in place since 2000. Outcomes showed the existing arrangements had become resource intensive, processes driven and officer led. The CRG led work to trial new arrangements, reducing the scrutiny committees from three to one, providing the ability to set up time limited task and finish groups, and putting in place a targeted development programme to help councillors understand the new methodology, protocols and establish a more councillor led approach. The “Members Hub” was created to provide political overview of performance for all councillors and act as a forum to coordinate questions and answers. This is a brilliant tool, but it is only as good as the information on it and peers recommend more regular updating of information, timely responses to questions and possibly a councillor/user survey to help improve the usage.

The CRG is aware that further developmental work is required and peers spoke to councillors and officers about the positive changes that have taken place. Embedding the new approach is important, along with continued councillor development to highlight best practice and changes in legislation. Scrutiny is still at an early stage and the workplan should be reviewed to ensure it is focussing on the most important

strategic issues of the council. Consideration should also be given to policy development function within scrutiny – there are many examples of this in other councils.

A good relationship exists between officers and councillors. Peers heard from officers who felt supported by councillors, that there was an improving open dialogue and trust and that good cross party working existed with meetings across the parties between leaders and deputies. Councillors welcomed the #OneTeam ethos being shared with them and were buying into this. Many staff talked about the #OneTeam and it was clear the culture of the council is changing but peers saw pockets within the organisation where it was not yet fully embedded and where the customer ethos was not always front and centre. More work is required to break down historic barriers particularly between the housing service and the council which is still seen and feels like an “outsider”. Peers felt that work needed to be done on both sides to improve the situation and there is a willingness from staff to do this.

Engagement with staff particularly during the pandemic was positive and reflected to peers through various conversations. The staff surveys and wellbeing checks were welcomed and staff felt supported. The council is due to roll out an internal communications strategy and peers believe this will help to bring clarity to those who are starting to question where the council is going and what it is wanting to achieve post pandemic. Consideration should be given to continuing the engagement with staff through virtual staff briefings. These along with the Corporate Leadership Network and CMT+ groups are valued by staff and help to ensure communication is both top down and bottom up.

WHBC engages well with internal and external audit. Peers heard that there is an open and honest dialogue with the council often bringing issues to them for review. Audit views the council as stable and low risk, which is an endorsement many councils can only dream of at this time. The only issue raised with peers was a risk around senior management capacity which the council is very aware of.

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

WHBC has delivered over £17m of efficiency savings since 2010, reduced the general fund budget by over £3m and demonstrated that it is able to make difficult decisions (e.g. to introduce charging for green waste). The council has also started to

develop new income streams through investment in property - the proposed crematorium and the setting up of a housing company “Now Housing” incorporated in December 2020. In addition, the population has grown rapidly increasing by 27% since 2001 and 13% since 2010 – around twice the national rate for England – a growth rate in the top 10 of shire districts. This has brought additional spending pressures but also resources such as New Homes Bonus and additional Council Tax income to the authority. Whilst Covid has continued to impact on finances, the council has been able to cover the lost income and costs so far through government support (£910k) and use of reserves (£665k). However, peers cautioned against complacency and advised the council to continue to monitor the impact of volatile income budgets closely, for example with parking, Campus West and commercial tenants where losses have been most significant (around £1.84m).

The council has addressed many of the recommendations from the 2019 peer challenge, along with other improvements including:

- Combined finance and governance policies within the MTFs to enhance the links between the documents.
- Introduced a cross party task and finish group to oversee preparation of the budget.
- Reported progress on efficiency savings quarterly to councillors with a RAG rating approach.
- Refreshed the council’s financial regulations, delegations and compliance with CIPFA codes.
- Undertaken numerous efficiency reviews to transform services and deliver savings.

A baseline budget reset was undertaken for the 2020/21 budget following a historic trend of underspends as recommended in the 2019 LGA corporate peer challenge. This involved reviewing the average spend for the previous three years, and resetting budgets based on need. The exercise generated a total of £0.800m of savings, which were included in the 2020/21 budget. Peers were pleased to see this review will form part of a rolling programme of budget reviews going forward but appreciate savings may not be of the same level in future.

A review of the revenue reserves was carried out as part of the 2020/21 budget setting process. Total reserves have been growing from £10.1m in 2015/16 to £16.3m in 2019/20 representing 1.15 times net revenue expenditure, but below the English Shire District average of 1.49. The Budget Priority and Transformation earmarked reserve was renamed the Modernisation reserve to support the delivery of the Modernisation programme in line with the 2019 corporate peer challenge recommendation that dedicated resources be set aside to assist the plans. The peer team advise the council to consider further modernisation programme investment to achieve the benefits, integration and efficiencies at pace.

WHBC is part way through a substantial capital programme focused on economic regeneration and affordable housing, partly funded through grants from Homes England (£10.6m) and the Hertfordshire LEP (£6m). During 2021, as cash balances have decreased, the council took its first loan of £20m against the general fund capital financing requirement. The capital financing requirement at 31 March 2021 was £38.930m, and the remainder funded through internal borrowing. Current forecasts show the Capital Programme as affordable but do highlight that General Fund capital balances will be significantly reduced by the end of the programme. This will need to be considered in the longer-term context and form part of the 2022/23 budget setting process. In addition, there appears to be one outstanding recommendation from 2019, which was to align the capital programme with the Council's narrative and vision for the Borough, so that new schemes reflect those priorities. Given the extensive work the council has undertaken to develop its narrative, peers saw this as an opportunity for the council to reflect on its capital programme and ensure its alignment with the vision and priorities.

The 2020/21 audit report qualified building services asset management as "limited" and peers learned that condition surveys had already been identified as a priority need to inform the developing asset strategy, and a growth item was included in the 2020/21 budget to fund these. Furthermore, the council owns an ageing stock of facilities, including, swimming pools, sports centres, community centres and Campus West. Options appraisals have been completed on individual facilities, but a full asset review remains to be completed. Peers recommend the condition surveys and asset management review are completed at pace. Investment will be required, over and above that agreed with the leisure provider and the council will need to plan for this in



capital programmes. There is a further need for WHBC to develop a vision and future strategy for these facilities.

The anticipated budget gap for 2022/23 is £1m and is forecast to be replicated over the three-year MTFs period, presenting a gap of £3m over the next three years. Whilst peers heard of proposals to address this, the detailed targets and timings of where the funds would be found are still to be formalised and communicated.

#### **4.5. Capacity for Improvement**

WHBC has a dedicated and supportive workforce who pulled together and worked differently during the pandemic. There was more cross departmental working and collaboration on corporate projects, teams were established to tackle specific issues and more staff were involved in the decision making at silver and bronze level. The council is aware of fatigue beginning to set in amongst staff on the frontline who are supporting the most vulnerable in the community. This needs to be addressed, the impacts recognised and staff shortages in priority areas focused on. Sickness absence in 2020/21 was 4.5 days (below average) and is currently at 1.9 days for Q1 2021/22 – a little over the council's target of 1.75 days. Staff turnover in 2020/21 was at 12% higher than the 9% national average (compared to 181 districts).

Training and development has recently been centralised within HR and a new post of learning and development adviser recruited to – with a new leadership programme being developed. The council is active in apprenticeships and sponsoring of staff with qualifications but is yet to take part in a graduate scheme. The refreshed workforce strategy is focused on transformation and agility post pandemic and is themed around what the council wants to deliver, how it does it, who it needs to do it and its commitment to employees. A staff recognition scheme is in place to reward staff for their service. An annual event used to take place before the pandemic to present awards and from 2022 the scheme is moving to quarterly awards linked to the council's values. Peers observed that most nominations are made by peers rather than managers or heads of service. Keep doing it

Recruitment was identified by the council as one of its key challenges. Given its location on radial routes out of London, it is highly accessible by rail and road. Posts are particularly difficult to fill in planning, legal, finance, estates and surveyors – similar issues are faced by councils across the East of England. WHBC has made

changes to its recruitment process, including accepting CVs, moving away from job descriptions and person specifications to more outcome focused job roles and implementing career grade roles. At present 74% of all vacancies are filled at the first attempt and 60% at the second attempt meaning one in six are still vacant after the second attempt. The council needs to continue reviewing its approach to recruitment and urgently decide on and implement proposals, including, new advertising across the borough in prominent positions further discussions around the opportunities with the education providers and universities and work with the other Hertfordshire councils to develop a coordinated approach. Peers saw Welwyn Hatfield as a great place to live and work - the council needs to develop and market its unique selling points to encourage others of the benefits (you still have a John Lewis in town).

In concurrence with the auditors, peers viewed the council's biggest risk, the lack of capacity at senior officer level, however it is known that the Chief Executive is currently reviewing the senior management structure. The chief executive is performing multiple roles and trying to be strategic whilst having to make operational decisions on a daily basis. There are soon to be two vacancies at Director level and two of nine heads of service roles are vacant. It is testament to her strength and that of other senior staff, that delivery against the corporate priorities is continuing. Clarity around the future structure is needed to give confidence that capacity will be addressed at CMT level and heads of service involved in how they can contribute to decision making for their areas of work and more corporately. Temporary roles have been put in place in areas such as Housing Property Service and Planning. The council is also using consultants to advise on leisure and cultural services. However, the senior management restructure should be delivered as soon as possible with consideration given to temporary strategic capacity as required. Peers heard from across the council that some staff are concerned and want to know more about when the structure will change, and what the implications for them will be – communication is key to embedding the new approach.

The council has done a lot of work to modernise governance, but peers heard there are some internal officer processes that also need to be reviewed. Examples were given around the time taken to approve advertising vacancies which sometimes took up to four/five weeks to wind through the machinery of HR, Finance, Legal and CMT. Peers recommend the council takes a look at its internal decision making and

delegation processes to ensure it maximises its agility and doesn't add further issues to an already difficult recruitment position.

#### **4.6. Modernisation Programme**

Following the corporate peer challenge in 2019, the council embarked on a whole organisation modernisation programme #OurFuture. Governance arrangements were very collegiate, providing all three corporate directors leadership roles within its programme structure – review steering group, delivery steering group and modernisation board. The leader provides political oversight of the programme as it falls within his portfolio. When launched, the leader wrote to all staff to communicate the aims and objectives of the programme – we heard from many staff that this was appreciated.

To date the programme has delivered organisational change, more efficient alignment of services through numerous service reviews and around £600K in savings. Successful delivery projects include:

- Centralised procurement – this has delivered £100k savings so far with more expected as service reviews complete. A new commercial adviser post was created which aims to achieve future efficiencies.
- Agile working and roll out of technology – this was accelerated due to the pandemic but is now formalised and the new hybrid working model is being trialled by some services ahead of full roll before the end of the year.
- Garage management review – this optimisation of resources brought together garages which had been managed across different departments, under one service, with one management system. This also improved income recovery and reduced voids.
- Virtual business unit and operating systems for community facilities – this review brought together a virtual business team to deliver the review recommendations. So far, the virtual team have rationalised the IT systems being used across Campus West, museum services and the Hive. They now share the same booking, sales, marketing and stock management systems as well as a planned loyalty scheme across all three sites.
- Creation of new posts – Service reviews led to the implementation of new

posts for learning and development, community outreach and business engagement – much welcomed resources.

It was obvious to the peer team that a huge amount of hard work, time and effort had gone into the programme over the past 18 months and the council should take credit for this. However, peers heard from numerous sources that the programme aims and objectives had become confused and the pace of delivery had slowed. There also needs to be wider communication regarding the council's intention for IT and customer services – specifically whether some services were being brought in house.

The corporate peer challenge provided an opportunity for the programme to be reset and relaunched with new energy and leadership. Listening to the feedback from staff and councillors, the relaunch should include a refreshed communications strategy to clarify the programmes ambition and expected outcomes – to tell and sell the Welwyn Hatfield modernisation story.

The modernisation programme has started the journey to improvement. Numerous service reviews have increased efficiencies, recommended additional capacity and removed duplication of effort. Some staff told peers they struggled to find time to deliver on the programme whilst undertaking their day job. Further communication that the modernisation programme is part of the day job is recommended to help staff understand its purpose and objectives and to support prioritisation of work.

In order to increase the pace of delivery, peers identified the need for investment in a larger internal delivery team. In particular skills in technical support, coding, systems integration and business process reengineering. In addition to and alongside this expanded internal team, peers heard that there was a need for the (contract) IT service itself to have increased capacity to support modernisation projects; at present the same individuals deal with 'business as usual' IT service requests and IT development requests related to modernisation – this inevitably causes delays. Consideration should also be given to development of an IT strategy which documents the councils vision for the future, and direction of travel – to help guide and steer decision making around how technology should be used to meet IT and business goals. This would provide more guidance to the modernisation programme on the types of technology and software it should be implementing.

Given the changes at senior management level, it would be appropriate to review the

programmes governance, taking the opportunity to combine the steering groups and increase political oversight at board level whilst also streamlining decision making, which peers had heard often held up delivery. In order to be fully transparent and continue to improve and develop the programme, peers suggested scrutiny might like to review the programme in 12 months.

## 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, Rachel Litherland, Principal Adviser for the East of England, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Rachel is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

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