

Report Title:	Local Government Association Peer Review Follow Up Visit
Contains Confidential or Exempt Information?	No - Part I
Meeting and Date:	Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel - 22nd October 2019
Responsible Officer(s):	Duncan Sharkey, Managing Director
Wards affected:	None

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REPORT SUMMARY

The Local Government Association (LGA) undertook a peer review of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM) in September 2017. On 10-11 June 2019 the same team visited to assess progress.

The team found positive progress in relation to the original findings of the Peer Review and offered further comments. The team particularly highlighted a perceived lack of robustness in our finance management and position amongst other themes.

1. DETAILS OF RECOMMENDATION

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Panel note the positive progress identified in the Follow Up visit and consider the further themes discussed by the Peer Review Team.

2. CONTEXT

2.1 LGA Peer challenges are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. The peer team, who are existing or former local government staff used their experience and knowledge to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read. The process effectively provides a supportive reflection on the Borough to aid in future improvement.

2.2 In this case, RBWM were fortunate the original peer team could return to complete the follow up. A Follow Up visit lasts for twenty-four hours, in a light touch way assesses progress, and offers any further insights garnered.

2.3 As a Follow Up visit does not explore in the same depth as a full peer review it is not usual to prepare an action plan in the same way as was done for the full review. The themes discussed should be borne in mind when developing and designing future actions.

2.4 In this case management action had already started to address some of the issues identified by the peers in particular with the management restructuring just

completed, the engagement with CIPFA to assist the Council in better planning and management of finances, work on the Borough Local Plan, proposals for master-planning both Windsor and Maidenhead, a organisational development project to re-establish organisational values and behaviours and work to grow capacity around mobility, sustainability and economic development.

3. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report. The report is the advice of the LGA from the peer team. It is entirely the decision of the organisation how much we engage with or change because of this advice.

4. POTENTIAL IMPACTS

4.1 Equalities None arising from this report.

4.2 Climate change/sustainability None arising from this report.

4.3 Data Protection/GDPR None arising from this report

5. CONSULTATION

5.1 The report has been published on the Council's website and all staff and Members received a copy at that time.

6. APPENDICES

6.1 This report is supported by one appendix which is the LGA Peer Review Follow Up Report.

Corporate Peer Challenge: Follow Up Visit
**Royal Borough of Windsor and
Maidenhead Council**

10-11 June 2019

Feedback Report

1. Introduction and purpose

The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead received an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge in September 2017. Feedback from the Peer Challenge concluded that the Council should consider the following three main recommendations:

- **Pause:** now is the moment to pause on the change you have focused on designing and delivering. This does not mean stop improving services, but will allow you time to;
- **Embed:** establish and share with all partners clear lines of accountability for council service areas, whether commissioned or directly provided and clarity over the location of statutory roles (Director of Children's Services, Director of Adult Social Care and Director of Public Health). Ensure these are widely understood. Consolidate the good services that you have without seeking further immediate change. Where services fall short of expectation identify clear pathways for improvement and ownership for who is accountable for that improvement. Refresh your governance to help you underpin this;
- **Explain:** the organisation, its partners and the residents of the Royal Borough need to better understand the changes that are taking place – and why. The new operating model is not widely understood by staff and the residents that we spoke to. By investing more time in explaining what changes have taken place, and why, you will be able to reflect upon their success and consider how the borough can best deliver high performing services and value for money. This will also be an opportunity for you to build and further deepen trust between yourselves and all of your partners.

Having implemented the three key recommendations actively promote, to all parties a single vision for the borough – bringing together your ambitions for people and for place.

The purpose of the follow up visit on 10-11 June 2019 was to help the Council take stock of progress made against the recommendations identified in September 2017. This report provides a written summary of the key observations made by the peer team during their visit to the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.

The principles of peer challenge

Peer challenges are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. 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 process is not designed to provide a technical assessment or due diligence on specific proposals. Neither is it intended to provide prescriptive recommendations. The peer challenge process provides feedback, observations and insights from experienced practitioners that will help validate, reality check and further develop the Council's current plans, proposals and evolving thinking about the future.

Scope and focus

The peer team were asked to consider the progress made since September 2017 and provide observations about whether the Council is still on track to deliver its ambitions. In doing so peers considered the recommendations identified by the original peer challenge and the three key recommendations made at that time. Alongside these, recommendations included:

- Undertake a full Constitutional review and update the Constitution and associated protocols to reflect the new operating model
- Recognise that members and officers have distinct roles, but can lead and deliver together adopting a 'one-team' approach
- Use the constitutional modernisation to empower a refreshed leadership culture
- Strengthen scrutiny to ensure decision-making is inclusive and robust and adequately support the scrutiny function
- Invest more time in understanding what residents' value including engaging positively with residents and community groups using tools such as Residents Surveys
- Focus on the Borough Local Plan delivering the council's vision including driving economic growth and enhancing cultural and heritage assets and engaging positively with business and the community
- Ensure interaction with safeguarding boards is regular and consistent.
- Link the medium term financial strategy to the single overarching council vision and ensure that financial strategies and decisions are effectively communicated alongside corporate priorities
- Ensure that future transformation needs of services are adequately planned for
- Develop a 'one-team' approach to leadership.

Peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the Council's requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with the Council. The peers who undertook the follow up visit to the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead were the same as the original peer challenge:

Gillian Beasley:	Joint Chief Executive, Peterborough Borough Council and Cambridgeshire County Council
Cllr David Renard:	Leader, Swindon Council
Anna Rose:	Head of Planning Advisory Service
John Skidmore:	Director of Adults, Health & Customer Services, East Riding of Yorkshire Council
Clare Hudson:	LGA Programme Manager

The team spent 24 hours onsite at the Royal Borough on 10th and 11th June 2019 during which they spoke to more than 40 stakeholders including councillors, senior officers, managers, frontline staff as well as partners. Peers prepared for their visit by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council, the challenges it is facing, and the recent progress and developments made.

2. Key findings and observations

The Council has clearly embraced the findings from the CPC in 2017 and evidenced its proactive response through an Action Plan, the implementation of which has been carefully monitored. Since the 2017 challenge there has been a new Managing Director, who took up the post in February 2019. He has made a strong impression throughout the organisation and has made it clear he will work to ensure there is a supportive culture within the Council with members and officers working collaboratively together. The Managing Director's early plans to reshape the organisation provide an opportunity for an organisational 'reset' that will help deliver the council's ambitions.

In 2017 there were clear instances of members and officers not always working positively together. Whilst this follow up visit was very much a snapshot in time there was a universal recognition that the culture within the Council feels more positive and open. The Council has undertaken a significant programme of governance modernisation including adopting a revised constitution. Progress in this area is commendable but it is too early for the peer team to be able to comment upon the full impact.

In 2017 the peer team advised the council to 'Pause, Explain, Embed'. During our follow up visit there was a sense that whilst the Council has invested time and energy in embedding and explaining, the pace of change has not abated. This is not dissimilar to many councils and the Royal Borough has faced a boundary review as well as submitting its Borough Local Plan for examination. The changes made have not included structural changes to the Council or its service provision model and in the peer team's view the time feels right for the organisation to now restructure around the operating model and use this opportunity to establish greater connections between service areas.

In 2017 the peer team reflected that the Royal Borough provides generally good and valued services delivered by committed and skilled officers. This remains the case, but the Council's leadership must now consider if it wants to move towards delivering universally great services alongside major regeneration – for people and for place. To do this well, risks need to be better understood, shared, and clearly managed.

2A. Understanding and managing risk

The peer team recommends that the council ensures it has a better understanding of and plans to mitigate risk. These should include:

The future vision - The Borough Local Plan is at critical phase in its development and was submitted for examination by the Planning Inspector on the 31st January 2018. The Plan itself is outside the scope of this peer challenge and no comment will be made on its content. The Local Plan and the subsequent wider vision for regeneration throughout the borough need stronger alignment to ensure that the Council is appropriately communicating and engaging with its residents and partners on its future vision for both people and place.

Financial management – the Council has a strong record of delivering within budget and low levels of council tax. However, this was tested in the financial year 2018-19 when the

council faced an unexpected and significant overspend. This has prompted the Council to assess its current approach to financial management and strategy. The current culture of financial management and budgetary control is not robust enough and needs greater resource and grip given the scale of risk the Council is now exposed to.

Commissioned services – many services provided by the Council, and notably those services that are people-focused, are now commissioned to external providers. In 2017 the peer challenge focused on steps the Council needed to take to provide greater assurance that these services were being effectively monitored and sufficiently linked to the Council's corporate oversight. Whilst there are now clearer reporting mechanisms there remains further scope to ensure a better connection between commissioned services and the corporate centre of the organisation – and importantly - with each other.

Member and officer relationships – the Royal Borough has prided itself on being a strongly member led council. This remains the case, but the Council needs to adjust to the changed political balance and reduced number of councillors and scrutiny panels. In our previous report the peer team focused on the potential for a rebalance of member officer relationships and a strengthened scrutiny function under a refreshed constitution. This is yet to fully materialise, but the Council is cognisant of changes that it needs to make.

Collaborative leadership – the Council accepted the peer team's suggestion in 2017 that it must establish a one-team approach to leading the Council with members and officers working collaboratively rooted in a culture of trust and integrity. The instability within the management team in 2018 and more recently Cabinet – due to the recent elections - have hindered potential progress on this crucial shift but there are already signs that the Council is willing to move towards this approach, and it now needs to identify the steps it will take to get there.

Alongside the key risk areas identified above set out below are the peer team's reflections and recommendations on the core elements of peer challenge.

2B. Understanding of local place and priority setting

The Council undertook a resident's survey in 2018 which showed many positive results. Residents value many of the council's services. The leadership of the Council is now rightly focused on delivering its manifesto commitments from the recent all out elections in May 2019. The Leader speaks compellingly about the regeneration of many areas of the borough. This is often rooted in physical change meaning that the overall vision for people *and* place feels underdeveloped. This could result in developments taking place that are disconnected from each other and from the council's commissioned services. The Council should articulate an overarching vision of what the borough will be like in the future pulling together the physical regeneration and people centred plans in a vision for the entire borough.

The Royal Borough has a good relationship with its partners and this is allowing regeneration to happen at pace. However, the Council has to be careful that development happens within the context of the vision that the Borough Local Plan is seeking to deliver. The Local Plan should be a blueprint for the future *including* regeneration. Senior officers and leaders need to spend more time articulating and collaboratively delivering the vision

for people and place under a one-team approach. To achieve this the Council must invest more time and resource in agreeing and communicating the vision for the borough with the Leader and Managing Director both being highly visible enablers of change.

2C. Organisational leadership and governance

Colleagues and partners value the more positive and open culture that is emerging. This should be consolidated by developing a consistent and collaborative approach to communicating the Council's vision both internally and externally. The Managing Director and Senior Leadership Team need to be visible and approachable in communicating the vision. This will be critical in tackling the silo working that remains a consistent feature through the Council and requires sustained effort to be broken down.

There are still too many instances of announcements being made publicly without having gone through the agreed internal procedures. This approach risks undermining how well the Council can communicate its overall vision as well as potentially fostering a culture of mistrust. The Council is ready to move on from this and should focus on communicating and leading under a 'one-team' approach.

Following the governance changes Member - Officer protocols are clearer and should provide a solid foundation for the future. Members and officers now need to make them a reality and model the appropriate behaviours to enable this to become 'the new normal'. The reduction in the number of scrutiny panels presents potential for scrutiny to be a positive influence. The Council must now ensure that the supporting infrastructure is appropriate and well-resourced with papers prepared carefully and circulated on time. Scrutiny should move away from verbal only updates and build a deeper level of analysis with a focus on forward looking scrutiny and debate. Collectively senior managers and portfolio holders must come together to agree a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities and how they will work to deliver the council's ambitions and ensure service levels are maintained and improved where needed.

2D. Financial Planning and Viability

The Council has managed an overspend in 2018-19 but will want to avoid this going forward. The Council will need to develop a greater understanding of why and how unplanned spend has grown over the past year and ensure it will not recur in 2019-20. The culture of budget development has been rooted in an approach of finding efficiencies in service areas rather than a council wide budgeting approach that identifies and plans savings with a view towards future transformation.

This is borne out in the Council's limited future savings plans, because budget challenges have tended to be dealt with in-year by finding efficiencies, there is not clear evidence of a future pipeline of savings. As a result the Council has currently identified limited savings options for the future. The capital programme varies significantly in scale and scope year on year and the majority of planned capital spend is centred in the forthcoming regeneration of Maidenhead town centre. The number and complexity of capital schemes the Council is now engaged in, either singularly or with partners, will require a strengthened approach to capital financial management. The Council should use a

refreshed and more detailed Medium Term Financial Plan to set out a narrative for the financial strategy for the future – and how it will be delivered.

2E. Capacity to deliver

To further embed the progress made the Council needs to:

- Establish a clearer vision bringing together elements of people and place
- Share this vision with partners
- Introduce consistently strategic oversight of services, this must address the current disconnections between service delivery and siloes that predominate
- Collaboratively plan with partners – the future of commissioned services will require a much deeper approach to collaborative planning. The Council should be leading discussions with Achieving for Children and Optalis on issues such as transitions services, all age learning disabilities and demand management
- This clearer vision and collaborative plan should be consistently communicated by members and senior officers
- The Council should build on the refreshed culture to move from a culture of finding efficiencies to one of change for transformation

In everything the Council does over the coming years there are four key principles the peer team recommends the Council should put at the heart of its culture:

People – Place – Change - Transform

3. Next steps

We appreciate the Council will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions with the senior managerial and political leadership in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer review/challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The Local Government Association (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. Mona Sehgal is the main contact between your authority and the LGA. Her contact details are: Tel. 07795 291006 and Email. Mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk.

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide additional information and signposting about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

Clare Hudson

On behalf of the peer team