

Corporate Peer Challenge **Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council**

21 – 24 January 2019

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council (WHBC) is located in central Hertfordshire between five of the ten Hertfordshire district/borough Councils and one London Borough. It has two distinct towns, Welwyn Garden City (the second garden city to be built in 1920) and Hatfield (designated as part of the New Towns Act 1946) in addition to eight other larger villages and settlements. With around 79% of the borough designated as green belt, an estate management scheme governing how parts of Welwyn Garden City can be developed and strategic transport routes through the Borough, there are challenges to delivering growth and housing.

The Boroughs population is estimated at 122,000 with over 70% living in the two towns. A significant student population attend the University of Hertfordshire, Royal Veterinary College and two other colleges. It is a prosperous area with few pockets of deprivation, a healthy population with low crime levels. Excellent transport links make it easy for people to access employment and as a consequence there are high levels of employment.

Leadership of the Council has undergone significant change in the last two years, with a new management team in 2016, new Chief Executive in 2017 and three Leaders during 2018. This follows many years with few changes to managerial positions under the previous Chief Executive and Leader who served for 26 and 13 years respectively. The peer team heard from staff, members and partners how passionate and respected the new Chief Executive and Leader (including reference to the previous Leader, Cllr Perkins) are and how they have led the change and focused the ambition whilst continuing to deliver good services.

WHBC is a partner of choice, well respected and trusted by partners, who spoke of the improved positive relationships built by the new leadership team and in particular by the Chief Executive in his discussions with the LEP, University of Hertfordshire, Business Forum, businesses and public sector partners. WHBC is the first local authority in the country to sign a £10.5m funding agreement with Homes England as part of its Accelerated Construction Programme. The Council has also secured over £6m from the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to assist in the Hatfield 2030+ transformation programme.

The Council is in a strong financial position and has a proven track record of delivering savings - regularly delivering a balanced budget with high levels of reserves, minimal borrowing or reliance on reserves and has managed to protect frontline services in spite of 62% core funding reduction since 2010. There is a cautious approach to the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) highlighted by annual underspends and prudent income projections which need to be more closely aligned to the budget. More work can be done to expand the detail within reports to enhance understanding of the budget gap and how it will be closed and reflect the Council's ambitions through its capital, investment and asset strategies but this will only strengthen what is already a good fiscal position.

There is a motivated, dedicated and enthusiastic workforce at WHBC who are focused on delivering the best services to their communities. The cultural change programme - #OneTeam is recognised throughout the Council and progress is being made in embedding behaviours with staff already using them to challenge attitudes. The peer team observed that consistency is required in demonstrating the behaviours throughout all management tiers and with members. Developing the new customer services strategy was identified by the peer team as a great example of bringing staff and members from across the organisation to deliver a cross cutting project.

The three year business plan sets out the vision, priorities, objectives and values of the Council, with the plan on a page recognised by staff throughout the organisation. Staff can see how their roles fit with the plan and what objectives they are delivering against it. The peer team felt good

progress had been made with the long term narrative for Hatfield (Hatfield 2030+) but there was no obvious long-term narrative for Welwyn Garden City and the Borough as a whole. The business plan looks at the short term, mainly Council driven operational tasks. There is a need to describe how the Council sees the two towns and the Borough developing, what it looks and feels like over the longer term into 2030+ in order for staff, residents, partners and investors to see the potential for WHBC the place.

Although there are ambitions and the will to change, there is no corporate modernisation vision or programme to deliver it. Individual plans, expertise and views are evident across the Council, but the lack of a corporate modernisation programme could result in isolated improvements within service areas. In order to deliver the pace of change reflected in the leadership's ambition, the resources, skills and technology will need to align to deliver the vision. Governance arrangements will also need to match the pace of change to make the decisions needed in a timely and efficient way.

WHBC benefits from a committed willing workforce and engaged passionate members. Now is the time to take opportunities to modernise, embrace change, shape your place and be fit for the future. Be bold and ambitious building on the cultural change programmes #OneTeam #OurFuture.

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

1. **Develop a clear vision and narrative for the Borough, Welwyn Garden City, Hatfield and beyond.** This is a long term vision (20/30 years+) describing what the place will look like - the local plan is only one element of this. Describe as a Council how the two main towns, the villages and the borough will look and feel. This is likely to be different for each area but brought together under one vision building on the great example already set by Hatfield 2030+.
2. **Develop a modernisation programme with clear aims, objectives and targets around:**
 - **Workforce**
 - **IT and Digital**
 - **Customer**
 - **Communications**The programme will support delivery of the vision by bringing together projects under each of the themes with clear deliverables. Capacity, capability and resources need to be identified, allocated and aligned, ultimately resulting in a better customer experience.
3. **Align the structure to deliver the above (right people, right place doing the right thing)**

Develop the workforce strategy to utilise the skills already in-house but also don't be afraid to buy in or ask for help from others to deliver in more specialist areas, particularly in relation to regeneration and modernisation.
4. **Modernise governance and embrace external challenge and expertise**

Brave first step in allowing the peer team to share their views. Continue this reflection and use it to support decision making and top team development.

5. Review your approach to underspends and reserves, develop and evolve the MTFS to reflect the Council's direction and modernisation

Review the base budget and hit "reset", articulate savings, income and risk strategies and earmark resources to enable change to happen.

6. Ensure members are included in the #OneTeam approach

The politicians are part of the overall team and want to be included. You are all in it together delivering for the residents of WHBC.

7. There needs to be a coherent approach to communications and engagement developed through strategies linked back to your overall modernisation agenda

Align the communications strategy with the modernisation plan, review how and when you engage with all stakeholders and broaden your approach.

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council (WHBC) were:

- **Lead Peer** - Paul Shackley, Chief Executive, Rushmoor Borough Council
- **Member Peer (Conservative)** - Cllr Duncan McGinty, Leader of Sedgemoor District Council
- **Officer Peer** - Shirlene Adam, Strategic Director Operations and Deputy CEO, West Somerset and Taunton Deane Councils
- **Officer Peer** - Hannah Thorpe, Head of Communications and Digital, Thanet District Council
- **Peer Challenge Manager** - Kirsty Human, LGA

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges. These are the areas we believe are critical to Councils' performance and improvement:

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the Council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of Place: Does the Council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?
4. Financial planning and viability: Does the Council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
5. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the Council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to provide observations and feedback on:

6. Whether the Council could improve its communication methods to proactively engage with the public and improve trust and relationships

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. 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. 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 for the peer challenge 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 four days onsite at WHBC, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 125 people including a range of Council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 45 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 233 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 6 weeks in WHBC.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (24th January 2019). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

WHBC demonstrates it understands its place and recognises the real strengths of the area – its connectivity with the wider region and the economic growth opportunities this brings. Welwyn Hatfield has a strong heritage in the aviation sector with British Aerospace based and providing employment in the Borough for many years. After its closure in the 1990's a major regeneration project commenced and delivered some 2000 homes a new University campus, neighbourhood centre, primary school, community facilities and business/employment premises - Its economic development work builds on these assets. The Council has ambitious plans for the regeneration of both Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield town centres.

The Council's business plan sets out the Council's overall vision, priorities, objectives and values for the next three years. It is set around five key themes of community, environment, housing, economy and Council. An annual action plan details how the key activities will be delivered and monitors performance against them. The new "plan on a page" helps publicise the business plan in a clear and succinct way to staff and residents as was demonstrated by many people the peer team spoke to. Along with many Councils who have elections in thirds, this helps to plan for the short to medium term.

The business plan was developed through member workshops, Corporate Management Team (CMT) sessions and engagement with service teams. It pulls together key statistics for the Borough and aims to address the key issues. The peer team questioned whether the plan fully addresses the needs of all residents given that it was only shared with the Borough panel who were asked if they agreed with it. It is unlikely they would disagree with reducing crime, providing affordable housing and supporting local sport and leisure but there may have been other priorities if the Council had engaged further. Whilst the Borough Panel and Tenants Panel are valuable sounding boards they are not representative of the Borough as a whole. The outreach, community based staff spoken to by the peer team really know their communities. They are using needs based evidence to deliver their projects in the community and are a great asset to WHBC. These staff should be used to help shape future Borough wide consultation and engagement to ensure a wider range of voices are heard.

To strengthen its priority setting processes and deliver improved outcomes, the Council should develop, with its communities and partners, a clear "place narrative" for Welwyn Hatfield, linked to the long term vision which articulates what the Borough will look and feel like over the longer term and how people can engage with it. The Hatfield 2030+ renewal project is a good example of how the vision for a place can be promoted with key stakeholders. This needs to be replicated for Welwyn Garden City and the Borough as a whole and driven by WHBC as community leaders. The social aspects of place e.g. health, education and community development need to be included and linked to the physical environment/development (local plan). Once the long term vision is in place, the three year plan and service objectives can be aligned to ensure resources and investment are allocated.

WHBC is an ambitious Council with aspirations to regenerate, develop and acquire property/assets in the Borough, with any financial benefits achieved to be reinvested back into supporting Council services, projects include:

- Retail/commercial acquisitions in both Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City - this year are expected to draw in circa £600k in rental income to the Council. Further capital has been allocated to make more purchases.
- Regeneration plans for Hatfield, Welwyn Garden City, High View development and development of another business incubator hub in the Borough.

- Two garage sites (Lilac and Limetree Close) have been developed to provide 29 affordable homes for local people as part of the Council's ambitious affordable housing programme.

In the context of ever reducing government funding, the investment strategy will only go so far to help address budget deficits. The peer team felt the Council needed to modernise to keep up with the changing local government environment. This includes looking at what skills are required within the workforce, what digital infrastructure and soft/hardware will make processes more efficient, matching the needs/wants of your customers and ensuring the right communications channels are being used for different stakeholders. The new customer services strategy is a great first step and the peer team were impressed by how this had been driven and developed across every service at all levels. Combining this within a modernisation programme which addresses all themes will support WHBC to reduce the budget gap in the future. .

4.2 Leadership of Place

The Council's Leadership team is relatively new and partners see this as an opportunity to refresh and build on already established relationships. WHBC is a well-regarded partner across the public, private and voluntary sectors - a partner of choice, it has worked hard to develop relationships with key stakeholders including Tesco, the LEP, Business Forum, Police and University of Hertfordshire. The Chief Executive has influence at the Hertfordshire County Chief Executives Group and is voicing the priorities of WHBC. Enhanced relationships with the other Districts, Boroughs and County Council have also been developed over the past eighteen months - demonstrated by cross boarder developments with East Hertfordshire, Stevenage and prevention projects with the County. Everyone the peer team spoke to were positive about WHBCs relationships with them but recognised there was still more to do.

The Hatfield Renewal Partnership (HRP) is a good example of a stakeholder steering group helping to drive change in Hatfield. The Hatfield 2030+ vision and "book of opportunity" clearly articulate what ambition there is for the town, how partners are working together to deliver this and how communities can get involved. This is raising the profile of the Borough, attracting investment, and building pride amongst residents. WHBC now need to take the lead as the community leader and drive this vision into reality in order to maintain pace, expectations and credibility. The peer team heard from residents and partners that they would like to see a faster pace of delivery - they need to see some action on the ground to keep up the interest.

WHBC has ambitious regeneration plans for the Borough overseen by the Regeneration Group. The list of projects is extensive, and funding has been drawn in from the LEP, Homes England and development partners to assist delivery. These projects need to underpin the narrative and vision for the Borough – align them to the objectives and be clear about what they are delivering against. Taking a programme management approach will ensure they are delivered in the most efficient, cost effective way and the outcomes/benefits will be easy to measure.

Partners want to work with WHBC – many spoke to the peer team about opportunities for collaboration on a range of issues. Seize this as a chance to drive the WHBC agenda. Work with your partners and public sector neighbours to deliver your shared priorities on health, education, housing, connectivity and economy. The proposed North, East and Central Hertfordshire place shaping group provides further prospects for strategic and long term place shaping – be influential in this.

The Welwyn Garden City Centenary event in 2020 provides a unique opportunity to look forward, showcase the Borough and attract investment. At the moment there are lots of events, activities, and horticultural improvements planned to celebrate different aspects of the town, all organised by different groups. Make the most of being in the national spotlight to promote the

Borough as a whole, show others what WHBC will look like in another 100 years and why they should come and invest. It doesn't require significant resources and presents an opportunity too good to miss.

4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

The new Chief Executive and Leader have both brought enthusiasm and pace. There is a recognition of the need to develop a more flexible and responsive organisation which can adapt more quickly and one which will be financially sustainable in the longer term. A new set of behaviours, changes to the management structure and the introduction of "OneTeam" has set the tone and begun to change the culture from the top down. A noticeably stronger collaborative relationship is being developed between officers and members with greater transparency.

The Council is conservative led with a small two seat majority but there is cross party engagement on issues with back benchers able to influence policy development through the cabinet panels, scrutiny committees and cross party task and finish groups. Portfolio holders have roles on multi-disciplinary project teams e.g. Customer Services Strategy and Technology Users Group which ensures their views and those of the electorate are feeding into improvements. Members know their patches and can make the views of their electorate known for example through debate over the location of future housing for the Borough. Whilst it is important to reflect local views, there will always be differences of opinion and there needs to be a collective responsibility to delivering the Council's longer term vision.

Staff, members and partners all recognise a change in leadership style and are willing and open to engage with this agenda. The Council benefits from a positive relationship with the Union. A recent survey completed by 60% of staff shows enviable results:

- 90% agreed WHBC is a good place to work
- 92% got satisfaction from their work
- Almost 9 in 10 understood the Council's priorities, objectives and what their services were trying to achieve.

These results were backed up by staff who spoke to the peer team. It was clear to see that the implementation of #OneTeam is going well and is understood by officers at all levels. The "plan on a page" had helped staff to see how their work contributed to the Council's overall vision and ambitions.

The survey also found that it was not always easy to gain "sufficient support" from other service areas with over a third of staff identifying this as an area for improvement. The peer team saw and heard examples of some "silo" working and recommend the Council continues to embed #OneTeam to achieve consistency of message and behaviours across services including within all contracted services – some of which are your frontline. #OneTeam would also be strengthened by including elected members as they are also part of the WHBC team.

Efficient processes exist for managing and reporting on risk, performance and projects. Regular performance clinics and reports to members and CMT ensure there is oversight at all levels. Implementation of the Clearview performance/risk management software system has reinforced the importance of this with service heads and CMT. Further development of the system and its reports will consolidate the Council's strategic risk management arrangements.

There is a need for CMT to now drive the development of the strategic vision, the modernisation programme and external image of WHBC. Working together to shape these will enable heads of service and service managers to deliver business as usual and priority projects. Cross service steering groups have already delivered corporate projects e.g. customer service principles, equality scheme, town centre corporate group, regeneration group and the re-integration of

housing. By empowering managers to lead such projects, CMT will have the capacity to take on the leadership role required.

The Corporate Director for Public Protection, Planning & Governance has started a review of WHBCs constitution and this was identified as a good first step in supporting the Council to become more agile and modern. Modernising the constitution to reflect the Council's ambition - particularly member/officer scheme of delegation will help to deliver the vision, aims and speed up decision making. Work is needed to identify risk appetite and the parameters that are acceptable to members. Involving members in the development of appropriate processes, they can be confident the right decisions are being made through delegation.

4.4 Financial planning and viability

WHBC is in a strong financial position providing a stable foundation to deliver on the ambition and priorities set out in its Business Plan. The Council has consistently delivered a balanced budget with minimal use of reserves to prop up day to day spending. Admirably throughout recent times of reduction in funding for local government, frontline services to the community of WHBC have been protected. The Council has demonstrated it has a good track record of delivering savings and can take difficult decisions (e.g. to introduce charging for green waste) and has started to develop new income streams through investment in property.

There are however regular underspends. The reported underspend of £2.3m against net controllable income and expenditure in 2017/18 reflects several transfers to reserves, including the significant impact of timing differences on business rates. The true net service underspend in 2017/18 was actually £470k, and likely to be around £300k in 2018/19. Although service underspends bring positive impact on the General Fund Reserve, it suggests that expenditure budgets could be reviewed and income projections updated. The peer team felt the base budget could be adjusted and "reset" to reflect any underlying issues. The s151 officer is already progressing this as part of her robust budget management approach. This will allow the Council to have a stronger base budget position from which to move forward from.

The 2019/20 budget has been presented for members to consider and shows a balanced fiscal position. Beyond next year, the MTFs projects a £1.5m deficit for 2020/21, which increases slightly the following year. Whilst this message has landed in the organisation and is understood by all, what this budget reduction actually means (in terms of specific changes to the organisation) has not been clearly articulated. There could also be clarity over resourcing the Council's capital programme ambitions. Using Capital receipts and New Homes Bonus to fund the routine elements is reasonable but the peer team suggests borrowing plans are developed further to fund future ambitious needs.

The member briefing on the budget and the "Team Talk" budget special were well received and are good examples of communications tools which could be repeated regularly to explain the MTFs and widen organisational understanding of the financial challenges facing the Council.

Despite the challenges, the ambition to continue to protect front-line services is clear. Whilst ideas are developing to resolve the £1.5m gap, these have not been formalised or agreed. The MTFs now needs to be developed to include more detail on the "solutions" to the identified gap. The MTFs needs to develop to become a "live" document that is continually updated to reflect known national risks, for example the likely changes to funding streams from the Fair Funding Review, The Spending Review, The Business Rates Retention Review, and New Homes Bonus regime - as well as local risks - the reliance in 2019/20 on income streams from assets not yet developed, the timing of property acquisitions and development.

Sound financial and performance management processes exist at WHBC. There are regular systems for reporting to senior officers and members - via monthly/quarterly Cabinet, Resources and Overview Scrutiny meetings, performance clinics and informal budget holder discussions. The reports could be further enhanced by ensuring they report progress on key budget savings targets. For example there are £1.7m of savings identified in the 2018/19 budget (with a total £981k identified from specific service areas). It would be good to report and track progress against these to further improve transparency.

WHBC is fortunate to have a high level of unallocated General Fund Reserves (£8.6m against £2.7m minimum level) – over three times higher than the minimum level identified by the s151 officer. With recognised risks around business rate income, new homes bonus forecasts and income projections it would be prudent to consider allocating some of this unallocated General Fund Reserve to specific Earmarked Reserves for these purposes. This would give assurance that these key risks can be managed, and any impact “smoothed” for the taxpayer.

The Council has been successful in drawing in external funding to develop the capital programme. Partners including Homes England and the LEP have awarded over £16m towards developments in Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield. Opportunities also lie ahead as part of the Hertfordshire business rates retention pilot. This is a great chance to get more money from central government into the local community of WHBC.

There is an opportunity to develop the existing Capital and Investment Strategy and Capital Programme – to better reflect the regeneration and growth ambition of WHBC. At present there are lots of projects included in the capital programme and the capital strategy could be strengthened by explaining why projects are included, and how the Council has managed the priorities between capital and revenue. Aligning the priorities with the narrative and vision for the borough reinforces that WHBC is delivering what is needed.

Investment will be needed to make the changes outlined in the new modernisation vision and programme, the capital and investment strategies need to set out how this will be funded. The Asset Strategy needs to clarify the long term vision for all asset holdings. The peer team recognise the community value in the assets held, but also acknowledge the financial challenges facing the Council. Progressing options appraisals on key assets will help the Council decide the best route forward – whether that is to keep as is, modernise, sell, look at different operating arrangements – all will help the Council develop its thinking and ensure value for money on assets.

Moving these recommendations forward would put WHBC in an even stronger financial position and help ensure it can keep delivering good services to its community.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

WHBC has a committed, enthusiastic and willing workforce who are a credit to the organisation. Sickness levels are below the national average and 90% of staff surveyed are happy to work for the Council. Turnover was higher than average last year but this can be partly attributed to a number of voluntary redundancies in one service area. Recruitment and retention however is a challenge partly due to the Council's proximity to London and surrounded by other local authorities with good transport routes between (staff can switch between Councils easily). It was evident to the peer team that partners definitely want to work with the Council. By clarifying the long term vision for WHBC it will be easier for them to identify opportunities for joint working. The Council should take a lead role in these negotiations to ensure its priorities are delivered as well as those of partners.

WHBC shows an openness to new ways of working, it has been successful in drawing in external funding (Homes England, LEP, Development partners), shares a number of services with partners including building control and recycling, is making strategic property investments and whilst the team were on site members agreed to set up a new housing company. The Council is well staffed (over 390 FTEs) but the peer team would challenge whether resources are appropriately aligned to deliver the ambition/vision particularly in relation to regeneration, growth and modernisation. Pockets of expertise exist in the Council for example the peer team heard that the transfer of the housing service back into the Council was carried out smoothly and was led effectively by the Corporate Director and her team. This experience could be utilised in other areas.

The peer team observed a desire from staff to “take breath” and have time to reflect - share successes and lessons learned before moving on to the next project. Project management processes were evident but varied across services – a corporate project management framework would help to deliver consistency and provide the right environment for the “pause” to take place.

WHBC has many contracted services including ICT, contact centre, revenues and benefits, leisure, housing repairs and waste collection. It would be prudent to take the opportunity to review contracted out services in good time before they come up for renewal in the context of modernisation and #OneTeam - everyone needs to be lined up behind it. Options appraisals will help support decision making around these issues.

The peer team saw sight of a draft workforce development strategy. It is recommended that further development of this be put on hold until the Council is clear what its modernisation programme looks like. The workforce strategy should be linked to priorities that underpin the modernisation programme and identify the long term capabilities that will be required for a modern workforce #OurFuture. An ICT and digital strategy also needs to be developed and owned to enable more efficient delivery of services - including support for members. The peer team heard lots of comments about how Wi-Fi doesn't work around the building, that there are many different software solutions that are unable to work collaboratively and that improvements could make the Council work more efficiently, improve customer experiences and allow for more flexible working.

The workforce strategy can address the recruitment and retention issue by identifying the Council's USP to attract the best candidates. What does WHBC want to be known for? What would make the Council an employer of choice? Investing in a leadership/development programme to support the modernisation programme will also help with this. Although staff are happy, there are few development opportunities at present. The Council should consider investing in a programme of development for a cohort of talented aspiring staff. CMT and Cabinet may also benefit from some external support in helping them develop the ambition, vision and modernisation programme.

4.6 Communications and community engagement

In addition to the five core areas, the Council asked the peer team to comment on whether it could improve its communication methods to proactively engage with the public and improve trust and relationships.

WHBC has a comprehensive approach to communications, using many different channels and becoming more direct publishers of its own content. A shift to digital communications has begun with some positive examples - new news portal “One Welwyn Hatfield” about to be launched, and will need to be developed further. The communications team is in a healthy position, sufficiently resourced with the humility to know where they need to improve. Having a cabinet

member portfolio holder who has worked in the media industry is a valuable asset. There is a willingness from staff to work with the communications team in preparing public messages, campaigns and publicity material. It was clear that staff feel well informed – the peer team saw many posters, hand outs and online methods of communication e.g. team talk, a view from the bridge, team focus etc. Whilst this is all positive the peer team heard that key messages can get lost in the “noise” and suggest the frequency and focus of briefings be reviewed to ensure staff don’t feel overloaded with information and that essential information is filtering through. Having a communications strategy aligned to the overall organisational vision will help to define what key messages should be clearly articulated to staff.

Allowing communications personnel to access and advise decision makers by attending strategic meetings such as pre-cabinet, CMT and directorate team meetings is an example of good practice not always seen in all Councils. This involvement can really help to develop strategies and manage the Council’s delivery of difficult messages. The publicity around the recent poplar tree cutting was an example cited that enabled the communications team to prepare and deliver public messages in a clear concise way that landed well with residents.

WHBC has a track record of engaging with residents over issues affecting the Borough. The local plan is an example of this. Although residents might not always agree with what is being proposed they appreciate the opportunity to have their say. The Tenants Panel is a well-run, well informed and valuable sounding board for tenant related issues. The methods of engagement used are extensive and the introduction of “texting” has been positively received. The panel said “we feel we are making a difference”. The Business Forum also cited the recent business survey as an important step forward in understanding the needs of the business community. The results were not published at the time of the peer visit but partners have high hopes of the rich data this will provide.

Engagement more widely across the Borough is however variable. Skills exist in different service areas and residents are being surveyed on specific issues within their localities. It was clear to the peer team that community based officers are experienced and knowledgeable, know their patch and hold a wealth of information. Adopting a corporate and consistent approach to engagement harnessing the skills and knowledge identified would enhance the Council’s ability to shape future vision, priorities and objectives and focus on the quality of engagement. The Council also needs to differentiate better between communication and engagement – shape methods and approaches according to the drivers.

The Borough Panel is used to test public opinion on a range of Council services, improvements and strategies. Whilst this is valuable and should continue, residents on the panel are not necessarily representative of the Borough as a whole. Broadening your reach across the Borough to engage with a wider demographic/audience - especially around place shaping and budget setting would validate decision making based on a more diverse and balanced range of opinions. When preparing questions for consultation, make sure they focus on what you want to know. Provide consultees with background information, give options and allow for new ideas. The example cited earlier around how the Borough Panel were asked views on the business plan did not allow for ideas, only justification for what was being proposed. Similarly the peer team heard how consultation on the introduction of the green waste charging, whilst essential, could have been approached differently to explain more fully why the proposals were being put forward which may have achieved more positive results.

When the peer team met with the Borough Panel it was the first time they had met, been invited to the Council and asked face to face for their views. Obtaining views via electronic methods is quick, easy to evaluate and controllable. There is however value in some qualitative personal approaches around specific issues that WHBC may want to consider in the future. The Borough Panel would certainly welcome this along with regular feedback (possibly via an end of year

review) to all consultees on how their views are being used – you said – we did. This will also enable the Council to build up trust with residents.

A communications strategy is being developed - it is important not to create this in isolation - it needs to develop and support the Council's ambition and modernisation journey to ensure consistent, clear and focused messages throughout all corporate strategies. Within the strategy, outline who you want to engage with, why and what the best method is. The peer team were encouraged by awareness amongst communications officers of audience segmentation but this now needs to be implemented and explained within the strategy.

5 Next steps

Immediate next steps

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

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. 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. Rachel Litherland, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are: Email Rachel.litherland@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 signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

Follow up visit

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the Council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the Council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 2 years.

Next Corporate Peer Challenge

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all Councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the Council will commission their next Peer Challenge before 2023.