

Alistair Neill  
Chief Executive  
Herefordshire Council  
Plough Lane  
Hereford  
HR4 0LE

27<sup>th</sup> December 2019

Dear Alistair,

### **LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Follow Up visit 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019**

Following the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in February 2018 Herefordshire Council asked the Peer Team to make a Follow Up visit to help review and assess progress and development in response to the feedback and recommendations. This visit took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

This letter summarises the main observations of the Peer Team. The peers 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 before and during their visit.

#### **Process and peer team**

Peer challenge is one of the key tools to support sector-led improvement. It is tailored to meet individual councils' needs, and designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. The Peer Team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.

The Follow Up visit included members of the Peer Team who were involved in the original CPC:

- Nick Carter - Chief Executive, West Berkshire Council
- Councillor Glen Sanderson - Cabinet member (Environment & Local Services), Northumberland County Council
- Kevin Jones - Strategic Director, Local Partnerships
- James Millington - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

To inform their findings, the Peer Team spent a day and a half on site at the Council, during which they spoke to around 70 people including a range of council officers, councillors and external partners. The Team gathered information and views from more than 20 meetings.

We would like to thank you for inviting us back to provide further challenge to the Council and we hope that our feedback helps to support continuous improvement.

## Messages and Observations

The focus of this Follow-Up was to specifically review progress and developments in response to the peer challenge feedback and recommendations made in the 2018 CPC.

Since the Peer Team visited in 2018 the most significant change is the political leadership which brings a new direction to the organisation. Following the local elections in May 2019 there is a new administration formed of an alliance between independent members, It's Our County and the Green Party. The Council had 25 new councillors in May 2019 and there have been recent changes to the management team.

The Council has made significant progress against many of the recommendations made in 2018, particularly in facilitating improved cross-directorate working and the reorganisation of the Council to develop a corporate core. The Team would encourage you to continue to develop this. The Council will also want to ensure that corporate governance across the organisation is consistent to maintain robust compliance and risk management processes.

The new administration has a shared vision and the Corporate Plan (2020-24) is being developed through widespread public consultation including face-to-face engagement and a digital survey. Finalising this key strategic document will be critical for the Council's next steps and its future direction. The Peer Team consider that the Council is where we would expect it to be in this planning cycle and that this work is progressing well. This is also a perfect opportunity to ensure that when the Corporate Plan is finalised it is aligned to what Herefordshire 'the place' stands for. The Peer Team would encourage you as part of this to also ensure that you consider the communications needed to support getting your Council priorities, through the Corporate Plan, widely understood.

Partnership working remains a strength and key partners are complimentary about the approach adopted by the Council. The 'Talk Community' programme has also been a significant development in the approach taken by the Council to work directly at the community level and the energy and enthusiasm for this approach is felt across the organisation and beyond.

There are huge amounts of positivity in the organisation and through conversations with staff, members and partners there is a sense that the organisation is moving forward. We would encourage you to be confident and continue to build on your approach.

### **1. Articulate a longer term vision for Herefordshire including the development of a compelling narrative with your strategic partners under the banner of One Herefordshire. This will help clarify your ambition and establish your 'USP'**

There is no compelling single vision and narrative for Herefordshire 'the place' which has been developed with Partners. The Peer Team observed how the importance of having a shared narrative and unique selling point is considered but is not actually expressed and communicated. This is still important to develop and now is the time to finalise your Corporate Plan and work with your Partners on the wider narrative and the ambitions for the County in the medium to long term.

Partners did report feeling well engaged with the Council and have a sound understanding of the issues facing the County. There are strong relationships and a good understanding between partners which will be key in reaching a consensus on 'the place' narrative for Herefordshire. The Council will want to consider how to best work together with partners to develop the narrative and deliver the ambitions.

## **2. Ensure consistent delivery and follow through to turn the positive rhetoric into reality – including relationships with communities and engagement with strategic partners**

Over the last 18 months the Council has made progress in building strong relationships with its key partners. It is regarded positively and there are a range of initiatives with partners which are delivering benefits. This has included the development of Herefordshire's Children and Young People's Plan 2019-2024 with West Mercia Police, Health partners and others; and activity through the Multi Agency Targeted Enforcement Strategy (MATES) between the Council's Trading Standards and Environmental Health team, Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service and West Mercia Police. The Peer Team spoke to a range of partners and the Council is seen as a beacon for its work and by association, the Council is viewed as having a positive impact on the work of its partners.

There is a strong focus and importance placed on engaging with communities and this has been maintained by the new administration. The ongoing Parish Summits have developed relationships between the Council and Parish Councils. Similarly, 'Talk Community' is providing a brand which has a 'buzz' and energy across the organisation. Partners and those outside the County describe the new administration as having an ambitious vision and a new energy which places a strong emphasis on communities.

## **3. Undertake a strategic review of your finances so that the potential to resource your ambition and priorities over the medium term is maximised**

The Council has undertaken a base budget review over the past 18 months and remains in a financially stable position.

The development of the Council's new Corporate Plan is an opportunity to consider the resourcing of its ambitions. The Council will want to consider how to prioritise investment as there will almost certainly be a long-list of options. The Peer Team would encourage you to spend some time to carefully consider the alignment of resources to your priorities.

## **4. Consider expanding your presence, profile and influence on the regional stage (and beyond) using your narrative and USP**

As outlined above 'the place' narrative is still to be developed. This will be important at a regional level to clearly communicate Herefordshire. Partners the Peer Team spoke to feel they do understand what this may be but would benefit from this being clearly defined.

The Council has a good presence and profile on the sub-regional and regional stage. The Council is shouting about Herefordshire and benefiting from inward investment. It is supporting activity including the New Model in Technology and Engineering Higher Education (NMI TE) Institute, the ongoing delivery of the Herefordshire Enterprise Zone and the development of purpose built business incubation space in the Marches. Securing funding through the Government's Stronger Towns and Heritage Action Zone also represent significant achievements for the Council in continuing its work to benefit Herefordshire.

At an appropriate time the new administration will want to consider how it maintains its visibility across the region. The Corporate Plan presents an opportunity to consider further political engagement in regional activity and the Council's influence and profile can be further enhanced by focussed development of 'the place' narrative.

## **5. Develop a more strategic, collaborative and corporate approach to building more resilient communities**

The Council is undertaking important work in this area and the new administration is very focused on engaging with communities. The Peer Team heard a great deal both inside and outside of the organisation, including from those outside the County, about the potential of Talk Community for connecting communities. Talk Community is the Council's approach to communities and its relationship with them and includes several strands of activity including establishing 'hubs' led by communities for delivering local activity (20 in 2020 and 50 by 2021).

The Council will want to ensure that officers and members have clarity on what Talk Community is as the Peer Team felt that as the brand has taken off so quickly some of those within your organisation may not be clear about what it is. You will want to consider how to ensure that this is well understood by all. Talk Community is a very strong brand which is known by partners and parishes and the Peer Team recommend you consider how this could be of wider benefit to the County.

## **6. Further cultivate 'One Herefordshire' by developing a 'One Council' approach, specifically:**

### **Create more space for the political and officer leadership to work together strategically**

The leadership has created space for strategic discussions between senior officers and Cabinet members. Member and officer relationships are good. The change of administration has brought together members from different groups in an alliance and there is an energy and a keenness from both members and officers to work together effectively, and this has included regular briefings and holding an Awayday.

As part of this the Peer Team would also urge you to ensure that your decision making processes are effective. Clarity on how decisions are taken and communicated in what is a more complex political landscape would be of benefit.

### **Give your managers the space to think and do**

Staff were positive about having the space to operate and generate ideas to support the Council in being innovative. Staff feel supported in presenting their ideas and that the organisation provides opportunities to do this, such as through the Leadership Forum - which is viewed particularly favourably.

### **Build a 'top table' (Strategic Management Team)**

The 'top table' has now been created following a review of Management Board. The Management Board is known across the organisation and provides critical oversight of strategic activity.

### **Continue to strengthen your governance**

The Council reorganisation and creation of the corporate support function is viewed positively by staff. There is strong support for the project management approach but some clarity would be helpful on what this resource is to be used for as there are slightly different views on this across the organisation.

Further work remains to strengthen some aspects of corporate governance. The Council's approach in ensuring compliance is important and the organisation would benefit from closer scrutiny of this. The Council will want to ensure its processes are robust - particularly in contract management and risk management. Risk may benefit from being more visible in the organisation and Management Board could have an enhanced oversight role. The Peer Team recommend that a separate specific piece of work may be helpful to look at this in more detail and the LGA would be happy to support this.

There was positive feedback on the engagement of councillors, including the role of members in scrutiny. Non-executive member involvement could be strengthened with further communication and engagement and we anticipate that the introduction of monthly written updates from Cabinet members to all other councillors will be a useful tool. Member training has been well received and it is now timely to identify next steps and what other support to meet the needs of councillors would be helpful.

It is important that the Cabinet has opportunities to meet informally in addition to the established arrangements. The Peer Team recommend that this regular time is identified for the Cabinet.

### **Shift the strategic and operational focus from Directorates to One Council**

The corporate support function has facilitated moves towards 'One Council' through an increase in organisational level planning and delivery, with directorates working more collaboratively. This has included work addressing climate issues through sustainable transport and active travel initiatives. Establishing a more focused Management Board has also been a critical factor in developing this.

### **7. Build on your success and have the confidence to work with your top team to drive and deliver your political priorities**

The new administration has agreed its vision and through the new Corporate Plan will provide clarity on the Council's priorities. Working relations between members and officers are good and are evolving well. The Council has strong relationships in place with its partners too. The Peer Team would encourage you to continue to invest in these relationships to support the delivery of your political priorities.

### **8. Within the context of a corporate transformation programme, develop a more strategic approach to your workforce to ensure alignment with ambition and priorities**

A Workforce Development Strategy has been produced, linked to the development of the Corporate Plan, and is awaiting approval. The Council will want to ensure the Strategy is aligned to the finalised Corporate Plan.

Staff were unclear on the status of the Council's Workforce Development Strategy, so the Peer Team would encourage you to ensure that you launch and communicate your approach clearly, discussing this across the organisation so that it is well understood. There are individual aspects of good workforce development activity being delivered and staff feel well supported with structured and relevant training and development opportunities including sessions on 'working in a political environment' and communications. The Council has invested in growing its own staff and your Leadership Programme was applauded by staff who offered really positive feedback on the Programme.

## **9. Use your communications more proactively to build support and understanding of your vision, ambition and direction of travel**

Capacity in the organisation to communicate your strategic vision and Corporate Plan will be critical. The Communications Team is currently very involved in essential operational service issues but the communications activity required around your wider strategic approach will need to be considered. The Council will want to be clear on where this capacity will come from for both the Corporate Plan and the wider County narrative activity. Communication will be key - so you may want to consider how the Management Board discusses communications at its meetings to determine what strategic messages need to be delivered.

We appreciate that 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 move forward.

Your LGA Principal Adviser, Helen Murray, will be happy to work with you to identify any additional support the LGA can offer to help you respond to the points set out in this letter. Helen can be contacted on 07884 312235 or [Helen.Murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:Helen.Murray@local.gov.uk).