

Corporate Peer Challenge **Gloucestershire County Council**

12 -15 June 2018

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) has a strong team of political and officer leaders. They work with purpose, overseeing significant changes and improvements and jointly pushing forward the ambitions for the county and council with its partners. Such leadership has specifically helped guide recent progress towards improvements in children's services, and is now being deployed effectively with partners establishing ambitious plans for the future of the county, through 'Vision 2050'.

In 2017 Ofsted rated GCC's children's services as Inadequate. It has been a difficult time for the council as it responds by improving systems to keep children safe, and addressing the culture within children services which gave rise to such concerns. A year on, Ofsted have recognised progress, but the council knows there is still much to do. The peer team were pleased to see that GCC has sought to improve leadership and practice within the service, but also to develop a more open and transparent culture of reporting and accountability across the council as a whole. It is of course 'early days' and our advice is to stay resolutely focused on that improvement within the service but for GCC not be afraid to 'lift its head' and encourage a narrative which is more than just about responding to Ofsted, but also embedding sustainable improvement across the council as a whole; that is the next challenge but a real opportunity too.

The process to establish 'Vision 2050' is a strength, galvanising the commitment and enthusiasm of partners and residents. It is stimulating a county-wide conversation around ambitions and plans intent on shaping the long-term future of Gloucestershire, including some difficult issues of prioritisation for growth. The council is a key player in this, and the governance of the collective public stakeholders through 'Leadership Gloucestershire' is a strong platform on which to build. The development of this future orientated vision is important and partners should coalesce around designing the next steps and building a plan of action which delivers the economic, social and health ambitions for the county. In the view of the peer team, GCC is well placed to utilise its collaborative leadership style and resources to provide the necessary drive to keep that momentum going. We encourage them to take on that role with confidence.

The peer team also encourages GCC to review its organisational operating model as it embarks on the delivery of its new Corporate Strategy, against the backcloth of 'Vision 2050'. In doing so, it must ensure it is clear, simple and well understood by members, managers, staff and partners, as the current arrangements do not achieve this. People we spoke with were sometimes confused about lines of accountability and responsibility and given the change agenda GCC is committed to, this is a core issue to address and resolve. The council should hold on to what it does well, notably a strong commissioning culture with effective partners, especially in health and social care. Likewise, the move away from a previously strong directorate structure has helped drive out many aspects of 'silo working' and any return to that must be avoided. Holding on to such strengths, coupled with clarity of responsibility, accountability and encouraging a culture of challenge across GCC are all key design elements for the updated model.

GCC is clearly a leader of place with a highly experienced leadership team. As is to be expected in a complex and dynamic environment, they have a range of relationships, from excellent to challenging, with partners across politics, business, and the wider

public and private sectors. The review of the operating model alongside the influence we suggest GCC should exert in respect of 'Vision 2050' will be an excellent opportunity to reassess their external relationships, and to make deliberate efforts to increase their visible leadership.

The council is well served by its finance team and overall it has an impressive track record for financial grip. It has managed its transformation agenda well through its 'Meeting the Challenge' programmes. This has evolved and matured from a cost savings programme to one that is aligned strongly to the council's future ambitions and priorities and is becoming a driving force to enable their design and delivery. The council is predominantly achieving its savings targets and is financially self-aware. It recognises the implications on budget and spend for its children's services and has made provision for this, but done so in a planned and proportionate way, with a stated ambition to stem spend in the future through effective budget management. The council's future financial plans are predicated, in large part, on a reliance on stemming demand in key areas such as children's services and adult social care. It would be wise to keep these plans under constant review.

The council should consider the effectiveness of its political relationships and ensure there is effective challenge and transparency in place and a focus on taking the council forward. GCC moved from no overall control/minority Conservative administration to a strong Conservative majority council in May 2017; this has led to changes in the political dynamic across the council and the coincident publication of the Ofsted report has compounded this and created a strained political climate across the political parties. We believe these matters need addressing. GCC should look afresh at its scrutiny arrangements to ensure that Members use the range of tools and techniques available to challenge and hold to account. Furthermore, the respective political groups and senior officers need to work through the tensions that exist and ensure clarity of understanding about access to information and officers, but also for the political arm of the council to embrace the cultural change, ambitions and practices of the council as a whole.

The council is responding well now to the challenges posed by Ofsted and has sought to embrace a more open, transparent and progressive culture right across the board. It has initiated a significant staff engagement programme and set in place key underpinning processes and procedures to support it. Clearly this is new; it will take time to bed in and the council must give the time to allow that culture to grow, but also to keep firmly on top of it, in order that it prospers, is authentic, and sets the future tone for GCC.

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. GCC should review its operating model, building on its many existing strengths. It should ensure it is future proofed, therefore enabling effective delivery of its refreshed Corporate Strategy and also offers sufficient clarity of purpose and understanding.

2. As 'Vision 2050' progresses, GCC should, with its partners, review its specific leadership role and influence for its further development, ensuring the subsequent delivery of plans to underpin this.
3. From a strong financial base, GCC should consider how it develops a wider understanding of its longer term financial strategy, beyond its current horizon, so that all stakeholders are clear in respect of its longer term plans.
4. At a significant time of change GCC should seek to ensure its senior political and managerial leadership are more visibly seen by stakeholders as they fulfil their strong and effective leadership role for the county and council.
5. To ensure more effective and transparent challenge GCC should review the structure and impact of its Scrutiny arrangements. As part of this members should be equipped with the necessary skills and tools to enable them to best achieve this and the review should reinforce and support good, effective governance.
6. GCC should continue to develop its organisational culture plans, but constantly review and refine, through and with its staff and partners, so that culture becomes real and vibrant and enables the council to live its values every day.
7. GCC must continue to deliver the improvements in its children's services. At the same time and from a position of strength, it should equally ensure it provides sufficient focus and resource to address some of its other key priority areas, notably adult social care and the service pressures within that area.

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 Gloucestershire County Council were:

- John Henderson, Chief Executive – Staffordshire County Council
- Cllr Colin Noble, Former Leader of the Council – Suffolk County Council
- Cllr Bryony Rudkin, Deputy Leader - Ipswich Borough Council
- Cllr Colin Ross, – Sheffield City Council
- Rachel Crossley, Chief of Staff – Surrey County Council
- Lee Harris, Executive Director Economy, Infrastructure and Environment – West Sussex County Council
- Andrew Lewis, Managing Director – Tees Valley Combined Authority
- Zara Ahmed, Commercial Projects Officer-LGA
- Paul Clarke , Peer Challenge Manager- LGA

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges cover. 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?

As part of the above the council, were keen that the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) helped them address the following issues which are covered within the body of the main report:

- How GCC better achieve its ambitions for the economy and aspirations in terms of 'Vision of Gloucestershire 2050'
- The current operating model - to test GCC's existing principles and practices in respect of commissioning and transformation
- An external view on the 'culture' of the organisation

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 current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge every four to five years. Gloucestershire

County Council had a Corporate Peer Challenge in 2013. Where relevant to do so, findings from that previous peer challenge have been referenced in this report.

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 Gloucestershire County Council, during which they:

- spoke to more than 140 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders
- gathered information and views from more than 50 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading
- Collectively spent more than 380 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 10 weeks in Gloucestershire.

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 (12 – 15 June 2018). 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

GCC has a good understanding of the challenges facing the county. Utilising an impressive evidence base, including InformGloucestershire (a central source for information about the county, its districts and communities), GCC and partners are able to relate a clear narrative for Gloucestershire: a relatively affluent county with an ageing population, a diverse and generally buoyant economy, but a county with pockets of persistent deprivation and one from which the young migrate to find housing and employment elsewhere. Furthermore, the council works well with partners to collectively understand and respond to the needs of communities. It works through the MAIDeN (Multi-Agency Interactive Database for Neighbourhoods) partnership to provide all public sector stakeholders with access to local information, statistics and profiles.

The peer team felt that this evidence base could be enhanced and balanced by a greater understanding of need and opportunity through further engagement with communities and partners including District Councils, so GCC has an even more granular understanding of place and priorities. For example, being clear what communities and partners know, understand, want and importantly can offer in respect of some of the key challenges and priority issues: young people, ageing population, health, infrastructure, communities and assets. A recent LGA led peer challenge which dealt with how GCC tackles prevention, identified similar themed issues and GCC is intent on addressing this.

GCC is a proactive Leader of Place and aspires to strengthen this role in partnership going forward. The council was, at the time of our peer challenge, refreshing its Corporate Strategy and is drawing on the evidence base and action referred to above to do so. This is setting a very positive tone to further help shape and prioritise the council's vision to '...improve the quality of life for Gloucestershire people and communities'. Importantly this is being underpinned by its developing set of values and behaviours. As such the development of the strategy is a lively and engaging process and is providing a great opportunity to determine how GCC will best lead for Gloucestershire and work to improve outcomes for its residents.

The council's priorities are clear and importantly being addressed. For example, we saw an unequivocal corporate commitment to turn around its children's services. This is helping achieve GCC's ambitions for keeping children safe, tackling deprivation and disadvantage and establishing a strong education and skills base. A further example is the significant investment in the county's highways. This was a clear manifesto commitment for the new administration to establish a fit for purpose road network and to GCC's credit this is being seen through with vigour.

4.2 Leadership of Place

GCC works proactively with its partners to design and deliver good public services for the residents of Gloucestershire. They benefit from and make the most of largely co-terminus boundaries with other public authorities from different sectors. They have created strong collaborative leadership arrangements, the embodiment of which is 'Leadership Gloucestershire', chaired by the Leader of GCC. This brings together those public sector organisations to provide vision, leadership and strategic direction for the county as a whole - it is a real strength and platform for future development.

As a result of the above 'Leadership Gloucestershire' is setting out a bold, ambitious and inclusive framework to design the future of the county. Titled 'Vision 2050', it is promoting a county wide 'big conversation' in respect of eight potential ambitions and six major projects, all designed around creating a stronger economy, healthier residents, enabling young people to thrive and stay in the county and the infrastructure to ensure all of the above is achieved. GCC is a very engaged and collaborative partner, often 'leading from the back' to keep the momentum for this impressive vision and the peer team would strongly endorse GCC's positive contribution in respect of 'Vision 2050'. Our challenge to GCC would be that as outcomes of the 'big conversation' become clear, as appropriate, it starts to 'lead from the front' more and shape these ambitions and the resulting outcomes to ensure they are developed into a tangible plan of action. This will be particularly important as the major projects are developed and prioritised, on the basis of their contribution to the wider Gloucestershire economy.

For the present we saw many impressive examples of effective leadership of place, for which GCC should take great credit. Integration across the Health and Social Care Sector is well developed and mature with Gloucestershire set to become one of only 14 Integrated Care Systems (ICS) across the country. This provides the partners with a platform from which to take this to a new level, working together to look at innovative solutions to managing demand and ensuring an effective prevention strategy.

GCC is also developing progressive partnership arrangements with its district partners. Gloucestershire is clear that no consensus yet exists for radical reform of local government structures. But by deepening GCC's relationships with the district councils they could together foster a greater "Team Gloucestershire" approach, mitigating the barriers that exist within two-tier governance arrangements. The joint post of Managing Director of Gloucester City Council who is also a Corporate Director at GCC is an example of this. GCC and its partners have a good platform from which to build opportunities to be even more ambitious, looking at more integrated teams and approaches into the future.

Like many counties, GCC is considering how best to contribute to the challenges and opportunities of economic growth. Although statutory planning powers rest

at the district level, GCC wishes to add value through its broader strategic role, linking issues of economic growth, business development, housing and infrastructure. The perception of some partners is that this important role has been under-played in the past, and all partners would welcome a pro-active and inclusive approach to GCC's strategic leadership. Vision 2050 provides an appropriate framework for this enhanced role. GCC is advancing the vision of a strategic growth corridor between Gloucester and Cheltenham, which has a strong economic rationale, but also raises complex issues of community-engagement, joint planning with the districts, asset ownership, and interaction with statutory planning processes. GCC should not shy away from raising challenging opportunities of this nature, but will need to develop propositions within strong partnership arrangements to ensure they secure wide support and are sustainable and deliverable.

GCC fulfils the role of accountable body to the Local Enterprise Partnership, GFirst. This role is critically important in assuring integrity and performance, and GFirst and GCC have a positive and constructive relationship in this regard. GCC is careful to ensure ethical walls exist between its accountable body role and its role as a sponsor of individual projects, but its role as a strategic investment partner with GFirst is less clearly developed. GFirst have supported some excellent projects in the county, for example in partnership with Gloucestershire University. It has made some important strategic calls; for example in positioning Gloucestershire as the national lead for cyber security, based around GCHQ. GCC and GFirst could now consider whether it would be possible to deepen the strategic relationship further. There is scope to bring together GFirst's access to capital grant investment and business leadership, alongside a more pro-active role for GCC using its ability to invest for an economic return, and the role of other investing partners, to create a joint long-term investment plan for the county, in support of the agreed economic plan and Vision 2050. The co-terminosity of GFirst and GCC makes this more of an achievable opportunity than for other LEPs, and could ultimately create a stronger basis for assuming devolved responsibilities from government.

4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

There are many strengths in the political and managerial leadership at GCC. The council's Cabinet and Corporate Management Team (CoMT) work well together. They are formally and informally setting the future agenda for GCC, but just as importantly they also hold each other to account in terms of outcomes, performance and improvement. Examples of effective leadership and governance exist across GCC. This hasn't always been the case, most especially in children's services, where effective challenge and transparency was, as one stakeholder told us 'stymied pre Ofsted and we didn't know how bad it was'. The council is putting in place structures and systems to ensure that they do 'know' and as a consequence act. Whilst an inadequate Ofsted is not a position any council wants to find itself in, it is a valuable lesson to learn and the new ways of working must constantly be reinforced - a culture of openness, transparency and challenge throughout must become the norm at GCC.

With regard to Scrutiny, we believe there is further work to be done to ensure the lessons referred to above are evidenced, since we found a mixed bag in terms of the effectiveness of scrutiny, and use of data and challenge. At one level we heard about and came across evidence of good scrutiny, notably the budget scrutiny in 2017/18 and good cross party task and finish working in respect of Flood and Community Resilience as well as around air quality. However, we also found there isn't a strong enough culture of using data for effective insight and challenge. There appeared to be inconsistency of approach across scrutiny committees and no consensus reached by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on its role in terms of the scrutiny of council-wide performance. As such we suggest GCC review its approach to Scrutiny in terms of its structure and impact to ensure it reinforces and supports good, effective governance. It will be important that members are supported to develop their forensic skills and be able to exercise them - this will help reinforce the cultural changes across the council. Likewise, given the challenges of moving from no overall control to a majority administration, it is recommended that GCC look to consider best practice elsewhere in the sector to inform its approach to scrutiny, with an offer from the cross-party members on the peer team to help facilitate this if useful.

For the most part we found good individual member and officer relationships across the political spectrum. When members spoke about officers in person, they did so in positive, respectful and confident terms. However, it was clear to the peer team that as a consequence of the recent Ofsted inspection, a lingering climate of uncertainty and lack of overall trust exists and needs addressing at a more general level between the officer and political groups. One stakeholder reflected the peer team's core challenge, 'How can we genuinely come out of this stronger, rebuild trust and learn the lessons?' It would be useful for GCC to reflect on this and then 'check - in' with members, senior officers and staff on a regular basis as it does so.

Through 'Vision 2050', the culture change programme and other key current and future plans, the council is acutely aware of how it must forge its leadership credentials through effective partnership working and staff engagement. For the most part such arrangements exist but we did pick up feedback from a range of external and internal stakeholders that they would welcome more visible leadership from GCC's senior team both politically and managerially at this significant time of change.

We found some political tensions at GCC. The Ofsted outcome from last year has contributed to creating a less than positive climate between the political groups. Furthermore, when the current administration took overall control in May 2017, it made changes, as it had the right to do, both actual and perceived, which have been unpopular with the opposition political groups. It is not for the peer team to prescribe solutions but we do suggest that Group Leaders spend time reviewing how they might make their existing arrangements and culture more progressive. What is important is that the council should find ways to ensure that through effective governance it helps minimise the potential for such an Ofsted outcome to ever happen again and the groups now more than ever need to collectively address that. To that end it should review Scrutiny, as already mentioned, but also

other 'pinch points' such as the arrangements for opposition spokespeople, political assistants and all members' access to senior officers with the intention of reaching improved relationships, challenging positively and refocussing efforts on improving GCC.

The peer team came across a spectrum of external relationships, which ranged from strained to excellent. However, they were overall generally positive and from the peer team's experience of working within a two tier local authority setting, were largely as we would expect to see. Where some of those relationships were most strained, notably with the Police and Crime Commissioner, we found that this was not significantly impacting on the positive operational co-operation evidenced between Gloucester Constabulary and GCC

Operating Model

The council's operating model has served it well and has been changed and evolved overtime as a deliberate strategy to support improvement. This has seen the council instill an increasingly strong and more effective commissioning culture and resulted in many improved outcomes for residents as well as significant efficiencies. It has helped develop stronger horizontal, cross council arrangements, helping GCC move away some time ago from a 'silo' like Directorate Structure, and therefore has strengthened its corporate focus. The council understandably has had to revise its operating arrangements to take account of some leadership and managerial changes as well as the shortcomings in children's services. It now needs to make sure it learns the lessons from these experiences and continues to build on its more recent pragmatic approach to organisational design.

The advent of the new Corporate Strategy provides an ideal opportunity (set against a longer term plan embodied in the sentiments of 'Vision 2050') for the council to review that operating model. Clearly GCC should hold on to the values and strengths referred to around commissioning and a strong corporate focus. But equally, it must ensure alignment around responsibility, accountability and authority so people are clear about these things. Both senior managers and staff told us they would welcome that clear and simple 'blueprint' for the future around how the organisation will shape itself over the next 1-5 years. This is an important message for effective leadership and communication since as one leader told us , ' it works largely because we make it work despite the existing structure' and several staff and managers told us that they were not crystal clear in respect of the organisational structure and accountability much beyond their own service arrangements.

4.4 Financial planning and viability

GCC has a track record of sound financial management and we found a strong and effective corporate oversight of finance. It's 'Meeting the Challenge' (MTC) programme is now on its third iteration and through its refreshing and constant alignment to the council's corporate planning processes it has helped deliver

£114m of savings in the period 2010-14; and a further £75m between 2015 and 2018, but just as importantly at an impressive 95% success rate.

As the MTC Programme has evolved and matured, it has driven efficiency and latterly become targeted on managing demand and redesigning key services. This is important because it means it is responding to the current pressures predicated on the back of the Ofsted inspection as well as the inevitable demographic demands of a higher than average elderly population. Equally, this strong financial stewardship has meant that GCC has been able to contain budget pressures and as a result of purposeful underspending, been able to make appropriate contributions to earmarked reserves to support future pressures and spending priorities. Indeed in 2017/18 it delivered £22.7m against a target of £23.6m and approximately 50% of the savings generated were reinvested into the budget to fund such pressures and improvement priorities.

GCC and its district partners have been progressive and pushed boundaries in respect of financial management which has led to real benefits for all. A successful pooling agreement for business rates with all six district councils and GCC has been in existence since 2013/14, and it is one from which they have collectively learnt some important lessons. Earlier this year they were successful in becoming a pilot area for 100% business rates retention - worth approximately £9m to the county as a whole and 50% to GCC for financial resilience (stability and sustainability) and growth initiatives.

GCC has a strong and developing plan to ensure its future financial viability. The latest 'Meeting the Challenge' programme is a good balance between ensuring delivery of priorities, savings, and cost avoidance through effective demand management. For example, GCC has reviewed the arrangements for the effective delivery of its significant investment in the county's highways over the next 5 years as it tenders for 3 new contracts to ensure quality and value. It is also working with a strategic partner to embed a demand management approach across the social care system, with an emphasis on building internal capacity rather than permanent reliance on external support. Furthermore, GCC is very aware of the additional corporate resourcing including funding which has been directed to children's services recently, but there is a plan in place to stem and manage those costs in line with the approach already outlined above.

The challenges to address further savings extend into the medium term. We saw a clear picture around the plans and actions in respect of the next 2 years and given GCC's track record we are generally confident the council will achieve these. However the MTFs from 2020/21 has a lack of detail to support the figures and whilst we were told that plans are in place or developing we would encourage GCC to be more explicit in respect of these so all stakeholders have a clear sense of future intentions.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

The council's senior officer team (CoMT) is a real strength and a good platform on which to build. It is a well-established, talented group, working in a corporate and

collaborative manner. It has recently been augmented by an experienced Director of Children Services whose leadership is already showing benefits for that service and making the senior officer group stronger still.

GCC's approach to building the capacity of its members is impressive. The investment in modern IT kit, a well-regarded member induction programme and an equally sound overall training and development programme all evidence this. This means that politicians are well served with equipment, support and skills development to ensure they are able to undertake their roles to good effect - all members we met with spoke very positively about this.

We were impressed with the talent and potential within the tier of managers below CoMT (Lead Commissioners and Heads of Service). It was refreshing to be able to discuss GCC's organisational strengths and potential areas for development with them. Our message back to the council is on one hand a very positive one - it is developing that openness and transparency it wants amongst staff. However, this then needs to be acted upon more and turned into actions, for example, this group was full of suggestions for improvement but a representative view from them was 'their voice was not always heard'. Indeed managers and staff alike being happy to be open and honest was a positive and consistent messages from all internal focus groups we ran - clearly a growing strength but reinforcing a message that leaders need to be 'seen more' and 'listen more' - an area of development that GCC should continue to address with managers encouraging more challenge and inviting new ideas so that it becomes part of the everyday culture.

There are real strengths in the way that GCC looks to build the capacity, skills and resilience of its workforce. We heard about exciting and proactive approaches to the way it embraces a coaching culture and how it is a leading light in terms of its engagement in the National Graduate Programme, as well its own strong and developing Apprenticeship programme and Aspiring Leaders Network (the latter a joint initiative with Gloucester City Council). Therefore, in the midst of change the council is clearly seeking to develop and shape its future leaders so they have the skills and qualities required of GCC managers for the future. Our main challenge here is utilising the Aspiring Leadership Network as a model to learn from. Could GCC and its partners across the public sector in the county collaborate more in a mutually supportive programme of organisational development? Such collaboration could build capacity through workforce learning and development in a co-terminus "Team Gloucestershire" approach, and would show real intent to deepen collaboration between authorities.

The council is building capacity in key areas to help drive organisational change. This is especially true within the HR service which has recently geared up in terms of both its capability and capacity to help inform and support the council through this intense period of change. This will be important as the council's people management capacity did need strengthening. GCC is well aware it needs a refreshed framework to work within: i.e. a workforce plan and an OD strategy. The alignment then of these to the new Corporate Strategy is key, embedding the council's new values at the centre of this. Through this work GCC should also

ensure it has the necessary HR skills, expertise and importantly influence, to drive further organisational change and improvement.

The council needs to review and address capacity issues in terms of communications. As with HR/OD it knows this area is also a 'work in progress'. There are real challenges and opportunities ahead in terms of how well GCC develops its narrative around change both internally with staff and externally with partners and most importantly with its communities. We have made reference in this report to the need for more visibility of leadership, clarity around future plans and how community needs could be better understood. These are clear examples where the peer team believe greater attention should be paid so the council's communications are more proactive, positive and credible. As with many councils, there is scope to continually modernise the approach to social media engagement with residents, making the majority of interactions easy for the resident and efficient for the council. Social media also provides opportunities for the council to adopt a more informal and accessible relationship with its residents which will build familiarity and visibility, improve reputation, and complement the reform of service delivery.

GCC has rightly invested significant resources to address serious issues within children's services and a year on that is beginning to show improvement. What has characterised some of this is speed, purpose and creativity - it is addressing leadership shortcomings and building capacity into front-line social work. Through this it has demonstrated how well it can mobilise its corporate will and intent to address key priority areas and make a difference to people's lives. A key challenge will be to continue to do this both in children's but other areas too, but not from a deficit approach and with the same characteristics referred to above.

We believe the council is responding positively to that challenge and the proactive way it is planning to address the present and likely future demand pressures in adult social care is a good example of this - it is tackling this from a position of relative strength with a clear plan of action. It now needs to build in that speed and purpose since the council's future plans are in large part predicated around its effective implementation.

We believe GCC could build on current strengths to further develop its partnership arrangements and to build collective capacity and improve outcomes for residents. An example is the strong relationship it has with Gloucester City Council: shared senior post, soon to be shared building and the sharing of back office functions. This is a real strength but the peer team felt that the potential both within that arrangement and then potentially scaled up across partners is not as developed as it could be. It would be useful to reflect both on what has been achieved but equally what remains untapped in terms of the real potential there is for further integrated, one stop, joined up public services.

Organisational Culture

GCC is working diligently to strengthen the culture of the organisation. It has recently established a set of core values about the way all its staff will go about

their business. These will be key enablers to underpin the delivery of the refreshed Corporate Strategy and as such should be the very lifeblood of GCC. It has sought to listen to feedback from staff as well as critical messages from the Ofsted inspection report and crucially has designed these new values of Accountable, Integrity, Empower, Respect and Excellence, through and with its staff. It is undeniably a step in the right direction but the groundwork to establish these is just concluding now. The acid test will be how effectively these are, as one stakeholder said, 'lived and breathed across the council' and it will be important that GCC creates an environment that allows them to flourish.

We heard about a strong and developing range of approaches to staff engagement and listening including Employee Voice Groups, which aim to make sure the views of staff are heard and acted upon. From our engagement with GCC staff it was plain that the reception and socialisation of these values to date have received a mixed response. Views expressed ranged from 'five words on a page means nothing', to 'the values are inspiring and setting the tone for how all should operate'. To ensure the latter of these two views prevail, it will be important that GCC reinforces through the actions, words and deeds of its leaders and managers that those five words on a page actually mean everything.

The senior leadership team of GCC is very aware of the importance of the need for this culture shift. They recognise the council is on a metaphorical journey to a more inclusive culture and are intent on seeing that through and constantly refreshing it. Regularly checking progress via staff surveying, appraisals, campaigns such as 'Speak up if it's not right', exit interviews and formal and informal staff engagement sessions will be key and that's where the existing and planned infrastructure will be key. Throughout this forthcoming period the visibility and actions of leaders in being seen to live out these values will be important, as will ensuring the GCC remains open to external challenge and validation of progress.

GCC is working hard to reinforce that strong enabling culture through introducing modern working practices and the more effective use of technology. The benefits of this in children's services are being realised – investment in systems, IT infrastructure, upskilling and enabling staff to work to the values referred to above are now clearly paying off. To ensure GCC continues to move with agility and pace it will require investment of resources and capacity as well as a steadfast aim to improve the digital capability of the council and its workforce as a whole. The council knows it must respond to this challenge and has developing plans in place. Ensuring those plans are realised will be critical to the achievement of GCC's priorities and 'Big ticket' issues such as its transformation agenda in respect of managing demand.

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. Andy Bates, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Andy's contact details are: andy.bates@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 two 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 four to five years. It is therefore anticipated that the council will commission their next Peer Challenge before 2023.