

Remote Corporate Health Check Telford and Wrekin Council

7th to 10th June 2021

Feedback Report

1. Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and lockdown began in March 2020, the Local Government Association (LGA) suspended the physical delivery of all peer challenge work including the delivery of corporate peer challenge in its traditional sense.

To continue to support councils during this unprecedented period, the LGA rapidly refocused their support and adopted a new remote approach, focusing on supporting the varied needs of local government. This new approach does not replace the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge offer, rather it complements it.

From 7th to 10th June Telford and Wrekin Council undertook an LGA Remote Corporate Health Check (RCHC), with the work of the team focusing on:

- Understanding place and priority setting
- Leadership of place
- Financial planning and viability
- Organisational leadership and governance
- Capacity to deliver

The council asked the peer team to consider also:

- The Covid-19 response and on-going plans for recovery
- The culture of the organisation – general reflections plus an exploration of the extent to which there is a ‘can do’ approach to delivering organisational priorities and responding to the pandemic
- Reputation and reach – reflections on how the council is perceived locally, regionally and nationally

The peer team comprised the following:

- Nick Carter, Chief Executive, West Berkshire Council
- Councillor Michael Payne, Deputy Leader, Gedling Borough Council and Deputy Chair of the Local Government Association

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- Laura Church, Deputy Chief Executive and Corporate Director for Population Well-Being at Luton Council
- Richard McGuckin, Director of Towns Investment, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
- Andy Ralphs, Strategic Director of Customer and Corporate Services, Plymouth City Council
- David McIntosh, Corporate Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development, Dorset Council
- Will Bramble, incoming Chief Executive of Pembrokeshire County Council (shadow)
- Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

Across the course of the four days, the peers met with approximately 130 people, including elected members, council officers and representatives of partner organisations.

2. Executive Summary

The council can be very proud of what it is achieving, with it clearly being very ambitious, top-performing in key areas and striving constantly to deliver for local people. The authority, partners and communities can be extremely proud of the borough's Covid-19 response.

The authority is held in extremely high regard as a partner, founded upon credibility and a convincing track record of delivery, and it is very highly trusted.

The council has been very successful in drawing in funding and tapping into initiatives from the regional and national level to help shape the borough and drive it forward. 'Telford and Wrekin fights for Telford and Wrekin' is a theme strongly associated with the council that people value highly.

There is strong and effective political and managerial leadership of the council. The Leader and Chief Executive are held in very high regard both within and beyond the organisation, but it clearly isn't just them. Phenomenally hard work has been delivered over many years to get the organisation to where it is.

It is time for the council to move away from what feels like 'hiding its light under a bushel' and establish the higher profile and enhanced reputation that its track record and successes deserve. We see real opportunity at the regional and national level for the council as an influencer and innovator.

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The question and challenge now concern how to take the council to the next level.

The Council Plan was renewed in autumn last year, featuring a reduced number and more outcome-focused set of priorities and making tackling climate change explicit and central. The renewal of the Plan has been complemented with a refresh of the council's performance framework and the 'golden thread' in Telford and Wrekin feels robust.

There is a clear focus on managing the council's budget and maintaining and enhancing the overall financial position. The development of new models of service delivery and commercial approaches have been key to this.

There is extensive dialogue and collaboration across the senior managerial leadership of the council. This represents a very deliberate approach which is key to the development of a 'One Team' philosophy.

The council is working to establish itself as an 'employer of choice'. Its growing reputation, the exciting agenda that exists in the borough and the role the authority plays within that all make Telford and Wrekin Council an increasingly attractive proposition as a place to work. The organisational culture that has been established plays to the 'employer of choice' ambitions and the council can also be very proud of the Employee Survey results.

We see real benefit in the development of a place-based vision that draws together and articulates what Telford and Wrekin as a borough is seeking to become and the opportunities and challenges to be capitalised upon and addressed. The development of such a vision should be approached as a partnership endeavour. Alongside this, there would usefully be an outlining of the 'Asks and Offers' around Telford and Wrekin – enabling partners at the regional and national level to see the way in which mutual benefit can be derived through tapping into what the borough has to offer.

3. Recommendations

As a peer team, we recommend that the council:

- Continues to strengthen the use of data, intelligence and insight to inform policy and service delivery
- Publishes the Medium-Term Financial Strategy in early 2022 and aligns it with the Council Plan and priorities
- Works with partners to develop a place-based vision
- Develops a clear set of 'Asks and Offers' around Telford and Wrekin – enabling partners at the regional and national level to see the way in which mutual benefit can be derived through tapping into what the borough has to offer

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- Determines the extent to which the council seeks to extend its engagement at the regional and national level – crucially involving first a determination of the benefits of this for Telford and Wrekin as a council and as a borough
- Weaves in mechanisms to ensure the council ‘takes a breath’ intermittently – creating the space for reflection and evaluation before moving on

4. Feedback on the core themes of the health check

4.1. Just to take a moment ...

At the outset of providing our feedback on the final day of our work, we were keen for the senior political and managerial leadership of the council to take a moment to reflect on the progress that has been, and is continuing to be, made across a wide range of spheres. The council can be very proud of what it is achieving.

This is clearly a very ambitious council and one that is top-performing in key areas. Most notable within this is being judged by Ofsted as ‘Outstanding’ for its children’s services. It has also received very positive feedback in relation to the external challenge it has undertaken around its ‘Shared Lives’ (adult social care) function which has been judged by the Care Quality Commission as ‘Outstanding’. The council has a relentless focus on neighbourhoods and very high standards that it works constantly to attain and exceed. It is an organisation that is striving constantly to deliver for local people and the following are just two of the findings from the most recent Resident Survey, undertaken in the summer of last year:

- 82% of residents who responded indicated they were satisfied with Telford and Wrekin as a place to live
- 74% of residents who responded indicated the support provided by the council during the pandemic was helpful

The Employee Survey last year also provided positive results, including 83% of respondents indicating they would recommend the council as a great place to work.

The council is universally held in very high regard as a partner. It has an impressive track record in place-shaping, including economic development and regeneration initiatives, the enhancement of local amenities and its efforts to meet housing need.

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Tackling inequalities is a clear driver for the authority and is reflected in a revised set of council priorities that includes every child, young person and adult living well in their community and everyone benefitting from a thriving economy. Enabling community involvement and increasing social capital are also key drivers, encapsulated in the 'Co-operative Council' values adopted by the organisation and central to the authority's ambitions around building stronger and more resilient communities. One example is the Capacity Building Fund, which supports the development of grass roots community and voluntary organisations. Another is the Councillor's Pride Fund, enabling each elected member to allocate £2,000 (recently increased to £5,000) to community projects. The Pride in our Community awards celebrate the contribution volunteers and community organisations make to the life of the borough whilst 'Telford 2020' provided funding for a range of community-led initiatives linked to VE Day and VJ Day plus wider activities including projects to tackle holiday hunger. The council has also worked to develop volunteer capacity, with 1,900 people acting as street champions, health champions and snow wardens.

The last 18 months have seen the council contending with a series of crises, starting with very major flooding incidents in the winter of 2019/20, followed quickly thereafter by the outbreak of Covid-19 and recently a very major fire. All of this has been responded to whilst the council has continued to fulfil 'business as usual' – thus maintaining delivery in circumstances well outside the norm.

The council, communities and partners can all be extremely proud of the Covid-19 response they have been involved in, in a series of waves, focused on protecting and supporting the most vulnerable. The local authority is clearly seen as having been a real driving force within this, with one partner indicating "we all played our part but the council led the charge". The following are just some aspects of the response:

- Direct support has been delivered to one in five households in the borough including 'safe and well checks', dog walking, undertaking shopping and delivering food and medication
- Breakfast boxes delivered to children and families in greatest need
- The 'Kindle Kindness' campaign generating £20,000 and enabling 190 tablet devices to be delivered to hospitals and care homes
- 1,147 local people volunteering to play their part
- More than £100,000 of additional funding provided by the council to food banks and charities tackling homelessness
- Every one of the 78,000 households in the borough being written to twice by the Leader during the first couple of months of lockdown to outline the pandemic-related support available and how to access it

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- The council making personal protective equipment (PPE) available to partners including residential care homes and schools
- £30m in Business Rate relief issued to businesses in the borough
- £28.5m paid to businesses qualifying for government grant support

The Resident Survey highlighted that 75% of respondents felt the leadership of the council had done a good job responding to the pandemic. Good communications from the council are seen to have been central, with them being highly valued by partners we spoke to and 91% of respondents to the Resident Survey indicating they felt well informed by the authority about the support available.

The Leader and Chief Executive are held in extremely high regard both within and beyond the organisation, but it clearly isn't just them. Phenomenally hard work has been delivered over many years to get the organisation to where it is. The question and challenge now focus on how to take the council to the next level.

4.2. Understanding place and priority-setting

Telford and Wrekin is well understood as a borough born out of a series of individual communities, such as Madeley, Oakengates, Dawley and the market towns of Wellington and Newport, each with their own history and identity. The council has led the celebrating and investment around place. In 2018, with Telford having been designated as a new town fifty years earlier, a £2m 'Telford@50 Fund' was established for community groups to bid against for events and the development and upkeep of community buildings. There was also a balloon and kite fiesta and a series of events in a big top in the Town Park, attracting more than 60,000 people.

The political ambitions and imperatives of the authority are clearly understood widely across the organisation and drive much of what the council does. The £45m Pride in our Community programme focuses on making a difference, ranging from the relatively small to the large such as a £1.6m 3G playing field and investment in highways. The Pride in our High Streets initiative saw £1m injected to support nine high streets within the borough, delivering physical regeneration such as improved parking and lighting; a 'Young Enterprise Challenge' involving school pupils being awarded funding to launch business ideas; social enterprise 'pop-up shops'; community events; and a training programme to develop the commercial skills of high street businesses.

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Telford and Wrekin is also recognised as a 'borough of contrasts', including its mix of urban and rural; the gap in life expectancy between the least and most deprived neighbourhoods of 9.4 years for men and 8.1 years for women; and 18 neighbourhoods ranked among the 10% most deprived nationally for health, skills, employment and housing. In total, 26% of the population live in areas amongst the 20% most deprived nationally. It is fully anticipated that the pandemic will exacerbate key aspects of disadvantage, with the true impacts of the crisis seen not to have been fully felt yet. August last year saw 32 per cent of jobs in the borough furloughed; the claimant count rose by 96 per cent between March 2020 and February this year and the number of people claiming Universal Credit rose 91 per cent in the first four months of the pandemic.

The council strives to protect the wonderful characteristics of the borough's natural environment whilst fulfilling the area's development potential. Two-thirds of the borough is classified as rural and 17 nature reserves have been created across a 'Green Network' covering 2,600 hectares. The Local Plan seeks simultaneously to protect the green space, with more than 200 'Green Guarantee' sites, and support the growth agenda, including housing, employment sites and infrastructure developments.

Getting things right for citizens is well established as a fundamental principle and the following 'Co-operative Council' values that the authority has adopted can be seen to be integral:

- Openness and honesty – being open and honest in the way we work and making decisions and communicating in a clear, simple and timely way
- Ownership – being accountable for our own actions and empowering others with the skills to help themselves
- Fairness and respect – responding to people's needs in a fair and consistent way
- Involvement – working together with our communities, involving people in decisions that affect their lives and being prepared to listen and take on new ideas

'Protect, care and invest to create a better borough' is also firmly established as a key aspect of what drives the council and its activities. This is positioned as the council's corporate vision but we would pose a question around the extent to which it fulfils that niche relative to being a set of principles that guide the organisation? We return to the issue of a vision later in this report.

The Council Plan was renewed in autumn last year and saw the following determined as the organisation's priorities:

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- Every child, young person and adult lives well in their community
- Everyone benefits from a thriving economy
- All neighbourhoods are a great place to live
- Our natural environment is protected and the council has a leading role in addressing the climate emergency
- A community-focused, innovative council providing efficient, effective and quality services

Through this, understanding has been established around the tackling of climate change as an explicit priority. The overall number of priorities has reduced but the priorities remain broad.

The use of data, intelligence and insight, including the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), is increasingly central to the understanding of place. The information to have emerged from the JSNA regularly informs council and partnership-based 'deep dives', which recently have included looking at domestic abuse and the impact of the pandemic on communities and health services. The analysis around domestic abuse quantified the demand generated on key public services, such as safeguarding and housing, and led to the commissioning of specific services with a preventative focus. Also, the use of data, intelligence and insight has informed targeted activity in localities, including smoking cessation and active lifestyle initiatives, the deployment of the 'Job Box' routes into employment facility and support around those not in education, employment or training (NEET).

This use of data, intelligence and insight is supplemented with community engagement and involvement approaches that inform policy and contribute to service design. These include the Resident Survey with its 5,600 respondents last year; the Community Panel – which is currently being re-configured to ensure it as representative of the community as possible; and the 'Making it Real Board' comprising adult social care service users who act as 'experts by experience' in contributing to the council's understanding, thinking and planning. The housing strategy and customer charter are just two examples of the way in which input from local people has helped shape the council's approach.

The council seeks to balance the input from across the three domains of data, intelligence and insight; input through community engagement and involvement approaches; and the political ambitions and imperatives. As it moves forward, we see the opportunity for the council to continue to strengthen the use of data, intelligence and insight within this mix.

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4.3. Leadership of place

'Telford and Wrekin fights for Telford and Wrekin' is a strong theme that came across during the course of our work, particularly from partner organisations, and people want to see that approach from the council continuing. The authority has been very successful in drawing in funding and tapping into initiatives from the regional and national level in order to help drive the borough forward. One example is the £3.7m grant secured from the West Midlands Combined Authority, of which the council is a non-constituent member, that has been integral to the delivery of 540 new homes. Another example, announced during the week we delivered our work, is the Towns Fund award of over £22m. This focuses on Telford's Station Quarter, between the railway station and town centre, and includes residential and commercial space and a digital skills and enterprise hub delivered by Telford College, the University of Wolverhampton and local businesses. The Towns Fund work will also aid the reshaping and regeneration of Wellington and Oakengates borough town centres and the funding is anticipated to attract £30m of additional private sector investment.

Activities and successes such as these contribute to the council being held in extremely high regard as a partner. It has developed a convincing track record of delivery, established its credibility and is very highly trusted. The council has engaged effectively across the West Midlands and, in doing so, has demonstrated an ability to 'transcend the politics' through its engagement with a number of institutions of alternative political composition. The Telford and Wrekin Integrated Place Partnership (TWIPP) represents a further example of the council's ability to work in complex environments in a constructive way and secure positive outcomes, reflected in the establishment of the Health and Social Care Rapid Response Team to reduce unnecessary hospital admissions and being positioned in the best quartile under the delayed transfers of care (DTC) performance measure.

The question that arises for us is where the council wants to take the partnership agenda across the wider geography, with what we see as real opportunity at the regional and national level for the council as an influencer and innovator. As an example, the Integrated Care System (ICS) under the Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin Sustainability and Transformation Partnership was described to us as being "on a journey" but having "solid foundations". The council's track record in relation to the TWIPP means it brings much to the table in the wider geographical context of the ICS. There is potential there but the environment nationally around health and social care is challenging and, in that context and the constraints that exist as a result, progress feels it will continue to be gradual. In this context there would seem to be a lot for Telford and Wrekin as a council to offer at the national level, where informed conversations, constructive challenge, experience, innovation and pioneering instincts are all required to try and move forward public service reform and 'wicked issues'. The council's performance and delivery track record, its

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trusted status and its ability to forge relationships in lots of different spaces should see its potential contribution at this level being very highly valued.

Southwater has been a real landmark for the borough and the council. At one level it represents a civic space combined with amenities linked to leisure activity and the night-time economy and which complements the Town Park as officially the 'Best Park in the West Midlands'. At another level, it represents a statement of intent around delivery and working in partnership. Many other place-shaping initiatives have followed, including:

- £50m Growth Fund, delivering amongst other things a number of design and build units to support expanding local business and a new hotel, plus 1,000 new jobs and the safeguarding of a further 300
- Housing development, both facilitated through others and directly delivered – including via NUPlace as a housing company wholly-owned by the council with the aims of providing homes for market rent
- The Borough Towns initiative providing £5m for regeneration
- The Stronger Communities initiative making £1m available to develop community-led responses to local challenges, initially across seven wards
- The New Communities Programme with £500,000 made available to address challenges on recently developed housing estates

These are initiatives that go beyond physically changing a place, with much wider socio-economic benefits being derived including employment and skills opportunities; economic multiplier impacts through supply chains and social value initiatives; the creation of more affordable housing; and the setting of a standard for private housing landlords. NUPlace, for example, has seen the main contractor delivering over 1,400 hours of direct apprenticeship activities; more than 2,500 hours of sub-contract apprenticeship work; and over 2,000 hours of management trainee time. Southwater generated around 400 jobs in the entertainment and hospitality sectors.

The 'Business Supporting, Business Winning' approach of the council also derives socio-economic benefits. The inward investment dimension of this clearly generates employment opportunities and provides wealth creation. The business support element, facilitating business growth and ensuring the needs of existing businesses are understood, is reflected in the 'account

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manager' model whereby each of the top 200 businesses in the locality have a named council officer as a key contact to liaise with over issues that are important to them. All of this is integral to sustaining the council's financial position, as well as providing socio-economic benefits for the borough, through increased revenue. To date, the council has generated an additional £7.5m in business rates and council tax through its growth activities and it expects to receive in the region of £3.5m in New Homes Bonus this financial year.

The council is engaged in a network of service and sector-based partnerships, including the likes of adult and children's safeguarding, education, community safety and business. Specific partnerships also exist for dedicated purposes, including:

- Telford Place Board – central to the Towns Fund bid and including local MPs and representatives from the education sector, third sector and business community
- Telford Land Deal Board – an arrangement which has established the council as the 'agent' for Homes England (as the holder of a significant number of assets in the borough), generating capital receipts of more than £30m for them and the government whilst bringing development sites, including 23 hectares of brownfield land, to the market and both attracting inward investors and retaining existing expanding businesses. Through this, £254m of private sector investment has been secured thus far, along with 1,400 new jobs, 24 new commercial sites, 753 new homes and £2.5m of additional business rates plus nearly £1m of council tax revenue per annum.
- Partnership Support Programme – this has seen the council, Town and Parish Councils and other community organisations working together on the transfer of services and facilities such as libraries, community centres and markets
- Telford and Wrekin Integrated Place Partnership
- The Rogue Landlord Taskforce

There is good Cabinet-level involvement wherever appropriate in the above partnership arrangements. This reflects positively on all of the members of Cabinet.

Returning to the question of a vision, we see real benefit in the development of a place-based vision that draws together and articulates what Telford and Wrekin as a borough is seeking to become and the opportunities and challenges to be capitalised upon and addressed. The development of such a vision should be approached as a partnership endeavour. Alongside this, and to be played into the regional and national space, there would usefully be an outlining of the 'Asks and Offers' around Telford and Wrekin – enabling partners at the regional and national

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level to see the way in which mutual benefit can be derived through tapping into what the borough has to offer. Both of these pieces of work would helpfully inform a revised economic development strategy

4.4. Financial planning and viability

There is a clear focus on managing the council's budget and maintaining and enhancing the authority's overall financial position. Since 2009, £126m of savings have been secured, with the net revenue budget standing now at £131m. In recent years, the council has been able to strengthen its reserves whilst simultaneously addressing the significant financial challenge that has been faced. This has all been achieved at the same time as establishing the council as having the lowest level of council tax in the Midlands and maintaining essential services. Furthermore, every year for the last 11 years the council's end-of-year outturn has featured a small underspend, which is clearly positive but there are patterns of overspends and underspends plus mid-year revisions within the overall picture which it would be good to seek to move away from.

The development of new models of service delivery and commercial approaches have been key to what the council has been able to achieve in relation to the budget position and financial sustainability. The authority is now accruing commercial income of around £21m per annum from a range of initiatives. NUPlace is one of these, generating in excess of £1m per annum. The council has also established a solar panel farm, which has brought in nearly £2m to date. Nearly £8m was generated in 2019/20 from the council's property investment portfolio and a new contract was agreed for this financial year to provide property consultancy services to another council in England and this has a value of £1.2m per annum.

The council's auditors have indicated that the authority's "current financial standing means that it is in a sound position to respond to ... challenges". This should provide both reassurance and enable the authority to start mapping out the next stages of its financial journey, focusing both on the achievement of the necessary further savings and the investments that it would seek to make to improve outcomes for the borough and generating revenue. The authority is committed to developing and publishing a Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) in early 2022 to sit alongside the budget proposals for 2022/23. To date, the council has focused on using a budget modelling tool internally to track the anticipated impacts on the council's financial position of changes at the macro-level. Publishing a MTFS, taking the opportunity to align it with the renewed Council Plan and related priorities and presenting it in tandem with the budget proposals for the next financial year, feel like very positive moves.

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4.5. Organisational leadership and governance

There is strong and effective political and managerial leadership of the council, with a range of examples around this already outlined in this report. The leaders, at both Cabinet and Senior Management Team (SMT) level, are highly visible to people in the organisation and are felt to be approachable and engaging. Internal communications are seen to have been enhanced under the new Chief Executive and a wide range of mechanisms are in place including 'The Word' newsletter to staff every six weeks; regular 'Team Briefs' cascaded from the SMT level; quarterly 'Leadership Forum' meetings for all managers and future leaders; 'Communication Champion Meetings' involving employee representatives from across the organisation; 'Ask me Anything' sessions led by the Chief Executive; and staff engagement sessions involving the Chief Executive and Directors.

The Leader and Chief Executive are clearly key to the organisation but the wider sector and the regional and national levels would also benefit from their extended engagement. Increased input at these levels from the wider council would also offer much. We see a real role for the authority to play in sharing its good practice, keys to success and learning with others across local government more. It is time for the council to move away from what feels like 'hiding its light under a bushel' and establish the higher profile and enhanced reputation that its track record and successes deserve, whilst benefitting the sector in doing so. Linked to what we touched on earlier in a context of the ICS, there is also a remit for the council, founded upon excellence and credibility, as influencers and innovators on the regional and national stage – pioneering developments around future public service shape and delivery and the intractable issues councils, other public agencies and government are wrestling with. Partners would be keen to see Telford and Wrekin having a higher profile and being a key influencer, with this benefitting both the local area and the region.

The council will only engage more in the types of spaces touched on above if sufficient benefit is going to be derived for the borough and the organisation. Such engagement will take time and effort on the council's part. What would be required of the organisation will need to be determined and then weighed up carefully against the benefits that stand to be gained. Then, if the council decides it wishes to venture more into this space, there is a key question of how this is enabled to happen in terms of the 'permission-giving' around it that encourages and incentivises people to do so; determining what and where the council wishes to engage so it is done in the most impactful and beneficial ways; and 'freeing people up' to enable them to undertake it.

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There are good relationships between officers and elected members founded upon mutual challenge, respect and collaboration. Ensuring improved responsiveness across the organisation to elected member enquiries is important here and will help build on councillors' existing roles as strong community champions. The council has plans in place around this.

There is also evidence of good elected member support and training. This includes the induction programme following elections, which councillors regard highly, as well as on-going training through the course of each year around the likes of safeguarding and equality and diversity. There is a sense of elected members feeling their training and development needs are readily responded to by the council, including having access to external training and development-related events, and there are plans in place to strengthen provision further.

Facilitating extended dialogue across the political groups and increased Opposition engagement is recognised as a priority and steps have been taken to enable this, including meetings between the political group leaders and the Chief Executive. Linked to this, changes to the approach to scrutiny have been broadly welcomed, with them being seen to have enabled an enhanced role in policy development across the elected membership. We saw real passion and ambition amongst elected members to make scrutiny work and positive impacts are being seen.

Scrutiny has traditionally played a role in the consideration of the budget, led by the Business and Finance Scrutiny Committee reviewing the budget proposals put forward each year by the Administration and, as is sometimes the case, other political groups. This committee and others also receive updates on the in-year budget position for key services. This budget focus continues but other pieces of work making a real difference in communities are coming to the fore more now. One example is the Environment Scrutiny Committee leading community engagement linked to the Sustainable Telford and Wrekin Programme and a core element of which is replacing single-use plastics in the borough with more sustainable alternatives by 2023. Other examples are a review of multi-agency working against child sexual exploitation, one looking at the Covid-19 impacts on communities and the work of a task and finish group on a Local Plan review.

There has traditionally been good input from senior officers to scrutiny and capacity within Democratic Services is being increased to support scrutiny's work further. Whilst good progress is being made, it is recognised that embedding the scrutiny changes is a journey. The Covid-19 situation is impacting here, with officer capacity being deliberately diverted to focus on more immediate priorities whenever necessary and less frequent meetings being held. This is now moving back to a stronger position, with a review of support in this area, which concluded in March, leading to the creation of seven additional posts.

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The equalities and diversity agenda is becoming more prominent in the organisation and there are both internal and external dimensions to this. 'Black Lives Matter' feels as though it has had a significant impact and both provided cause for reflection and acted as a catalyst. The council is keen to build on this. A 'Trusted Panel' approach has been adopted to help address community tensions and aid cohesion. This emerged from specific experiences on the part of the Sikh community and has been adopted in other contexts subsequently, including that relating to the death of Dalian Atkinson in the borough. It essentially brings Cabinet members and senior council officers together with communities being affected by specific issues in order to ensure those communities are heard; enable them to see that their issues are being taken seriously; and be reassured.

The authority is also looking to become a more diverse organisation and develop deeper engagement and understanding around issues of equalities and diversity in order to support its drive to become an 'employer of choice', inform policy and thinking and help shape service delivery. The cultivation of staff networks across a range of spheres related to protected characteristics could play a useful role here.

4.6. Capacity to deliver

As we outlined earlier, the Council Plan was renewed in autumn last year, with it now featuring a reduced number and more outcome-focused set of priorities and making tackling climate change explicit and central. The renewal of the Plan has been complemented with a refresh of the council's performance framework and, as part of this, there has been a clear reinvigoration of the 'golden thread' with people working to ensure that corporate priorities are woven into service strategies and business plans. Service strategies, under each Director, have been drawn up over the last few months and will inform both the annual refresh of the Council Programme and an updated performance framework focusing upon impact and outcomes against the priorities. The business plan for each Service Delivery Unit is being developed currently, mapping out the key actions contributing to the service strategy. The 'golden thread' in Telford and Wrekin feels robust. The last employee survey revealed that 93% of respondents understand how their work contributes to the delivery of council priorities.

The council is working to establish itself as an 'employer of choice', with the recruitment and retention benefits that brings within a competitive jobs market. The growing reputation of the council, the exciting agenda that exists in the borough and the role the council plays within that all make Telford and Wrekin Council an increasingly attractive proposition as a place to work. The organisational culture that has been established, described to us as supportive; having a

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'family feel'; and founded upon flexible and family friendly policies also represents a key foundation for the 'employer of choice' ambitions.

The council is working towards securing 'Thrive' status, which is a framework developed by the West Midlands Combined Authority to support the physical and mental wellbeing of employees. The 2020 Employee Survey has underpinned the development of a new People Strategy which puts people at the heart of the organisation. The solid base that exists is reflected in the Employee Survey results, which provide much for the council to be proud. This includes the statistics that 83% of respondents would recommend the council as a great place to work and 78% indicating they feel proud to tell people they work for the council.

Over the years the council can be seen to have been willing to invest in people and enable them to develop. There are currently 149 apprenticeships within the organisation and the council has also been playing a leading role in creating opportunities for young people under the government's 'Kickstart Scheme'. The 'Future Leaders' programme, as a talent programme that focuses on personal development, the gaining of organisational-wide knowledge and networking, has delivered benefit and been welcomed by the fifty people nominated by their Directors to participate in recognition of their potential. Others in the organisation are keen now to have similar opportunities and the council is developing plans in line with this.

Core strands of organisational development (OD) work are underway to help shape the organisation for the future. This includes the implementation of the People Strategy; work that has been commissioned from the University of Wolverhampton to work with the council to develop a new statement around organisational culture; and the creation of a management and leadership programme for leaders across the authority and which will relate directly to the organisational culture piece.

The council's 'Covid-19 Recovery, Reform and Reset Strategy', established in the middle of last year, is contributing in this space too, helping to identify and take forward changes in how the organisation operates and what it delivers. The approach, entailing several programmes of activity, is facilitating cross-organisational working by focusing on interconnected elements of the borough's overall recovery and drawing together input from across the likes of Cabinet, SMT, other senior managers and representatives from partner organisations. This informs the design and delivery of projects, initiatives and interventions, with each programme led by a member of SMT. Examples of initiatives either already introduced or being taken forward include:

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- To define and implement an optimum flexible working pattern and develop an enabling programme to reduce the carbon impact of staff travel and enable reduction in required office space
- To build upon the current adult social care transformation agenda in order to further build independence for those in high risk groups (learning disabilities, autism, carers, mental health and older people)
- To work alongside local communities to ensure that residents who are the most vulnerable to, or impacted by, coronavirus get the information, advice and help they need to stay healthy, resilient and independent in their own homes, including a specific focus on enabling people who are lonely, isolated or with mental health issues to connect with local services, communities and each other, including through the use of technology
- To jointly develop a training offer for frontline staff in children’s social care to support the emotional health and wellbeing of children, young people, carers and families impacted by Covid-19
- To support an increase in face to face practice and interaction with children, young people and families in line with local and national guidance, with the creation of a hybrid model

Good progress is being made in the circumstances, with acceptance that inevitably focus is diverted from the recovery and reform aspects of the strategy at those key junctures when the council gets drawn back to ‘response’ priorities under Covid-19.

Whilst many councils are engaged in transformation activity and often have a programme of activity to support and drive it, ‘transformation’ in Telford and Wrekin is firmly established as much more of an ethos – with people describing it as “simply the way we do things here”. There is no underpinning programme, dedicated resource or set of governance arrangements needed to make it happen in the authority. One example is digital transformation around benefit claims, reducing the proportion of people needing to make a face to face visit by 89 per cent. Another is work across the council, health sector and voluntary and community sector to maximise the use of community assets to prevent people requiring adult social care support earlier than necessary. This pathway was highlighted as best practice by the NHS in their guidance on hospital discharge during the pandemic.

There is extensive dialogue and collaboration across the senior managerial leadership of the council. The Chief Executive and Executive Directors speak every morning to update one another on key issues; SMT meets every week and, as highlighted earlier, there are quarterly ‘Leadership Forum’ meetings for all managers and future leaders. A difference is being seen in

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terms of increasing join-up across the organisation and a wider senior management cohort feeling more and more informed and involved. People are enjoying this and it represents a very deliberate approach the Chief Executive has established which is key to the development of a 'One Team' philosophy and way of working. People described to us a culture where they feel they can be open and share issues, resulting in support from colleagues and the joint moving forward of issues.

Finally, in a context of the council being so ambitious and seeking to move at the pace it does, people have highlighted the importance of weaving in mechanisms to ensure it 'takes a breath' intermittently – creating the space for reflection and evaluation before moving on to the next major project or innovation. There is recognition that this is easier said than done but people would welcome initiatives being developed in support of the idea.

5. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Telford and Wrekin for undertaking this piece of work. We appreciate that 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. Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Helen Murray (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the LGA. Her e-mail address is helen.murray@local.gov.uk

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