

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO POLICY AND FINANCE COMMITTEE

Agenda Item No.

meeting date: 23RD JANUARY 2018
 title: CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE REPORT
 submitted by: DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES
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1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present committee with the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report and to seek approval for its key recommendations.
- 1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities:
- Community Objectives – The scope of the Peer Challenge covered:
 - Corporate Priorities – understanding of local place and priority setting,
 - Other Considerations - leadership, governance, financial planning, and capacity to deliver.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 As part of their 'sector led improvement' support to local government, the Local Government Association (LGA) offered the delivery of a Corporate Peer Challenge. Peer Challenges are designed to help Councils improve their performance.
- 2.2 The Peer Challenge team were onsite 20th – 22nd November 2017.
- 2.3 The core components that the team looked at were the issues of leadership, governance, corporate capacity and financial resilience. In addition the agreed scope of the Peer Challenge included:
1. Promoting local growth – this will likely explore how the council might better promote Ribble Valley as a place for businesses to start up and grow. This recognises the local challenges in many people commuting out of borough to work and will seek to examine how the council might better develop the borough as a place to work, not just reside.
 2. Balancing growth and housing – this will likely explore how the council can progress sustainable local development, including increasing the number of new homes (including affordable homes) being built in the context of the desire of many local people to limit the number of housing development in the borough.
- 2.4 A number of interviews and focus groups were organised at the request of the peer team. The peer team also reviewed a number of the Council's policies and strategies.

3 SUMMARY

- 3.1 The full LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report can be found at Appendix A. In summary the peer team felt that "Ribble Valley Borough Council has much to be proud about. The council delivers good core services through a committed workforce achieving high levels of customer satisfaction and value for money. The council has a history of prudent financial management and remains in a comfortable position relative to the rest of the sector".
- 3.2 However, there were a number of suggestions and observations made within the report that have led to some key recommendations for the Council.

4 RISK ASSESSMENT

4.1 The approval of this report may have the following implications

- Resources - The Council is currently a subscriber to the LGA. The Corporate Peer Challenge was provided by the LGA at no charge. Officer time was required to help organise and support the Peer Challenge. Small cost of lunch and refreshments.
- Technical, Environmental and Legal – None identified.
- Political – None identified.
- Reputation – None identified.
- Equality & Diversity - None identified.

5 RECOMMENDED THAT COMMITTEE

5.1 Receive the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback report.

5.2 Consider the key recommendations as set out in the report.

Michelle Haworth
PRINCIPAL POLICY AND
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BACKGROUND PAPERS:

REF:

For further information please ask for Michelle Haworth, extension 4421

Corporate Peer Challenge **Ribble Valley Borough Council**

20 – 22nd November 2017

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Ribble Valley Borough Council has much to be proud about. The council delivers good core services through a committed workforce achieving high levels of customer satisfaction and value for money. The council has a history of prudent financial management and remains in a comfortable position relative to the rest of the sector. Council tax is low (the Band D charge is in the lower quartile nationally) debt levels are low, reserves are healthy and the taxbase has shown consistent growth. Council tax levels have been frozen for 7 out of the last 8 years. A restructure and service review undertaken in 2010 placed the council in a good position to respond to reductions in government funding.

The area comprises attractive towns and villages, beautiful countryside landscape and natural environmental assets. As a fully parished area, the council has developed positive relationships with parish councils. Levels of unemployment are low and the area ranks amongst the lowest nationally in the indices of deprivation. Levels of recorded crime are relatively low and the health of people is generally better than the England average. We found that the council is not complacent and recognises there are still significant issues to address including rural access to services, digitalisation, levels of smoking in pregnancy, road injuries/deaths and challenges associated with an ageing population. The council is an active and respected partner at both local and county level in relation to health and wellbeing.

The council is generally viewed by partners as good, stable but cautious with a low appetite for risk. The challenge now is how the council might better harness their relatively strong financial position to meet future financial challenges and ambitions for economic growth. This includes future appetite for risk, investment, innovation and income generation.

The council's ambitious political leadership has overseen a review of the Corporate Strategy, setting the council's vision and priorities to 2019. A proposed re-organisation of the council's planning, housing and economic development sections, a newly established economic development committee and the recruitment of a planning and economic development director demonstrate the Leadership's strong commitment to this plan. Much more needs to be done to engage staff and partner agencies to ensure clarity of vision and desired outcomes. This is necessary to engender wider shared understanding and ownership. Key to this will be recognising and valuing the good work that the council has already undertaken which provide the building blocks for the future. The proposed development of a new Corporate Strategy next year provides the opportunity to do this. There are also opportunities to strengthen engagement between the Leadership and Corporate Management Team in order to take the council forward positively.

We found many examples of innovative projects including the Samesbury Enterprise Zone, A59 growth corridor, Thwaites' development, Holmes Mill and Barrow Enterprise site. The council has helped develop the area as an attractive tourist and food destination including the annual Clitheroe Food Festival. The council would now benefit from developing a clear Economic Development Strategy with partners; this could help

bring focus on economic development priorities and be used to help raise the borough's economic profile both regionally and nationally.

The council adopted their Core Strategy in December 2014 which provides a vision and framework for meeting housing need. We found that the council have developed a good understanding of housing need with a strong focus on maintaining their 5 year housing land supply. We found recognition amongst community representatives and councillors of the significant challenges and pressures faced by those involved in the planning decision process in the context of a highly desirable rural location; there was much respect for their hard work and commitment.

We identified a desire to strengthen early engagement with developers in order to influence and shape developments to maximise community benefits. Engagement with communities and stakeholders in relation to site delivery and associated infrastructure was also a recurring theme. Opportunities to strengthen approaches to engagement and communication should be explored, particularly in relation to larger developments. This includes key messages around section 106 agreements and associated infrastructure, delivery, timing and any changes agreed. Opportunities to strengthen engagement with developers at implementation stage to ensure site delivery and associated infrastructure should also be explored. Holding the line on viability will be key.

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 on site, 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. **Strengthen engagement with staff and partners to ensure clarity of vision and desired outcomes in relation to the Corporate Strategy, priorities and initiatives.** The proposed development of a new plan next year provides the opportunity to do this. Early involvement and engagement relating to key initiatives and projects is paramount in fostering shared understanding and ownership. Recognising past successes and building on these will help contribute to future organisational success.
2. **Review the Performance Management Framework linked to the Corporate Strategy.** This will provide an opportunity to review key goals and KPIs linked to the Plan and identify opportunities to further strengthen corporate monitoring, including the role of committees.
3. **Review the resourcing of Corporate Strategy priorities.** This will include exploring capacity in key areas in order to deliver ambitions, exploring opportunities for further income generation and the council's own appetite for risk.
4. **Develop an Economic Development Strategy.** A real opportunity for the council to set out its economic development ambitions linked to the Lancashire Enterprise

Partnership and its own Corporate Strategy. The council is ideally placed to use its relatively strong economic position as a platform to secure greater influence and leadership both in Lancashire and the wider north-west region.

5. **Explore opportunities to strengthen early engagement with developers in order to maximise community benefits, as well as opportunities to strengthen community engagement/communication in relation to development.** During the peer challenge stakeholders raised issues associated with their perception of development and associated infrastructure delivery. The council would benefit from looking at ways it might strengthen early engagement with developers and community engagement to ensure maximum benefits for communities.
6. **Strengthen engagement between the Leadership and Corporate Management Team** – this includes the chairs of committees. Regular opportunities to meet will support the council in moving forward positively to deliver its ambitions and address challenges.

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 Ribble Valley Borough Council were:

- Fiona Marshall – Chief Executive, Maldon District Council
- Councillor Chris Millar, Leader, Daventry District Council
- Charles Holmes, Head of Community Services, Allerdale Borough Council
- Tracy Darke, Head of Development Services, Warwick District Council
- Cindy Lowthian, Local Government Association and Peer Challenge Manager

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?

In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to consider/review/provide feedback on the interconnected theme of local growth, housing and planning. The council have asked the peer team to provide observations and feedback on the following indicative themes:

1. **Promoting local growth** – this will likely explore how the council might better promote Ribble Valley as a place for businesses to start up and grow. This recognises the local challenges in many people commuting out of borough to work and will seek to examine how the council might better develop the borough as a place to work, not just reside
2. **Balancing growth and housing** – this will likely explore how the council can progress sustainable local development, including increasing the number of new homes (including affordable homes) being built in the context of the desire of many local people to limit the number of housing development in the borough

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 3 days onsite at Ribble Valley Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 77 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- This included gathering information and views from more than 12 focus groups and additional research and reading. The Team also visited the Clitheroe Market Site.

- Collectively spent more than 20 days to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 4 weeks at Ribble Valley Borough Council.

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 on 22 November 2017. 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. It is acknowledged that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 Promoting local growth

- 4.2 The council has identified economic growth as a priority. We heard how the council is the lead authority in the county for the 'Lancashire Business Rate Pool'. This has seen substantial levels of growth on business rates since the start of the scheme. Under the pooling scheme, the retained levy for 2017/18 is circa £5m for Lancashire which means the council should benefit by extra income of £450,724. The council's leadership role in this is widely respected.
- 4.3 The council's Core Strategy and Corporate Strategy sets out a vision for the area as an area with exceptional environment sustained by vibrant market towns and thriving service centres. We saw how the council has a number of key developments in the borough supporting economic growth
- 4.4 The Lancashire Enterprise Zone of which the BAE Systems' site at Samlesbury is part of, is one of only 24 nationally, and is the centre of excellence for high technology manufacturing, generating jobs and growth for the whole county. Key projects also include the £8m Thwaites' development, Homes Mill Development, Fort Vale Engineering, Salthill Expansion and Time Technology Park.
- 4.5 We found recognition amongst members and officers of the key challenge associated with out-commuting of the borough's highly skilled/qualified workforce to higher earning employment elsewhere in the north-west. This has helped push up house prices making it more difficult for local young people and first time buyers to enter into the housing market. Excellent communication links that open up the borough to the rest of the country including the A59 which links to the M6 and access routes to the M65, facilitate this. Some local businesses cannot maintain wage levels that match property prices. We found an aspiration to address this through the Core Strategy which seeks to align jobs with homes in key areas with the potential to reduce out-commuting.
- 4.6 The council should be proud of the part it has played in ensuring the borough's recovery following the impact of Foot and Mouth in 2001. The council have harnessed local assets to ensure the borough's place as a tourist destination including a strong independent retail sector. There are a range of sports and outdoor pursuits including Gisburn Forest which attracts cycling enthusiasts from all over the county. There are 293 Biological Heritage Sites, 21 conservation areas and over 1000 listed buildings. The council launched the first Clitheroe Food Festival in 2009 which has since grown and attracts up to 20,000 people each year. Ribble Valley Wedding Heaven was launched in 2014 where venues and civil partnerships have come together to promote the area as a wedding destination.
- 4.7 The council's proposal to re-organise the planning, economic development and housing service areas into one section demonstrates the Leadership's commitment to further economic growth. This includes the new Economic Development committee and proposed appointment of a new Director.

- 4.8 Building on progress to date, the new Leadership has set out future economic development priorities within a policy document shared with senior officers in May 2017. These include development of commerce and industry on the A59 corridor, identification and development of industrial sites including those within the Core Strategy, improved transport infrastructure, Clitheroe town centre development including the market site and work to support business start-ups and growth. Continued development of tourism remains a key priority; a new Tourism Strategy was approved in September 2017. The overall aim is to create jobs and growth and increase the council's income.
- 4.9 There is now space to work with partners to better articulate these growth ambitions through a clear Economic Development Strategy that better reflects the borough's standing as a key player in the region. The Economic Development Committee will play a key part in overseeing this.
- 4.10 An Economic Development Strategy developed with partners should help prioritise resources and future investment in the key areas that will make a difference. With a direct link to the Core Strategy and Corporate Strategy this new strategy might include how to attract new and diverse industries, inward investment, marketing of key employment sites, higher value jobs for local people (harnessing good local educational outcomes) and branding. It should reflect the council's appetite for risk in terms of economic development investment going forward. It could be used to help raise the economic profile of the borough both regionally and nationally. The council's ambitious new leadership, along with the appointment of a new Economic Development Director and proposed restructure put the council in a good position to take this forward.
- 4.11 The renewed drive and focus on Economic Growth is likely to provide a number of potential development opportunities over the coming years. We would expect that the council engage in 'commercial reviews' following completion of major developments that it has initiated or led. This will provide an opportunity to build on success and better understand lessons to be learnt and built upon when engaging in future schemes. A good example of where this approach might be taken concerns the current market development in Clitheroe; there is an opportunity to build on what has worked well and what has worked less well to inform future approaches.
- 4.12 We found a commitment to work with local businesses to support economic growth ambitions. This includes 'Boost Lancashire'; the council is part of the growth hub providing a single gateway supporting businesses across the county. The council also continues to provide support, information and guidance directly to the 3 business group in Clitheroe, Longridge and Whalley, as well as links with other relevant business organisations. To take the next step, the council should consider developing a Business Engagement Framework. This could help provide a more structured approach to communication with local businesses on economic growth. It could serve to further strengthen understanding of local business priorities to inform economic growth in the borough.

4.13 **Balancing Growth and Housing**

- 4.14 The council have adopted their Core Strategy setting out the overall vision and approach to future planning policy for the next 15 years. Our view is that the council have developed a good understanding of housing need with a strong focus on maintaining their 5 year land supply, and regular reviews are done every 6 months rather than just annually. The Core Strategy requirement for 5,600 dwellings (280 per year) has been exceeded in the last 3 years.
- 4.15 Affordable housing targets are primarily being met through allocations, however, it is recognised that generally Ribble Valley has challenges in relation to providing affordable housing. This is particularly challenging with smaller developments coming forward that sit under the threshold of 10 dwellings. The council may wish to consider developing a policy relating to affordable housing delivery on smaller developments of under 10 dwellings. The council would need to provide evidence to demonstrate challenges associated with delivery of affordable housing in the borough and the affect this is having. Other councils have successfully done this (where house prices are significantly high).
- 4.16 To further support work to align jobs and affordable homes with the potential to reduce out commuting, the council may wish to consider utilising its own rural exception policy to promote/support community led affordable housing initiatives. Such schemes supported by local communities can provide affordable homes which are ring-fenced to local people and can be targeted to support young people in getting on the housing ladder. They are usually developed by, with and for a community led group and controlled and in some cases, owned by them. There are organisations that can provide support and guidance (see Locality).
- 4.17 We heard mixed views about neighbourhood plans. The council provides guidance for those parishes considering such plans including the offer of technical support and assistance and we saw this offer is promoted via the council's website. We learned of a recent example where a lot of work that had been put into the development of a neighbourhood plan which was then formally withdrawn following consideration of the Examiners Report. It is understandable that this may have disheartened many and put some off pursuing this route for their own areas. We would encourage the council to continue to share learning and offer support to parishes who wish to pursue such plans.
- 4.18 The council have prepared a Housing and Economic Development Plan Document (HED DPD) setting out more detailed policy coverage for housing and the economy to support implementation of the Core Strategy. We learned that this is on track with public examination to take place in early 2018.
- 4.19 We noted the senior leadership's commitment to ensure alignment between housing, the planning service and economic growth. The proposed appointment of a new Director of Planning and Economic Development demonstrates a renewed commitment to investing in the planning and economic development function to match the council's economic growth ambitions. The challenge now is how to

ensure continued capacity across the service is targeted towards actions that will achieve those ambitions

- 4.20 Many of those we spoke to expressed a desire to better maximise community benefit when engaging with developers on proposed schemes. We would encourage, through infrastructure planning and costing, that the council maximises the contributions to meet infrastructure needs arising from development. There may be opportunities to review the pre-application offer to developers, agents and architects to strengthen current approaches, including early engagement with councillors. Holding the line on viability, particularly in the face of demands around affordable housing, is key. Recognising there is often the opportunity to adjust the housing mix and/or tenure, which can deal with some of the gap on the viability to maintain affordable housing numbers, is also important.
- 4.21 Ongoing engagement with communities/stakeholders in relation to site delivery and associated infrastructure was also a recurring theme. Opportunities to strengthen approaches to engagement and communication in relation to enforcement would benefit from further exploration. This includes messages around section 106 agreements and associated infrastructure, delivery, timing and any changes agreed.
- 4.22 The council could explore opportunities to develop an 'implementation group' to take a programme based approach to oversee delivery of major sites with planning permission and associated infrastructure. A number of authorities employ Site Delivery Officers, who project manage major developments to ensure that the benefits from the development are fully explored and that the scheme is tracked to ensure it is meeting housing delivery targets. The council may find it beneficial to look at a similar approach.
- 4.23 Close monitoring of planning appeals will also allow the council to be robust in ensuring development is delivered in a planned way. This can be done by providing regular reports to planning committee (perhaps 6 monthly) to enable members to consider whether there are any common themes with those applications overturned so that lessons can be learnt.
- 4.24 Understanding of the local place and priority setting**
- 4.25 The area is the largest district in the county with a low population density and significant rural landscape. It comprises of attractive towns and villages, beautiful countryside landscape and natural environmental assets. Levels of deprivation and unemployment are low. Levels of recorded crime are relatively low and the health of people is generally better than the England average.
- 4.26 During our discussions with both members and officers we found that there are good levels of awareness of the significant issues that need addressing. These include social isolation in rural areas, access to services, digitalisation/access to broadband, levels of smoking during pregnancy, road injuries/deaths and challenges associated with an ageing population.

- 4.27 The council's Corporate Strategy covers the period 2015-2019 and is reviewed annually. We learned the council engaged widely on the strategy when it was first developed. This included feedback from the Ribble Valley Citizens' Panel, 2015 Perception Survey and analysis of local data.
- 4.28 The plan has recently undergone a review under the council's new Leadership who have sought to provide a steer on their ambitions of how the council will move forward over the coming years. This is about creating a stronger voice for the council both regionally and nationally with a focus on job creation and income generation. The Leadership has begun to engage staff and stakeholders on their ambitions for the future including team briefings, staff newsletter and, more recently, talks with teams from the Leader. We heard from a number of staff who had welcomed this.
- 4.29 But it is clear to us that more needs to be done to ensure clarity of vision and priorities. Key to this will be recognising and valuing the good work that the council has already undertaken which provide the building blocks for the future.
- 4.30 The council aim to develop a new Corporate Strategy next year. This provides an opportunity for the Leadership to develop a clear timetable of engagement with both staff and partners. This will help ensure wider ownership of the vision, ambitions and priorities. There are also opportunities to strengthen engagement between the Leadership and Corporate Management Team in order to take the council forward positively; the council should consider a 'top team development' session to begin to shape this work going forward.
- 4.31 The council has a corporate management framework in place to ensure delivery of the Corporate Strategy. Monitoring is via the Corporate Management Team, project updates via committees and an annual performance report to each committee. As part of the development of the new Corporate Strategy next year, the framework should be reviewed to ensure it is rooted in the priorities and ambitions of the council moving forward. There are also opportunities to review the monitoring information shared with committees to maintain clear governance, ownership and constructive challenge. Regular progress updates to staff and celebration of successes will help to keep the whole organisation engaged around delivery of the plan.
- 4.32 We considered how well the council is currently achieving priorities for local people within the context of service delivery. We looked at LG Inform data which shows that, on the whole, the council provides good core services which are good value for money relative to other councils. This is reflected in the council's latest perception survey (2015). Around 3 in 4 residents are satisfied with the council overall.
- 4.33 **Leadership of Place (political and managerial)**
- 4.34 Across the board we found staff and members have pride in the borough and the council. We found evidence of the council providing strong leadership of place. This includes their role during the devastating floods in December 2015. All spoke

highly of the council's response including senior leaders and staff at all levels. It also includes their response to the Foot and Mouth disease crisis in 2001.

- 4.35 It is clear the council has built positive, constructive relationships with parish and town councils who spoke highly of their strong links with officers and members including Senior Leadership Team. The Chief Executive's attendance at the Parish and Town Council Liaison meeting is particularly welcomed. This work has helped enhance the council's understanding of local needs. The Parish Liaison meeting provides an opportunity for the council and other partners (for example health colleagues and county council) to share updates and seek feedback.
- 4.36 The council is generally viewed by partners as good, engaged and approachable and there are examples of good partnership working and links including health, housing and the voluntary sector. This includes co-location of Job Centre Plus within the council's buildings helping ensure local access to the service for residents.
- 4.37 The council's work in relation to health and wellbeing is well regarded. It is clear that the council is a trusted and respected partner on both local and Lancashire level health and wellbeing partnerships. The council is helping to shape local services around health and wellbeing priorities including work to become a 'Dementia Friendly' borough and council.
- 4.38 The council's Leadership should now build on this strong partnership foundation to realise their ambition of becoming a stronger voice regionally and nationally, particularly through the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). The council have a real opportunity to raise their profile through the LEP; stepping up to the plate to harness their relatively strong economic position to better influence and shape future work. In particular, discussions relating to the Strategic Economic Plan and Growth Deal for Lancashire.
- 4.39 The council have been part of ongoing discussions regarding a proposed Lancashire Combined Authority for over 2 years. The council, along with a number of other councils, have recently withdrawn following concerns about the proposed model, particularly voting powers relating to transport infrastructure. It is important that the council continues to work in partnership with the other councils in the region outside of any Combined Authority if it is to realise its ambitions for the borough, particularly the LEP.

4.40 Organisational leadership and governance

- 4.41 The council comprises 40 councillors in 24 wards with elections every 4 years. A committee system is in operation. Those we spoke to said that this works well for the borough, operating in an open, transparent and accountable way. The committees are structured to deliver council priorities including 5 service committees, an Accounts and Audit committee, a Personnel committee, a Licensing committee and the Parish Council Liaison committee. There is also a cross-party working group to support budget preparation and monitoring. All members are provided with copies of agendas. Agendas are split into items for

decision and items ‘for information’ to facilitate decision making and more focussed meetings.

- 4.42 The council’s constitution is reviewed annually. This allows the council to utilise learning to ensure that it remains fit for purpose for the future, supporting good governance across the council.
- 4.43 The arrival of the new Leader has brought about ‘change’ as he seeks to move the council forward to ensure continued economic growth and prosperity. This includes changes to the senior management structure. The relationships between members and officers, including communication and understanding of respective roles, will be key in helping the council move forward positively. To this end, the council may benefit from re-visiting its current Member Officer protocol to ensure continued understanding and buy in across the council.
- 4.44 To ensure continued cohesive leadership of the council in meeting the challenges ahead, the development of a standard approach to senior member and Corporate Leadership Team engagement should be considered. Investing this time together will support collaborative working. This might involve regular meetings e.g. quarterly, between the Leader, committee chairs and CLT. It could also involve a future programme of ‘top team days’ – particularly leading up to the development of the new Corporate Strategy next year.
- 4.45 Financial planning and viability**
- 4.46 The council has a history of prudent financial management reflected independently through the council’s auditors. Reserves are healthy, and debt levels are low.
- 4.47 The council set a net budget for committees, after allowing for capital adjustments, use of earmarked reserves, general fund balances and interest, of £6m for 2017/18. During 2016/17 the council spent £715,910 on capital schemes including an ICT infrastructure refresh, play area improvements and replacement vehicles and plant. The Medium Term Financial Strategy estimates capital spend to total over £5,339m between 2017/18 and 2021/22.
- 4.48 Overall, the council’s funding from government has reduced by 40% since 2010 but the council has maintained service levels with good rates of public satisfaction. Council tax is low (the Band D charge is in the lower quartile nationally) debt levels are low, reserves are healthy and the taxbase has shown consistent growth. Council tax levels have been frozen for 7 out of the last 8 years.
- 4.49 The challenge now is meeting future efficiency targets. The council’s Efficiency Plan has identified a potential further budget gap of £719K (2018/19) and £921K (2019/20). The loss of income of £430K arising from the former cost sharing arrangement with LCC for recycling has heightened this challenge.
- 4.50 The council has set out a plan to address future budgetary challenges through encouraging growth in the tax base, business expansion and enterprise, delivering cost effective and efficient services and reviewing sources of income available.

The council need to build on this to demonstrate what this means practically with clear business cases covering each area.

4.51 Some partners described the council's approach as good but cautious. To deliver future budgetary challenges and ambitions for growth, the council might consider reviewing its appetite for risk. This might include appetite for investment utilising the historically low borrowing rates available, development of a commercial strategy to support income generation and how the council might invest to attract additional external funding e.g. via the LEP. The council could also consider further investment into priority areas to ensure capacity going forward e.g. planning and economic development.

4.52 **Capacity to deliver**

4.53 The council has recently reviewed its organisational capacity to ensure delivery against strategic priorities. This has led to the establishment of an economic development committee. It has also led to the re-organisation of the council's planning, housing and economic development teams into one directorate and the recruitment of a new Planning and Economic Development Director. This is a positive step, but the council need to ensure continued, timely engagement of staff at all levels to ensure wider understanding and buy in. Ensuring capacity at all levels in the new directorate will also be key to success.

4.54 The peer team found staff to be helpful, committed and flexible in their approach to achieving the best outcomes for residents. There is a relatively low sickness absence and positive relationships with trade unions. Most of those we spoke to identified with organisational values around achieving excellence in relation to customer care and good access to services for local people. We also found numerous examples of teams working together to support each other, particularly during busy times. It was apparent to us that staff value the quality of life of working and/or living in the Ribble Valley. We learned how many staff have worked for the council over a number of years, providing a good organisational memory. The challenge now will be to ensure good 'succession planning' for the years to come.

4.55 There are good foundations in place regarding staff development, team meetings, appraisals and staff wellbeing. However, we found anecdotal evidence suggesting delivery of appraisals and one to ones may be patchy in some areas. The council should consider reviewing its current approach to ensure consistency across all teams.

4.56 There is also an opportunity to review the current appraisal system, including competency based approaches. This should be aligned to the development of a new Corporate Strategy next year so that the appraisal system is rooted firmly within the council's future priorities and ambitions and the type of council it wants to be.

4.57 The building blocks for good employee engagement are also in place including the staff newsletter and intranet. However the most recent staff survey has shown a

dip in morale. It is important that the council continues to engage staff at all levels of the organisation to ensure ownership of future ambitions and priorities. Feeding back to staff following the staff survey is key. The peer team also picked up some feedback in relation to perceptions that the current flexi time scheme may be too rigid in some parts, including approaches to home working. The council may wish to look more closely at this to understand if this is the case and if the current scheme is working in the best possible way for all concerned.

4.58 We were told that the council's policy and finance committee has set up a communications working group. This is overseeing a new website to promote the work of the council and the branding of the borough "as an excellent location to visit, live and spend time". The council may benefit from further work to review its use of ICT linked to its ambitions for the future. The peer team had a sense that some service areas may still rely quite heavily on paper copies of documents and files. If this is the case, could more be done to reduce the need for this which may have the potential to reduce the costs of printing as well as supporting the council's sustainability agenda?

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. Claire Hogan, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are Claire.hogan@local.gov.uk

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

Follow up visit

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

Next Corporate Peer Challenge

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the Council will commission their next Peer Challenge before November 2022.