Corporate Peer Challenge
Warwick District Council

20th-22nd July 2016

Feedback Report

1.   Executive Summary

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge in 2012 reported an array of strengths and these are still clearly evident at Warwick District Council (WDC). We saw and heard an abundance of good will, passion and commitment from a range of stakeholders, and it is obvious that councillors, officers and partners all want to do their best for the Council and district. Working relationships between officers and councillors appear to be mutually supportive and many partners view the Council as a positive and responsive partner. The district as a place is relatively prosperous and benefits from some notable assets and advantages in terms of location. All of this combined with political stability and a sound financial footing - achieved through prudent financial management and continued delivery of the Fit for the Future programme - have put the organisation in a strong position to meet future challenges.

There is an opportunity for the Council to strengthen its grasp of those challenges. To do so it needs to provide greater clarity and certainty about the outcomes and strategy required to deliver its ambitions, increase its pace on implementing plans and proposals and be prepared to take further difficult decisions in terms of the services, investment and activities it might reduce or cease to deliver. The opportunity is time limited and the Council must seize it if it is to retain the ability to proactively respond, rather than passively react, to the evolving financial, economic and policy context facing the district, region and local government sector as a whole.

The priority themes set out in the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) – including a focus on prosperity, health & well-being, housing, safety and sustainability - all appear relevant given the context of the place and the challenges it is facing. There are good levels of awareness and buy-in. Councillors, officers and partners are all familiar with the themes and want to work with the Council to deliver against them. There is, however, less understanding of the rationale behind the themes, and the narrative about why the Council is choosing to invest resources, capacity and energy on them. There is also significant scope for a clearer articulation of the strategic outcomes being sought. This is essential if the Council is to build on its strong partnering and become even more effective at leveraging the capacity and commitment of others. It will also better enable the Council to demonstrate the return on its investment and the impact of its interventions.

There is a genuine desire and positive commitment from the Council to work with partners to address the priorities. This is demonstrated by a plethora of projects, initiatives and activities being jointly delivered with other organisations such as the police, businesses, university, voluntary sector and other councils. However, not all partners feel they are engaged and involved early enough in decision-making or proposal and policy formulation. The Council's approach to engagement needs to be re-balanced so it features earlier dialogue with stakeholders including both current and potential partners. Many have an appetite to be involved earlier in the debate and have relevant expertise and knowledge to bring to the table. There is an opportunity to harness this more to design and commission more collaboratively and jointly with partners.

The linkage between the Sustainable Community Strategy priorities, the Financial Strategy, Fit For Future (FFF) programme and other emerging strategies (including the People and Asset Management strategies) is not as explicit at it needs to be. The previous Peer Challenge suggested a perception among some staff that the FFF

programme was becoming increasingly focussed on purely making savings. In the absence of explicit strategic outcomes there is a growing reality that finance is now becoming the key driver for everything. In many other councils the severity of the financial challenge means that has to be the case. But at WDC there is an opportunity for service transformation and organisational development to be shaped by the strategic outcomes being sought, and deliver good services and support for residents and businesses, without being driven purely by a reducing financial envelope. It is critical that WDC takes this opportunity as the leader of place.

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. **Consider an externally facilitated Away Day event for Executive and SMT.** The purpose of the event is to develop a narrative about the rationale for each of the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) themes, and the strategic outcomes being sought by each. So for each of the priorities there is a clear thread of rationale (why this is important for WDC to focus) – action (what is WDC going to do, in terms of delivery, investment and influencing) – outcomes (how will things measurably improve as a result). Once agreed this then needs to be communicated to both staff and partners and continually inform service and financial decisions across the organisation.

2. **Ensure Executive portfolio holders own and drive agreed priorities, and are held accountable for delivery of the strategic outcomes.** The outcomes developed for each of the SCS priorities (with input from portfolio holders) will provide the basis for Members to demonstrate success and impact. They will also provide a means by which they can be held to account for delivery against priorities.

3. **Engage with the wider local government and public sector to explore commercial opportunities and learn more about examples of approaches and practice.** Get a better understanding about what is possible and consider the concept further with senior members and officers. The LGA can signpost to people and places that can share experience and expertise to inform the debate.

4. **Review the skill sets and capacity internally to deliver ambitions (including commercial, commissioning, procurement, project and contract management and customer insight).** Ensure the new People Strategy aligns workforce development with the overall priorities of the Council and the transformation programme, and addresses the culture, skills and mindset required by the future organisation.

5. **Move at pace to deliver the work in progress.** There are several evolving plans, strategies and proposals that will help to articulate the future direction of travel for the Council that need to be progressed and implemented.

6. **Work with local partners to agree how to work together better.** Better harness and utilise the appetite of partners and other stakeholders to be more involved, and

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work with the Council to co-develop and jointly design the interventions and activities that will most effectively deliver the outcomes sought.

7. **Continue 'horizon scanning', particularly in relation to emerging regional landscape regarding devolution.** The Council needs to:

   (a) articulate its rationale and reasoning for the current position regarding the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) to strategic partners and stakeholders

   (b) keep a watching brief on the rapidly evolving developments, keep its position under review, and ensure it is clear on if, how and when it needs to participate to influence and ensure a contribution to the strategic outcomes it is striving for.

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 the Council's requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with the Council. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Warwick District Council were:

- Lorraine Norris – Chief Executive, Preston City Council
- Councillor Paul James – Leader, Gloucester City Council
- Rina Singh – Strategic Director, South Somerset District Council
- Jackie Yates – Executive Director, Oxford City Council
- Gavin Handford – Head of Policy & Performance, Reigate & Banstead Borough Council
- Paul Clarke – Programme Manager, Local Government Association (LGA)
- Patricia McMahon – Policy Adviser, Local Government Association (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. 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?

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4. 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?

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 addressing these questions the peer team were asked to provide feedback on how effectively the Council is delivering, with its partners, against the three themes in the Sustainable Community Strategy: Prosperity, Health & Well Being and Housing.

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 focus. 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 an extensive 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 three and a half days onsite at the Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 80 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 30 meetings and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 190 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending nearly 6 weeks in Warwick District 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 (20th-22nd July 2016). In presenting feedback to the Council, 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 the Council is already addressing and progressing.

4.   Feedback

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?

The Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) sets out five priority themes that appear relevant given the local, regional and national context within which the Council operates.

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A stated focus on Prosperity, Health & Well Being, Sustainability, Housing and Safer Communities makes sense, and clearly supports an overall vision of making the district a great place to live, work and visit and the ambition to build sustainable, safer, stronger and healthier communities. Future housing growth and the supply of affordable homes are clearly understood to be a key issue for the district, and the importance of progressing the Local Plan through to adoption is rightly seen as critical by a range of stakeholders including councillors, officers and partners.

There are good levels of awareness of the SCS themes, and almost everyone we engaged with was able to confidently cite them. The themes are clearly used as a framework against which projects, initiatives and other activities are aligned – and in terms of supporting overall priorities through delivery on the ground there is arguably a strong link. However, there is limited explanation as to why the SCS themes are priorities for the Council and no articulation of the strategic outcomes sought. So while there is an impressive array of actions, projects and initiatives, there is no convincing or compelling narrative that justifies the investment in them, or the anticipated return on that investment in terms of measurable outcomes and timescales. Without these it is difficult to see how the Council can effectively demonstrate impact and success.

A more explicit connection between evidence base and rationale, action and activity, and impact and outcomes will help better communicate ambitions and political aspirations to a range of stakeholders. A strengthened SCS, outlining the priorities, evidence base and desired outcomes will provide a better basis for influencing and informing the engagement with communities, partners and other stakeholders about their expectations, respective roles and the contributions each can make to shaping and delivering the outcomes. Linking key decisions and strategic policy development more clearly to the SCS will help councillors, as accountable decision-makers, to own, advocate and explain Council priorities, policy and strategy to the community and other stakeholders.

There are councils (e.g. Reigate & Banstead) that produce or commission an evidence base (including a district profile, strategic needs assessment, analysis from the regional data observatory, etc.) to provide a rationale and reasoning – in addition to political ambitions and aspirations - behind their priority themes. Some councils (e.g. Lichfield, East Hertfordshire) have used their corporate/strategic plan to articulate how they will seek to influence and enable (as well as deliver) key stakeholders, and set out what they expect from others in the pursuit of the outcomes.

Internally, a strengthened and possibly re-branded SCS (Strategic Plan?) will provide a better basis on which the organisation can - through its decision making, service planning, and performance management - more effectively align its resources, capacity and capability across the organisation to the agreed priorities. The Financial Strategy and emerging strategies, such as the People Strategy and Asset Management Plan, should be supporting and enabling the delivery of the SCS priorities. As the Council's strategic plan the SCS should be determining the organisational development and transformation required through the 'Fit for Future' (FFF) programme. But in the absence of a clearly articulated vision and strategic outcomes, finance is being seen as the default driver for much of the change activity occurring at WDC. Rebranding the SCS will also show that the Council has moved on from the days when there was a duty

to produce a Sustainable Community Strategy (under the Local Government Act 2000), which was abolished by the Coalition Government in 2010.

The Council currently draws on a range of information to understand the needs of local communities. Locality profiles support the work of the Community Partnership Team, and community forums help determine local action plans against which grant funding is available to spend on community initiatives. This is helping to inform service delivery and more targeted interventions in areas of greatest need. There is, however, scope to further the use of customer insight and data to inform local priorities and service improvements so that they are informed by evidence and analysis as well as engagement and consultation.

Leadership of Place: Does the Council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?

There is a good understanding across the managerial and political leadership of the key challenges and opportunities facing the district. This includes an appreciation of the key assets the district has as a place, and its positioning and function within the wider sub-region. Good transport links and connectivity (road and rail), a highly skilled population with higher than average levels of productivity and earnings, economically resilient town centres, and an abundance of rural areas and green belt land make the district an attractive and sought after place to live.

There is a desire to build on those assets and strengths, and a strong understanding that the Local Plan is critical to enabling that. Adoption of the Plan will be an important milestone for the Council in terms of its ability to determine and shape the physical development of the district, and provide the infrastructure to enable the other SCS priority themes, particularly housing and prosperity. Informed and supported by external challenge and assistance, the Council has worked hard with partners to respond to the feedback from the Planning Inspector and get the development of the Plan back on track following the suspension of the adoption process last year.

The suspension of the process due to the absence of an objectively assessed housing need for the wider housing market area (HMA) demonstrates the increasing importance of the Council considering the regional and sub-regional context in its plans and ambitions. It needs to be clear what its offer is, what it needs from others to realise ambitions and deliver priorities, and also what the 'red-lines' and non-negotiables are. The regional context, particularly in terms of devolution, is now developing rapidly and the Council will need to continue to monitor developments. As one partner put it, 'watch the landscape to make sure you don't miss something'. We agree with that sentiment. The rationale for not joining the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) as a non-constituent member may need to be articulated and communicated more widely – particularly to partners who do not currently appreciate the reasons. There should also be a commitment to keep that decision under review given the fast pace of change.

The Council works constructively through various partnerships and relationships with many external organisations and agencies – both strategically and operationally. Officers and/or members are active in regional, sub-regional and county wide partnerships such as the Planning Officers Group and Community Safety Partnership. Key public sector partners,

including police, public health, and County Council, recognise and value the Council's engagement, and many cited WDC as a 'positive and responsive partner'.

It is clear that the Council has a commitment to consult, engage and involve. There is, however, a perception from some partners - including town/parish councils, the voluntary and community sector and business community - that conversations and involvement are not always sought early enough to enable them to contribute fully to decision-making or proposal and policy formulation. For some it feels that decisions have already been made, and that partnerships are not collaborative and collegial as they need to be to support faster delivery, and enable the co-design and innovation to improve services and outcomes as part of the commissioning cycle. The Council may need to look at re-balancing and evolving some relationships so that they are based on the principles of 'collaboration' and 'co-creation', and founded on a mutual understanding and a better appreciation of the roles partners can play and value they can add.

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?

The Council is currently in a strong financial position relative to many other councils. Prudent financial management, delivery of savings, and increased income as a result of the FFF Change programme have helped to protect frontline services. The Council has relatively high levels of reserves, including earmarked reserves which are enabling some key investments (e.g. leisure centre development). The HRA reserve is predicted to increase over the next five years, and the Council has not needed to mainstream New Homes Bonus into the core revenue budget. A pattern of underspends has meant the Council has consistently managed its spending within budget, and it reported a net surplus of £1.7 million against its 2015/16 budget. As a result of its funding position the Council was able to absorb a significant deficit on business rates in 2016/17.

Whilst a funding gap is projected over the next five years that will require further savings and income (£696,000) over and above what is already included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), that challenge looks manageable and benign when compared to other councils. The LGA's Future Funding Outlook Model suggests the projected funding for the Council in 2019/20 will cover 99.9% of its projected expenditure (compared to the average for district councils of 93.4%, and an average for all councils of 83.8%). Whilst the model is theoretical, based on generic assumptions, and last updated prior to the latest Local Government Finance Settlement, it nonetheless reinforces the position of relative strength.

Despite this, the Council appreciates there is no room for complacency. It has sought to evolve and develop the financial strategy to ensure future financial sustainability remains achievable in a changing policy and financial context. Up until now, the funding gap has been met largely through reducing service and staffing costs through systems/lean thinking, contract savings achieved through better procurement, and over-realisation of income, particularly in terms of planning fees and car parking charges. This has served the Council well, helping to realise savings and/or increased income of approximately £3.5million to date.

The strategy is now becoming predicated more on big investment decisions that will reduce running costs, increase income, and deliver better outcomes – such as the HQ Relocation and Leisure Development Programme. These two projects have been in the pipeline for some time, business cases are relatively well advanced and now need to be crystallised and implemented. There is a need for further clarity about the investment required to deliver some of the other projects within the MTFS and future projects in support of the SCS priorities. Many of the proposals are new and the realism of the savings predicated on them, and the timescales for their implementation and benefits realisation will need to be robustly assessed to ensure the risks and controls to manage them effectively are fully understood and resourced.   Funding provisions and/or implications of several longer term liabilities beyond 2018/19 will need to be factored into the MTFS, particularly in terms of corporate assets such as ICT, car parks, and the wider property portfolio.

The Council has rightly recognised the benefits of adopting a more strategic and integrated approach to asset management. An Asset Management Strategy is currently being finalised and the Council has formed a joint venture (with Public Sector Plc) to review assets in order to secure revenue savings. Both of these are positive developments. In progressing this work the Council should ensure the focus is not purely on finance, and that opportunities to utilise assets to support wider strategic priorities and outcomes are part of the approach.

Commercialisation and the need to adopt a 'private sector approach' is being cited by many – particularly Executive members – as an increasingly important facet of the Council's financial strategy.   More work is needed to articulate exactly what is meant and expected by this. Currently it means different things to different people. Some described it as exploiting opportunities for income generation including providing services for other authorities, others identified it as being more 'cost conscious', achieving value for money, and delivering things in a more cost effective way. Some see it as a way of describing a mind-set or attitude rather than a set of tangible approaches. These are all potential commercial objectives, but these need to be clearly articulated and agreed at a corporate level. There are some emerging tensions about what is possible and practical, but also what is philosophically acceptable and politically palatable. There is a growing body of practice and examples from across the public sector that can inform the debate – including a range of information and case studies on the LGA website at: http://www.local.gov.uk/commercialisation.

In terms of strengthening financial planning and management further, senior management have recognised the need to look at budget setting and monitoring in the context of underspends. There have been net budget underspends at the end of the last ten financial years. We know that in recent years, these have been predominantly due to an over-achievement on income targets so can be seen as positive. But there is a potential danger that achieving underspends becomes an expectation and assumption. This can result in difficulties in understanding the true cost of providing services. Over time it may become more challenging to make decisions about service or staffing changes - particularly if it appears they are not needed due to underspends occurring in service budgets being the norm.

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?

We observed relationships between councillors and officers that were generally positive and mutually supportive. There appears to be a strong working relationship between the Corporate Management Team and the Executive who meet regularly to consider the Administration's work programme. Individual portfolio holders have a regular dialogue with their respective Head of Service, and shadow portfolio holders are also provided with regular briefings – albeit there is an obvious question about whether this is sustainable given there are shadow portfolio holders from all political groups, and not all of those portfolios are aligned with the Executive portfolios.

Since moving from No Overall Control to a majority Conservative administration following the local elections in May 2015, the Council has remained committed to ensuring there are a range of relevant and timely opportunities for all councillors to contribute to key debates, decision-making and policy development. The Chief Executive continues to regularly brief all group leaders on key developments. Cross-party working groups are established to provide political oversight, support and challenge on high-profile initiatives (Leisure Development Programme and HQ relocation). Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committees - chaired by opposition councillors – consider the Executive's forward plan and agendas, and focus on providing views and input at a pre-decision stage. Cross-party O&S task and finish groups are used to inform policy on a range of topics determined by members (e.g. HMOs in Leamington), and opposition group leaders are allowed to speak at Cabinet meetings.   This provides a wide range of opportunities for all councillors to engage in key issues, despite the inevitable feeling from some councillors that this has changed since the days of No Overall Control.

Staff feel supported by the organisation and have a positive attitude to the need for change. The Peer Challenge in 2012 commented that staff liked working for the Council, and a follow up visit by that peer team in 2014 suggested a strong focus on staff welfare and effectiveness. That is still generally the case. It will be important to build on and maintain this, particularly given the inevitable unsettling impact of the two major projects (HQ relocation and Leisure development programme) on some staff. It is essential that the direction of travel is effectively communicated to all staff and stakeholders and critical that some of the emerging key strategies and plans (e.g. health and well-being, economic development, asset management and digital transformation) which will articulate this are finalised, communicated and implemented.

The 'Fit for Future' (FFF) programme is a well-known brand across the organisation and has served the Council well in terms of delivering organisational change and financial savings. Since its inception, the focus has been updated, and is currently based on the three themes of 'people', 'money' and 'service'. While emphasis has undoubtedly broadened from its early focus on lean systems reviews, the current schedule of projects does appear to be predominantly based on specific areas and/or functions of the Council's business. We posed the question of whether the Council is taking the opportunity to realise savings and improvement from cross-cutting themes and processes – for example by focussing on functions from a customer journey and perspective (book it, pay for it, report it) which would also help inform your digital transformation plans.

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There is need we think to clarify and communicate customer services standards, to ensure a consistent approach across the organisation and manage customer expectations. Feedback from a range of stakeholders suggested that responsiveness and standards can differ dramatically depending on which part of the organisation they contact, or indeed which officer. Given the recent move to take the customer contact function back in-house, and the digital transformation agenda there is an opportunity to review and reset performance standards, in consultation with staff and customers. We understand a survey is being developed to do this. How the Council will monitor delivery against those standards on an ongoing basis will also need to be addressed.

Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the Council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

The Council knows its workforce is its greatest asset, and has a long history of investing in its people.   A refreshed People Strategy and action plan have been developed, informed by the recent feedback from the Investors in People (IIP) Bronze award – which indicated there was some excellent practice in some areas of the Council, as well as areas for improvement. The purpose of the Strategy is to support the FFF programme and ensure that learning and development is designed to deliver the future workforce the Council requires.

In further developing and implementing the strategy there will be a need to increasingly focus on the culture change needed as the workforce becomes smaller and more agile and flexible, as well as the key skills and knowledge required going forward, i.e. Resilience, commercialisation, commissioning, programme and project management, and contract management. The latter two in particular are critical given the major projects that are beginning to feature as part of the Council's financial strategy. Given the levels of financial savings and transformation predicated on them, it is absolutely right that the Council invests resource in the skills, expertise and capacity to deliver the projects to time and budget.

The Council appreciates it doesn't have all of the skills and capacity to develop and deliver the range of activities that will most effectively deliver the priorities for the district. Like most councils it has acknowledged the need to commission and leverage skills and expertise to achieve efficiencies, improve outcomes and increase resilience. It has demonstrated a willingness and track record of doing so – the shared legal services arrangement and community partnership arrangements with the County Council, and the joint ventures with Waterloo Housing Group and Public Sector Plc providing good examples of this.

There is scope to further develop the approach to procurement and commissioning to better harness the capacity and expertise of current and potential delivery partners. Commissioning could be improved further through earlier engagement with partners and other stakeholders about the problem or challenge, rather than via fully formed specifications. This will better utilise and harness the willingness and readiness of partners to help complement or supplement Council capacity in some instances. Currently, there appears to be some facets of a 'paternalistic' attitude to the delivery of

services and responsibilities, where the Council either directly provides services or support, or determines the specification for potential interventions.

The Council should ensure it takes the opportunity to use its 'commercial leverage' through procurement and commissioning to deliver wider benefits beyond the bottom line of cost and value for money. In particular consideration of the social value and contribution to wider strategic priorities and outcomes, should be considered more prominently. There are big companies and businesses operating in the district, and the Council could potentially do more to influence their thinking and activity regarding their social responsibility activity and community investment. Where appropriate, procurement activity should also facilitate knowledge transfer to enable the Council to build its own expertise and capacity for the future.

The community based staff employed and resources deployed by the Council - including town centre managers and community partnerships – are highly visible and valued by external stakeholders. While changes to current arrangements and the resourcing of those are inevitable, careful consideration and communication of changes is needed so that expectations are managed, and the rationale behind change understood. The recent restructure and rationalisation of the town centre managers, for example, has not been well received by affected stakeholders. This demonstrates the importance of ensuring stakeholder engagement about options and proposals and clear communication of the decision.

The Council will also need to carefully consider the communication about the big investment decisions, given that they are being taken at a time when there are also reductions and changes to services. There should be a positive focus on the improved outcomes and benefits of investments rather than simply justifying the expenditure.

Additional feedback on delivery of priorities (Prosperity, Health & Well Being, and Housing)

The peer team were asked for their observations on how the Council is delivering, with its partners, against three themes in the SCS: Prosperity, Health & Well Being and Housing. Feedback in the main body of the report covers this to an extent. The following is a reiteration of some key points along with further specific observations.

General observations:

There is an impressive array of services, projects and initiatives being delivered with, and through, partners to support the delivery of the three priorities. The co-design, delivery and/or resourcing of job clubs, business advice, 'making every contact count' (MECC) training, street marshals, street pastors, CSE training for taxi drivers, and purple flag award demonstrate there is an abundance of activity on the ground and a good track record of working effectively with a range of organisations and agencies at an operational level.

It is clear that partners want to be involved and are committed to working with the Council. They are keen to better understand the wider SCS priorities and how they can support delivery of the outcomes being sought by the Council. Developing and articulating the outcomes including the rationale and evidence base for them will provide

a more coherent strategy, better focus/basis for activity and projects, and enable partners to understand where and how they can contribute. It will also ensure that priority outcomes are delivered rather than a series of projects aligned to priority themes.

The SCS priority themes are interconnected, but as one person put it 'physical regeneration doesn't equal social regeneration'. So there needs to be place-based initiatives that will cut across all of the priority themes. There are some examples of this already, not least the multi-agency work regarding regeneration of Lillington.   Partners see the Council as having a critical role in joining up, and co-ordinating and harnessing the input and contribution of stakeholders, and think that is something the Council could do more of.

Health and Well-Being:

The Council is seen by partners as committed to making a contribution to improved health and well-being in the District.   There is recognition that the Council has a key role of 'making every contact count' (MECC) and has opportunities to impact on people's mental and physical health. Partners described the Council as 'proactive' and having a 'culture of helping and supporting', and there are good examples of how the Council works with others on tackling wider health and well-being issues (e.g. GP referral scheme), and also work which focusses on the wider determinants of health such as social exclusion and debt management (e.g. Lillington). It is notable that WDC was the first district council in Warwickshire to take up the offer of public health (and more recently CCG) monies to match fund activities that contribute to improved health and well-being.

There are instances where the Council could be more proactive at seeking an earlier input and perspective from health partners (e.g. health impact assessment during Local Plan development, collaborative commissioning of the voluntary and community sector), and a need to articulate how key decisions (e.g. leisure development programme) contribute to the delivery of health and well-being outcomes.   There is a need for a clearer local strategy – linked to the countywide Health & Well Being Strategy – that provides a better foundation on which the Council can base its contributions, determine how best it can work with partners, and measure its impact.   If health and wellbeing is a political priority for the Administration, which it appears to be, it is important that there is a clear articulation about what the Administration wishes to achieve. It is also important to ensure that officers support the Cabinet Member to make the district's case in relevant forums such as the Health and Wellbeing Board.

Housing:

There is good partnership working with social housing providers including Orbit, Wilmott Dixon and Waterloo Housing Group, the latter with whom the Council has worked successfully with to deliver 161 brownfield site affordable housing units, with a further 240 planned. Partners are complimentary about the Council and have a keen interest to do more in future. A stock condition survey is planned that will inform the future housing business plan and investment strategy. In the meantime, partners recognise the pivotal importance of the Local Plan and the challenges associated with progressing it through to adoption. It will be important the Council's planning function is seen to be an 'enabler' as well as 'enforcer' to support the aspirations regarding housing growth.

<u>Prosperity:</u>

The Council has recognised the need to diversify the economy so that it isn't over reliant on one employer, industry or sector. Partners can see the emerging thinking about a digital/gaming (Silicon Spa) sector and an increasing focus on tourism (albeit the ambitions for the latter need further development). The Council has worked effectively through the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to progress the business case for a Creative Quarter, having previously helped to develop the Coventry and Warwickshire City Deal.   Businesses we spoke to were positive about the support to business start-ups and had a genuine desire to be engaged earlier, particularly in terms of developing a vision and plans for town centre development rather than simply being consulted on them. The district as a place has much to commend it – from heritage assets like Warwick Castle and Kenilworth Castle to attractive parks and open spaces. Each of the district's main towns has its own distinctive characteristics and we would urge the Council to build a vision for each of these towns, in consultation with stakeholders, and put together an action plan for delivery.

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. Helen Murray, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are: Tel. 07884 312235 and Email. helen.murray@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.