

Corporate Peer Challenge **Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council**

21st to 24th January 2020

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Our over-arching finding is one of a sound and well-run council that has all of the attributes necessary to enable it to shift to the 'next level'. The authority is a traditionally stable organisation which has proud, passionate and committed staff and elected members – there are a lot of really talented people within it. It also manages its finances well and is in a sound position in this regard as a result. Also, the council is seen as a good partner – it is trusted and stakeholders like working with the authority.

The council defines itself as “a quietly effective and well-run public service organisation” and there is ample evidence to support this description. However, the question that arises is whether that descriptor reflects the extent of its ambitions or, with the scope to aim much higher, why it isn't yet making the shift to the next level? Achieving this shift involves retaining all that is good about the council and supplementing it with the qualities and approaches necessary to being an exemplar of place-making.

A key aspect of the shift is a switch to a much greater focus on outcomes, tangible deliverables and the practical steps necessary to demonstrate progress. Another is a 'laser-like' focus on what is important in the borough, reflected in a more clearly defined set of priorities. The allocation of capacity and resource need to be re-visited in the light of this, in order for the council to reassure itself that it is securing the maximum benefit from its sound financial position. Given the complexity of the agendas the council and partners are addressing, and in order to bring clearer focus and greater pace, we would encourage the adoption of progress and performance reporting that is reflective of the cross-cutting and multi-disciplinary nature of the challenges. We recommend that all of this is reflected in a re-setting of the Council Plan.

The council has achieved a very successful positioning of Solihull as being integral to the economic vitality of both the West Midlands and the UK. The authority has also become increasingly significant within political spheres in the region. This has all been achieved at the same time as ensuring Solihull's individual identity, both as a council and as a place, remains strong. A key challenge for the council now is enabling local people to see how benefit can be derived for all within the borough through the inclusive growth agenda, given the prosperity gap and inequalities that exist within Solihull. The authority can already point to the substantial investment it has made in seeking to regenerate some of the areas of the borough seen to have some of the greatest need. Having delivered this physical regeneration, the council now needs to be able to demonstrate real and lasting impact in such communities.

It feels as though the 'stars are aligning' for Solihull in relation to local priorities being shared at the national and regional level, with the current and potential future investment flowing from this, and this must be capitalised upon as a one moment in time opportunity. In essence, the council has demonstrated good leadership and it now needs to generate 'followership', harnessing the strength of partners and enabling residents both to shape and participate in the delivery of tangible differences to Solihull. Residents need to be absolutely central to the council's thinking and planning in a way that is consistently more evident than at present.

The council's well-managed approach to its finances, including the taking of managed risk, has left it soundly positioned for the future. This has included the creation of an investment portfolio; the progressing of opportunities with the West Midlands Combined Authority; a leading role in securing the Business Rates Retention Pilot and ensuring the base budget position is maintained through the approach to Council Tax. The council has established a good track record of savings delivery. However, there are key risks that the authority needs to manage carefully in order to ensure financial resilience is maintained.

The council is committed to openness and transparency and has a range of mechanisms in place to facilitate this, entailing a mature and very advanced approach. Relationships between officers and councillors are good, founded upon the clear outlining of respective roles and responsibilities and mutual trust and respect. Elected members are well supported by officers in carrying out their various roles.

The council is clearly an organisation that invests in its staff and elected members. The managerial leadership is seen by staff to 'model the way' in terms of behaviours and people at that level prioritise spending time with staff and, fundamentally, are seen to be caring. The well-being of people in the organisation – both mentally and physically – is clearly a priority. Staff at all levels feel informed, able to contribute ideas, trusted and empowered. All of this has contributed to the establishment of a very positive organisational culture.

The relationship between directorates and the corporate centre is very positive with the latter being viewed as a key enabler. There are good areas of cross-organisational working between services but overall there is a mixed picture in this regard. There are effective processes and systems that provide the necessary frameworks to operate, accountabilities and safeguards. The authority needs to ensure it retains a tight managerial grip around all aspects, however, given what it has identified in relation to some inconsistent application of approaches.

The recent OFSTED inspection judgement of 'Requires Improvement' within children's social care services has clearly impacted the morale of the organisation. However, very strong leadership has been shown around this, both politically and managerially, and the council can already be seen to be bouncing back.

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of this 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:

- Undertake a re-setting of the Council Plan to ensure the ambitions and aspirations of the Administration are fully reflected in a clear set of priorities
- Use this re-set to develop clear measurable outcomes for priorities which demonstrate the impact on the local area, stakeholders and residents

- Establish clear measurable actions on an annual basis that demonstrate progress towards the longer term strategic ambitions and establish greater clarity and alignment around target-setting and reporting on progress and performance
- Review the capacity required to deliver ambitions and be robust in continuing to assess the capacity to deliver as longer term programmes move into different delivery phases
- Make residents and communities absolutely central to the council's thinking and planning – shape the inclusive growth story and determine the related practical interventions jointly with them
- Key risks around children's services demand pressures and the investment portfolio need to be managed carefully in order to ensure financial resilience is maintained

By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback is about things the council is already addressing and progressing.

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 you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge in Solihull were:

- Sharon Kemp, Chief Executive, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
- Councillor Sean Anstee, Trafford Council
- Councillor Bridget Smith, Leader, South Cambridgeshire District Council
- Tony Kirkham, Director of Resources, Newcastle City Council
- Matthew Norwell, Chief Executive, Thames Gateway Kent Partnership
- David Gallagher, Chief Officer, NHS Sunderland Clinical Commissioning Group
- Jamie Osowski, Adviser, Workforce Team, Local Government Association
- Chris Bowron, Programme Manager, Local Government Association

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all corporate peer challenges. 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?

Alongside these questions, the council asked the peer team to consider the issues, challenges and approaches relating to:

6. Maximising economic assets
7. Influencing within the health economy

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focused 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 four days on-site in Solihull, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 150 people, including a range of council staff, elected members and external partners and stakeholders
- Gathered information and views from around 35 different interviews and focus groups, additional research and reading that were all kindly arranged for us
- Collectively spent more than 450 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending around thirteen working weeks in Solihull

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team on Friday 24th January upon the conclusion of our visit. In presenting feedback to the council, we have done so as fellow local government officers and elected members, not professional consultants or inspectors.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority-setting

Our over-arching finding is one of a sound and well-run council that has all of the attributes necessary to enable it to shift to the 'next level'. The council is seen as a good partner – it is active, committed, values-driven and consistent. It is therefore trusted and stakeholders like working with the authority. It is a traditionally stable organisation which having experienced a degree of change in relation to both its political and managerial leadership in recent times, has handled this well. The authority has proud, passionate and committed staff and elected members – a lot of really talented people. It also manages its finances well and is in a sound position in this regard as a result.

The authority defines itself in the Position Statement it drew up to inform our work as “a quietly effective and well-run public service organisation” and there is ample evidence to support this description. However, with all the key attributes that are in place, the question that arises amongst partners and ourselves is whether that descriptor reflects the extent of its ambitions or, with the scope to aim much higher, why it isn't yet making the shift to the next level?

Key to this potential shift is clarifying what that next level is. We see it as entailing positioning the council to be able to both further drive and capitalise upon the opportunities and complex agendas facing it, including:

- Addressing the challenge of climate change, around which we heard loudly and clearly the Leader's and Administration's passion and commitment
- The creation of the UK Central Hub, which the council set up the Urban Growth Company in 2016 to deliver, and which reflects the authority's visioning and influencing abilities
- The challenge of delivering the regeneration of the different town centres across the borough in a context of the changing nature of high streets
- Fulfilling the ambitions for 'inclusive growth' across the borough, balancing economic, environmental and social considerations
- Completion of the improvement journey in providing services for children and young people following the most recent Ofsted visit

The positioning of the council to achieve this involves retaining all that is good about being that quietly effective and well run public service organisation and supplementing it with the qualities and approaches necessary to being an exemplar of place-making in Solihull and the wider geography.

Part of this is the authority capitalising upon its rich information and analytical capacity by drawing on this and using it to inform a switch to a much greater focus on outcomes, tangible deliverables and the practical steps necessary to demonstrate progress. The

council is highly adept at developing strategies and approaches in response to key agendas but it was interesting in considering the 'Key Programmes and Activities' section of the Council Plan how much of the emphasis was placed on this, relative to the outlining of tangible deliverables such as the number of apprenticeships to be created across the borough, the quantity of new housing to be brought about and the proportion that would be affordable, the reduction in delayed transfers of care, improvements in educational attainment etc. This translated into our discussions with elected members and staff from different levels of the organisation who found it difficult to articulate what, in the way of practical steps and tangible deliverables, will be implemented by when.

The Council Plan outlines a vision of a borough where "everyone has an equal chance to be healthier, happier, safer and prosperous through growth that creates opportunities for all". The priorities underpinning this are mapped out as:

- Securing inclusive economic growth
- Planning and delivery for Solihull's low carbon future
- Managing demand and expectation for public service
- Developing and delivering our approach to services for adults and children with complex needs
- Making the best use of our people and physical assets

We would suggest that making the shift to the next level requires a 'laser-like' focus on what is important in the borough, reflected in a more clearly defined set of priorities that reflect those which have been clearly articulated by the Leader – the UK Central Hub, climate change and town centres.

The allocation of capacity and resource need to be re-visited in the light of this, in order for the council to reassure itself that it is securing the maximum benefit from the council's sound financial position. As an example, the adult skills agenda is clearly important in the context of what the council and partners are trying to achieve and yet key aspects of the work around this are resourced through European Structural and Investment Fund monies, which raises a question of sustainability.

We would also encourage the development of greater clarity and alignment around target-setting and reporting on progress and performance to bring clearer focus and greater pace. At present, performance reporting to and by Cabinet Members is largely undertaken on a Portfolio by Portfolio basis. Given the complexity of the agendas the council and partners are addressing, we would encourage the adoption of progress and performance reporting that is reflective of their cross-cutting and multi-disciplinary nature. This is where the adoption of a focus on outcomes would derive significant benefit.

We recommend that all of the above is reflected in a re-setting of the Council Plan.

In summary, the current and future opportunities and challenges for the borough are different in nature, magnitude and complexity to what has gone before, necessitating a

sustained change in the functioning of the organisation both politically and managerially in order to further drive and capitalise upon the opportunities and agendas facing it and deliver at greater pace.

4.2 Leadership of Place

The council has achieved a very successful positioning of Solihull as being integral to the economic vitality of both the West Midlands and the UK, founded upon a really strong narrative around the growth opportunities that the authority is creating and capitalising upon. Integral to this is the UK Central Hub and related Masterplan. The authority itself has also become increasingly significant within political spheres in the region, as seen with the leading role it played in the establishment of the West Midlands Combined Authority, including providing the interim political leadership of it during its developmental stage, and now on-going leadership provided through prominent representation on decision-making bodies, as seen with the Chairing of the Sustainability and Transformation Partnership (STP).

At the same time as placing Solihull front and centre in the regional consciousness and ensuring it is seen as nationally important, the authority has ensured Solihull's individual identity remains strong. This is reflected in the titling of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and STP, all of which cover the footprint of the borough and the country's second largest city, as being for 'Birmingham and Solihull'.

Thus the council can clearly be seen to have ambition and yet strangely it is not viewed by partners as being 'ambitious'. This is difficult to explain but seems to link to the issue outlined in the previous section of this report regarding the need for the message to get through that the authority is moving on from being that quietly effective and well run public service organisation to being an exemplar of place-making in Solihull and the wider geography. Something seems to be becoming 'lost in translation' around the narrative both for the borough and the council's role in shaping it.

The council demonstrates a strong social conscience and is very mindful of the prosperity gap and inequalities that exist within the borough, with 16 out of 134 neighbourhoods in the most 10 per cent deprived nationally and variation across a broad range of outcomes including health, employment, educational attainment and crime.

Having positioned Solihull so effectively in terms of economic opportunity, the challenge for the council is in communicating and demonstrating the way in which economic growth can be balanced with environmental considerations in a borough that is 70 per cent Green Belt and has wonderful natural assets. Fundamentally, this is about enabling people to see how benefit can be derived for all within the borough through the inclusive growth agenda. As we outlined earlier, whilst the authority's hopes and aspirations for the borough can be seen at a high level, it is less easy to track how they translate into tangible differences that will be made for the people of the borough over the coming years.

The authority can already point to the substantial investment it has made in seeking to regenerate some of the areas of the borough seen to have some of the greatest need, including new homes, new primary schools, new village centres and the regeneration of parks and open spaces, benefiting places like Chelmsley Wood, Kingshurst and

Chelmund's Cross, amongst others. Having delivered this physical regeneration, involving £500m of investment, the council now needs to be able to demonstrate real and lasting impact in such communities. As part of this, we see significant scope to think about social value having a greater influence over corporate decisions, strategies and investments.

At one level, enabling people to see how benefit is being derived through the inclusive growth agenda is hard, given that the nature of many of the socio-economic challenges being faced entail progress across generations. At another level, the identification of real life stories about how local people have experienced and benefited from what is being created are very powerful and being able to convey these as clear messages to residents can make quite a difference.

It feels as though the 'stars are aligning' for Solihull in relation to local priorities being shared at the national and regional level, with the current and potential future investment flowing from this, and this must be capitalised upon as a one moment in time opportunity. In essence, the council has demonstrated good leadership and it now needs to generate 'followership', harnessing the strength of partners and enabling residents both to shape and participate in the delivery of tangible differences to Solihull.

Residents need to be absolutely central to the council's thinking and planning in a way that is consistently more evident than at present. Whilst the council delivers consultation with residents on specific services and projects, this needs to be supplemented with extensive engagement on the future of their place. The authority already demonstrates this approach with businesses in the borough and is moving to do the same with council staff, as seen with the recent open letter from the Chief Executive inviting employees to help shape the future of Solihull. Adopting a similar ethos in relation to residents, broadening out beyond what already takes place through parish councils and community groups, would serve to help people understand the council's ambitions for the borough and enable them to shape things in order to ensure the benefits of the opportunities being created are felt right across the borough.

4.3 Financial planning and viability

The council's well-managed approach to its finances, including the taking of managed risk, has left it soundly positioned for the future. This has included the creation of an investment portfolio, which in being focused locally, and whilst having a primary purpose of securing financial benefit, also offers place-shaping and socio-economic and environmental opportunities too; the progressing of opportunities with the West Midlands Combined Authority which has secured around £100m of investment; a leading role in securing the Business Rates Retention Pilot which has generated revenue of around £30m; ensuring the base budget position is maintained through the approach to Council Tax and some progressing of shared services including a resilience (including emergency planning) function that the council manages on behalf of Warwickshire County Council and Coventry City Council.

The council has established a good track record of savings delivery, founded upon rigorous focus and monitoring of savings and spend, with £55m delivered in the five years up to the last full financial year in 2018/19.

Managers reflected that the council's three-year budgeting approach moves them away from an incremental or piecemeal one by facilitating longer term thinking and planning, albeit in a context of continuing uncertainty given the picture at the national level. This enables them to draw in ideas from staff and users to position services and functions differently across a broader time horizon and thus move away from a more limited scope of trying to continue to deliver things in the same way but with less resource year on year. This is supplemented by an ability for Directorates still to call on dedicated reserves to ease peaks in demand pressures and challenges around savings delivery – a mechanism that has become increasingly less common in councils across the country over the last few years.

There are key risks that the authority needs to manage carefully in order to ensure financial resilience is maintained. This includes children's services demand pressures and the Dedicated Schools Grant high needs block. Another is around the council's investment portfolio and around which an increased appetite for carefully managed risk-taking can be seen.

4.4 Organisational leadership and governance

The council is committed to openness and transparency and has a range of mechanisms in place to facilitate this, entailing a mature and very advanced approach. One example is the reporting at every Full Council by each Cabinet Member of progress, activities and key issues around their Portfolio, on which any councillor can ask any question or raise any matter. A similar approach is seen with the individual Cabinet Member Decision-Making Meetings, which see Key Decisions they have made being publicly reported and which the leaders of the different political groups are able to attend and speak at. Political group leaders are also welcome to attend and address Cabinet meetings and any elected member has the opportunity to put questions forward in writing at these meetings and then ask a supplementary question.

The approach to scrutiny encourages input from the widest possible range of elected members through an approach to work programming aimed at ensuring issues of importance in the borough are identified and taken forward, irrespective of where they emerge from. This takes the form of an event, held shortly after the inaugural meeting of Full Council at the start of each Administrative year, which sees elected members and officers come together to identify the issues that scrutiny might consider in the year ahead. What emerges from this then goes through a process of iteration to determine a jointly agreed set of priorities which are then looked at to see how and where they are best taken forward, including what could become the subject of more in-depth work by Task and Finish Groups. Portfolio Holders take a strong interest in the work of Scrutiny Committees, attending their meetings not just when invited but also sometimes simply to observe them. One change that the council could consider, which would be largely symbolic but would send a significant message, would be looking to allocate the Chair and Vice-Chair roles of Scrutiny Committees across the political groups.

Relationships between officers and councillors are founded upon the clear outlining of respective roles and responsibilities and mutual trust and respect. Elected members are well supported by officers in carrying out their various roles, including very high levels of responsiveness to ward casework issues that they raise and a willingness to meet with

them, often on a one to one basis, to talk through issues and provide briefings for them. Councillors value the role of Neighbourhood Officers, who they see as the 'first point of call' for getting ward issues addressed, and also welcome the regular Ward Meetings that take place with officers to discuss emerging issues. At the heart of officers' approach sits a principle of 'no surprises' for councillors.

Relationships between elected members are also good. Whilst there is seen to be an increased 'spikiness' in some of the exchanges in the council chamber currently, that is simply a reflection of politics being more to the fore now and there is nothing that we have seen or heard about that suggests any of this strays beyond normal political 'cut and thrust'.

Elected members are invested in by the council in terms of being provided with IT kit and training and development opportunities. An induction programme is delivered in the weeks and months that follow each set of elections, with the content of this being open to existing councillors as well as those just elected. It is in this period that the scrutiny work programming day is held, whilst other activities include a formal welcome from the Corporate Leadership Team; an outlining of key aspects of the Constitution including the Code of Conduct; a session on community leadership and engagement; safeguarding, corporate parenting, equality and diversity and Planning training and a presentation from Solihull Community Housing as the council's housing management company.

Beyond the induction activity, on-going training and development is available to councillors through regular corporate briefings on key issues such as Brexit and the budget. Elected members can also approach the Monitoring Officer to request training and development, which is invariably supported provided that it clearly relates to council need. A revision that the council may benefit from making here would be shifting to an approach that is more proactive, with a risk that people don't know that they can ask or that they are reluctant to do so. There is a further risk simply around people 'not knowing what they don't know' i.e. they may not recognise a need or an opportunity and therefore don't come forward.

The managerial leadership is seen by staff to 'model the way' in terms of behaviours and people at that level are felt to demonstrate the organisational values of being open, honest, clear, approachable and keeping promises. They prioritise spending time with staff through a range of activities, including 'back to the floor' initiatives, in order to see and hear about their experiences. Fundamentally, they are seen to be caring.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

The council is clearly an organisation that invests in and cares for its staff, reflected in the way that those we met through focus groups, drawing together staff from different levels in the authority, outlined how it provides them with the tools to do the job and offers access to training and development. They also spoke of the way in which the scope for flexible and agile working is aiding them both professionally and in relation to work-life balance. The well-being of people in the organisation – both mentally and physically – is clearly a priority and investment is made in this, ranging from the Mental Health First Aid training undertaken to date by 87 per cent of managers, to the ready access to Occupational Health and related support.

Staff at all levels indicated to us that they feel informed, able to contribute ideas, trusted and empowered. Perhaps the best example of this is in relation to the Assistant Directors tier, which is seen as critical in linking strategic direction and organisational delivery. People at this level are given responsibility for driving the delivery of council priorities as Senior Responsible Owners for the programmes in the Council Plan and collectively they have a remit in facilitating cross-council working. It feels as though an appropriate balance is struck here, with this group being informal and flexible enough to respond to emerging issues but sufficiently formal and structured to bear down on things in a sustained way.

All of this has contributed to the establishment of a very positive organisational culture and is one of the key factors, along with the opportunity to impact positively through the opportunities and challenges within the borough, that makes people want to stay with the council.

Underneath all of this sit effective processes and systems that provide the necessary frameworks to operate, accountabilities and safeguards. Risk is managed carefully in the council, spend is monitored very closely to identify opportunities to reduce cost and managers are required to demonstrate a 'self-serve' approach through the Oracle system around HR, finance, performance management etc. The council has shown a willingness to adapt processes and systems that have been identified by managers as 'top heavy', including those for recruitment and performance development reviews (PDR). The authority needs to ensure it retains a tight managerial grip around all aspects, however, given what it has identified in relation to some inconsistent application of approaches, measured in an increase in the number of audits finding inadequate steps having been taken by managers.

The relationship between directorates and the corporate centre is very positive with the latter – delivering HR, finance, legal and IT support amongst other things – being viewed as a key enabler. This state of relationships and the quality of support being provided would be the envy of many councils.

There are good areas of cross-organisational working between services, for example that undertaken on the council's work on air quality and the major improvements highlighted in the area of transitions between children's and adults' services, but overall there is a mixed picture. Partners spoke of the council too often demonstrating a 'teepee' effect, with things progressing well as they move up the hierarchy within directorates, but the links across not being as good as they need to be.

The recent OFSTED inspection judgement of 'Requires Improvement' within children's social care services has clearly impacted the morale of the organisation. However, very strong leadership has been shown around this, both politically and managerially, with the time being taken by the Leader and Chief Executive, amongst others, to meet with staff and express their belief in the work that they are doing and their confidence that the necessary improvements will be brought about. On the back of this, the council – and it was clear from our discussions that the judgement is one that the whole authority has felt and feels a shared responsibility to address – can already be seen to be bouncing back.

4.6 Maximising Solihull's economic assets

The council understands the magnitude of the potential offered by continued investment in infrastructure, the delivery of more housing and the securing of further inward investment. As we outlined earlier, there is clear commitment across the council to ensuring economic growth benefits the whole of Solihull, with there being a widespread awareness of the concept of inclusive growth.

The story of inclusive growth is well understood by the business community as a result of good engagement with them by the council, resulting in a desire from that sector for greater pace and energy around securing growth and even more ambition and increased confidence in planning for the future. An example is around ensuring the power supply needs for the UK Central Hub, and the industries within it, which can clearly be expected to grow significantly, are being planned for and delivered.

Again, as we touched on previously in this report, the inclusive growth story now needs to be shaped with residents and communities. Central to this is making it 'real' for people, including bringing stories forward of the way in which local people across a range of spheres are benefiting already from what is being delivered and helping them to understand how they might be able to capitalise on the new opportunities. Also fundamental is determining and delivering the practical interventions needed to ensure local people really benefit. A key example here is the requirement to secured enhanced public transport provision within the borough. People we met, including representatives of large employers, outlined the challenges that exist around travelling across Solihull by bus and the barriers to education, skills development and employment presented by limited access to public transport, including at the sorts of irregular times that might be associated with working at, for example, the airport. Other examples of the sorts of practical interventions that could be delivered include re-vitalised high streets, an enhanced public realm and extended play facilities for young children and their families.

A phrase we have coined for the council around this is 'play big and play local'. As can be seen, the authority has positioned Solihull well both regionally and nationally. Now it has to ensure that residents truly derive the benefit. Linked to this, there is an opportunity to think about how the wider council is set up to take advantage of and enable the realisation of the benefits of growth. Given the benefits that can be gained, inclusive growth must be seen as a shared endeavour right across the council and the emphasis must be placed on 'growth for a purpose' – taking us back to the point from earlier about adopting a focus on outcomes, tangible deliverables and practical steps.

There is real scope for the council to look practically at how culture-led regeneration might help to deliver inclusive growth – whether thinking about innovative ways of animating town centres with emerging sectors or working more closely with near neighbours to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the Commonwealth Games and Coventry's UK City of Culture status in 2021.

A further example around this relates to the council having asked us to look at both the economic opportunities and health economy agendas during the course of the peer challenge. These are both pertinent issues and we outline the findings on them here, in adjacent sections of the report. Of course, the two agendas are very closely linked as two key aspects of how the borough seeks to impact on the prosperity gap and

underlying inequalities over the coming years. Whilst we report on them separately here, the council will want to ensure the two are fully intertwined into the future.

It is also important for the council and its partners at the regional level to look to ensure the Solihull economy is suitably diverse in order to try to protect against changes in the future. There are a number of large employers in the borough and any significant shift in the context in which they operate might result in changes to where and how they function, with consequential impacts for local employment. Taking the opportunity now to think about 'sectorisation', for example the potential of the green industry and the cultural economy, and what is most appropriate and relevant for Solihull to proactively pursue, would serve to enable the borough to position itself accordingly in order to diversify and 'future-proof' the economy as far as possible.

4.7 Influencing the local health economy

Health partners recognise and appreciate the council's support and input from senior officers and elected members into both the Sustainability and Transformation Plan and the place more generally. The structural changes that have been implemented around health and social care, including the establishing of the STP and the creation of the single Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) for Birmingham and Solihull, have settled and the relationships that are essential to making them work are forming. Partners find the council easy both to work with and to 'find their way around' as a result of its size (which came to be badged as 'perfectly formed'! – perhaps a new descriptor for the council to adopt as an alternative to the 'small' definition that it attaches to itself currently); the traditional stability across the officer group and the elected membership; and the constructive relationships that are emerging. Partners found this refreshing in a changing health landscape. The CCG's Locality Director is seen to be playing a key 'linking' role across the two organisations, facilitating relationships and influencing the agenda.

The Solihull Health and Wellbeing Board (HWB) is seen by partners as being relevant and well organised and there is respect from them for the elected members and council officers who sit on it. 'Solihull Together' is a partnership of public sector bodies working together to improve the lives of people in the borough and is mandated by, and accountable to, the HWB. It is seen to fulfil a key role and felt to be striking an effective balance between developing at sufficient pace to deliver what is required of it, whilst simultaneously staying close to partners and keeping them on board. Having managed this balancing to date, it seems timely now to review how it works in order to ensure it is geared to delivering effectively into the future.

The three developing localities for North, East and West Solihull, and the six Primary Care Networks within the borough, provide an opportunity to focus on neighbourhoods, creating common purpose and developing outcome measures through, for example, Neighbourhood Plans and Community Plans. One example is in the area of Kingshurst, where the joint partnership working and thinking about the development of the community centre there, involving ward councillors, the parish council, the voluntary and community sector, health partners and the police, amongst others, is helping to scope out the design of a new facility geared fully to meeting community need. Another example is the opportunity to improve the dialogue with local people in their communities about health and wellbeing and around 'rights and responsibilities' relating to the provision of public services

and the role of the citizen. An example of this, highlighted by the council, is the potential to develop locality level community conversations to turn the local needs assessment into asset maps and opportunities for positive engagement.

The council is seen by health partners as being good at evaluation, evidence-based working and taking on board learning. This creates the ability to offer an analytical focus and approach which, by emphasising data and intelligence (which might be badged as ‘facts’) facilitates “taking any hostility out of decision-making” between different organisations. As we touched on earlier, relationships are developing well and they are now seen to be strong enough to overcome ‘hiccups’ along the way. As an example, a recent decision by the council not to renew the Commissioning Section 75 at the specified end date of the arrangement, which partners experienced as having been ‘thrust upon them’, has not only not resulted in a deterioration in relationships but has actually led to the commissioning of a constructive piece of work to draw out the learning from the experience to derive benefit for the future.

Linking back to what we highlighted earlier, regarding the cross-cutting and complex nature of the issues being wrestled with by the council and partners, and the intertwined nature of the economic opportunities and health economy agendas in the borough, it was interesting to hear health partners talking of the impact they can have as big employers in Solihull. An example is their input to the ‘I Can Be’ initiative which aims to develop aspirations around, and understanding of, opportunities for young people to embark upon a career in the health and other sectors. Ensuring the potential offered by health partners as employers, as well as public service providers, is capitalised upon offers real opportunity.

5. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership of the council 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 the council. 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 point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her e-mail address is helen.murray@local.gov.uk

Follow-up visit

We are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the council through the course of the peer challenge.

The LGA corporate peer challenge process includes a follow-up visit. The purpose of this 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 usually involves some, rather than all, members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next two years.

Next corporate peer challenge

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a corporate peer challenge or finance peer review every four to five years. It is therefore anticipated that Solihull would commission its next peer challenge by 2025.