

Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Corporate Peer Challenge

Feedback from the peer challenge team

24 – 27 Jan 2022

Thursday 27th January 2022



The peer challenge team

- Kate Kennally – Chief Executive Cornwall Council
- Neil Thornton – Director of Resources – Rochdale Borough Council
- Tim Ryder- Monitoring Officer - Suffolk County Council
- Cllr David Renard – Leader Swindon Council (Con)
- Cllr Marianne Overton MBE- (Leader Independent Group LGA) - Lincolnshire County Council and North Kesteven DC
- Cllr Heather Kidd – (Lib Dem) - Shropshire Council
- Gill Elliott – Review Manager - LGA



The purpose of peer challenge

- Peer challenges are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet a council's needs.
- They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus.
- The peers 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 team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.





The process of peer challenge

- Peers reviewed a range of information to ensure we were familiar with the council, the challenges it is facing and its plans for the future
- The peer team gathered information and views from more than 35 meetings, in addition to further research
- We spoke to more than 85 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders





Scope and brief for the peer challenge

We have considered the core components looked at by all corporate peer challenges, namely:

1. Local priorities and outcomes
2. Organisational and place leadership
3. Governance and culture
4. Financial planning and management
5. Capacity for improvement

Overall messages and observations

- Council has made good progress on most of the recommendations from 2017/19 CPCs and the CIPFA financial governance review despite Covid. It is self-aware of what more needs to be done
- New Corporate Plan has given RBWM a strong "Guiding Star" for the future. 2022 needs to be about embedded it, including the MTFS
- Chief Executive recognised by Members staff and stakeholders as leading a positive change agenda at RBWM, including establishing a new leadership team.
- Values and vision developed "bottom up" and consequently resonate with staff who welcome greater opportunities for collaboration with colleagues
- Clear change of culture recognised by staff, TUs, voluntary sector
- Key statutory services – Adults and Childrens are recognised as good

Overall messages and observations

- Agreement of the Borough Local Plan will enable a plan led approach to development
- At a political level, RBWM has a largely district council approach, heavily focussed on a local place-based agenda rather than operating as a strategic unitary authority
- Performance management is not yet mature. Limited understanding of the difference between overview and scrutiny. Scrutiny process is improving and becoming less political. However, there is still room for improvement
- Difficult Member working relationships/behaviour are still in evidence and are showing the Council in a poor light to the community
- RBWM's mixed service economy model is working but there are inconsistencies in the governance arrangements and role and remit of senior officers and members.
- Transformation Strategy and Delivery Plan developed and approved but doesn't feel strongly linked to helping balance the MTFS. Not seeing large scale corporate transformation

Overall messages and observations

- Need to ensure that future financial sustainability is not over reliant on disposal of assets or future income generation through having a corporate transformation programme
- COVID has helped the authority reconnect with residents and community groups. This needs to be sustained into the future through embedding new ways of working.
- Council recognises that it is at an early stage in improving EDI. The Leader and Chief Executive however are both committed to progressing this agenda
- 2022 is a key year for the Council to celebrate its 25 years as a unitary by resetting its future vision for next 25 years with its young people with a strong focus on climate change.
- Council motto - In Unitate Felicitas " In unity, happiness" This should provide a prompt for further work on political culture.

Local priorities and outcomes

- Progress made on top line Corporate Plan. Staff are supportive. Plan still needs to be embedded and a performance framework established and rolled out which links service plans and priorities to budget and risks over the medium term.
- Not all the stakeholders feel involved at the formative stage of development of strategies and when involved it feels like a fait accompli. Health partners however do feel fully involved.
- Some key strategies in place - Corporate Plan, Housing, Environment and Climate. EDI recognised as a priority for the organisation.
- Partnership approach to delivering on a climate strategy seems right. Opportunity for RBWM to really connect with residents. A cross party approach will ensure it is seen as a-political by stakeholders. Route map needed to deliver on being net zero by 2050.
- Focus in last two years of addressing service delivery challenges waste, grounds maintenance. People services a recognised as good and the authority is delivering services at reasonably low cost.

Local Priorities and Outcomes

- Good performance management in people services but not across the council. Member casework systems not in place but priorities to address this have been identified New quarterly performance and risk board is being put in place for April 2022
- Digital transformation of services is understood to be a key priority but customer service experience is fragmented and inconsistent and doesn't allow for easy resolution of issues. A customer services review is underway for 2022
- Adoption of the Borough Local Plan has to be a significant milestone in helping to improve housing affordability across tenures and housing types which is really needed if the borough is to remain sustainable into the future.

Organisational and place leadership

- Leadership team of the Council looks fit for purpose at an officer level with a committed CLT.
- Borough has re-set delivery arrangements when right to do and arrangements with third parties regularised to give greater oversight of delivery
- New Leader and Chief Executive and their teams are driving the changes and improvements around culture and recognise more to be done to connect strategic intention with frontline practice and political culture and relationships
- Stakeholders recognise that RBWM has been a good organisation to work with particularly during Covid – businesses, health partners, voluntary sector. Welcomed the opportunities for networking provided by the Council
- Cabinet Portfolios are unbalanced and now do not reflect the Corporate Plan and executive leadership arrangements – e.g. one Head of Service has 5 portfolio holders

Organisational and Place Leadership

- Place leadership at a borough level as a strategic unitary is not as evident to businesses and other public sector partners as it could be. Council leadership is more evident at a local place level.
- Need to consider the Royal Borough's economic strategy and role in a post pandemic context as part of thinking about future of the Berkshire LEP and potential county deal
- Berkshire wide partnerships want to see more political leadership from RBWM e.g. around skills and placemaking
- RBWM with its partners needs to consider which issues are best dealt with at a regional, county, borough and town level and resource appropriately
- External partners are not sure about the role of the property company alongside the Royal Borough as the housing and planning authority. Opportunity to re-set RBWM's approach to the Borough Local Plan implementation with developers and partners.
- RBWM takes the visitor economy very seriously for Windsor and is seen as a partner of choice by the Crown Estate

Governance and culture

- Recognition of clear improvement by staff, unions on culture and values and a willingness to do more.
- Elected members engagement in public needs to be consistently constructive to enable good community engagement, public confidence and demonstrate effective progression on key issues.
- Group leaders should shape the tone for the political culture. Work with the monitoring officer to clarify their roles to drive improved behaviours across all groups.
- Continue to embed effective risk management through the newly established Audit and Governance committee. Consider appointing members to the committee who are independent of the council to members to support this.
- Take the opportunity of the formal establishment of the ICS to reset the role of health scrutiny alongside the Health and Wellbeing Board. Consider cross party membership of Health and Wellbeing Board.
- Strengthen the member development offer, through working with the current members to identify priorities for a new member induction programme to be driven by Group Leaders. This should take account of members local community roles and regulatory functions alongside their corporate leadership role.

Governance and Culture

- Continue to focus on improving overview and scrutiny within RBWM to ensure that the work programme is owned by all committee members, that it is supported through a clear programme of member briefing with annual reports providing clear evidence of impact.
- Revisit the number and remit of scrutiny panels to ensure that there is balance across the people, place and corporate functions of the authority and clarity on links with Corporate Plan priorities. This should include the role of opposition members in agreeing the work programme and the leadership of the scrutiny function taking account of best practice.
- Provide dedicated scrutiny support from the Monitoring Officer to ensure timely responses and improved quality of reports and briefings to support an effective scrutiny function.
- Ensure that members are better supported in their ward work through a consistent casework approach.
- Recognise the benefit of having a clear and consistent framework for arms-length Council entities, which separates out shareholder responsibilities from that of strategic client for governance and service delivery

Financial planning and management

- The appointment of the S151 Officer and strengthening of the Finance and Pensions Teams is positive. The s151 officer is working effectively with the Cabinet Member for Finance to help the organisation understand its medium term financial position.
- There now seems to be a stronger grip of operating within approved budgets, although there is work to be done to ensure that there is consistency of financial support and responsibilities with arms-length delivery vehicles.
- Financial management of the capital programme has been strengthened and appropriate provisions made.
- The establishment of the Audit & Governance Committee is positive but it is early days in terms of its effectiveness
- The latest approved MTFS would benefit from further development and detail to better articulate how it will be successfully delivered. There is a need to progress the five year financial plans covering transformation, regeneration, income generation and savings during 2022.
- Income generation whilst an opportunity needs to be underpinned through a jointly developed and agreed Commercial Strategy between Senior Executives and Cabinet.

Financial planning and management

- RBWM has made a useful start in its transformation journey via the recent approval of its Transformation Strategy and Delivery Plan and the establishment of a small team but large-scale system change will require a significant step-up in the organisation's transformation capacity
- We note that the 2019/20 statutory accounts remain uncertified due to objections being raised which are being worked through.
- The Council's Pension Fund is the most under funded in the country and is not forecast to be fully funded for another 20 years
- A strong link between the newly approved Corporate Plan and its successful delivery via the MTFS needs to be established and prioritised during 2022.

Capacity for improvement

- Recognise and celebrate the progress that has been made since the last two CPCs to enable new forward-looking conversations based on constructive challenge to take place which harnesses the energy and commitment of all 41 members.
- Nationally recognised Integrated Health and Care system is an opportunity for building RBWM reputation and promoting earlier intervention and prevention approaches.
- Connected leaders programme led by RBWM has been crucial for building relationships and is a model of good practice. Health partners have identified that capacity could be a potential limiting factor at an officer and political level for the future.
- Leadership development programme to be in place for middle managers and rolled out during 22/23 to support implementation of new Corporate Plan and Values
- But there is more to do from staff survey results to connect, top, middle and bottom of the organisation to the corporate plan goals
- Committed CLT. Could there be more themed based collaboration based on corporate plan themes to better harness collective leadership effort?

Capacity for improvement

- Recognise that RBWM has strengthened corporate capacity to deliver improvement and transformation – engagement, consultation, project mgt etc
- However, this will not be sufficient for large scale organisational transformation – may need an external transformation partner to identify opportunities and for implementation to be supported through a specific transformation reserve as part of MTFS process
- Ensure that capacity and skills are aligned across RBWM and its delivery partners to drive improved outcomes regardless of employing organisation e.g. consistent approach to personal development; inclusion within staff survey
- The establishment of the EDI Network and future recruitment to the EDI role is a positive step in driving and testing the EDI Strategy
- As part of the adoption and implementation of the BLP, complete the review of the Planning Service to build greater trust and confidence with residents and developers.

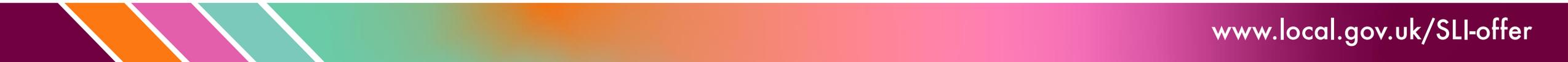
Recommendations

- Refresh the MTFS with stronger links to the Transformation Strategy underpinned by the creation of a Transformation fund to deliver the benefits needed with a first priority on improving customer experience
- Through Group Leaders establish a programme of Member development and a new Induction programme for May 2023 which aligns to the strategic priorities for the Royal Borough.
- Put in place stronger support for member casework that ensures consistency and timeliness of response across all council functions
- Review the current model of scrutiny committees – corporate, people and place in line with priorities in the Corporate Plan and service delivery
- Review Cabinet portfolios so that they are re-balanced across people, place and corporate functions and enable RBWM to have the capacity to influence at a sub-regional and national level



Recommendations

- Take advantage of the 25 year anniversary of being a unitary council to work with the Youth Council and partners to set out a 25 year vision for the Royal Borough
- Develop a localism strategy with town and parish councils and community groups which promotes greater subsidiarity of decision making enabling RBWM to be more strategic
Click to add text
- Consider a peer review of the Planning Service to drive continuous improvement in 2023/24 and beyond
- Develop a clear and consistent framework with regard to the role and governance of arms-length Council entities which separates out shareholder responsibilities from that of strategic client
- Revisit terms of reference and remit of the joint HOSC for East Berkshire as part of the establishment of the ICS





Next steps

- Opportunity for questions and discussion now
- Public feedback report to follow shortly
- LGA to produce the report by w/c 21st Feb
- Council to publish the report within 6 weeks of agreeing the final version
- Council to publish an action plan in response within eight weeks of the CPC report publication
- 6-month check-in to be scheduled – an opportunity to discuss progress and next steps