

# Corporate Peer Challenge Swindon Borough Council

13-16 September 2016

## Feedback Report

## 1. Executive Summary

Swindon Borough Council (SBC) is a well led and purposeful organisation. It has developed a clear and compelling vision for the borough which describes that by 2030 Swindon will have one of the UK's most successful economies based upon well managed business and housing growth.

Driving and nurturing that vision there is evidence of a strong council and community leadership. As such many of the required ingredients to help deliver that vision are either in place or being assembled. The Leader of the Council is passionate about Swindon and is intent on driving the council forward to achieve its ambitions. With the appointment of the new chief executive that political vision is matched with a renewed focus on equipping the council with the necessary leadership capability, capacity and culture to help deliver what is required. We found many positive ingredients that will help the chief executive with this including a staff group that are clearly proud to work for the council and within which there are many 'shining lights' in terms of people who can and will step up when required.

The council's ambitions have purpose and we had the benefit of seeing at first hand through our journeys around the borough, either the existing footprints or plans for how the council with its partners intends to grow an already buoyant economy and build housing in keeping with these plans and with a focus on the need of both its current and future residents. At the same time there is an exciting master plan for regenerating Swindon's town centre to reflect both its rich heritage as well as its future retail, cultural and leisure needs.

As well as the progressive leadership of both council and place there are a number of key ingredients to indicate that SBC has the capability to deliver upon its vision. Through a period of austerity it has demonstrated effective financial stewardship and has made savings in excess of £120m over the past 8 years. Importantly we saw the outline of a future financial plan with an emphasis on sustainability of the council based upon the growth ambitions in that vision. As a consequence the council is now at an early but important juncture in moving from making savings through service and transactional efficiencies to fundamentally rethinking the purpose of the council and how it can and needs to transform itself and the way it must do things into the future.

That financial discipline referred to is matched by a broader effective planning framework. The Swindon 2030 vision is also underpinned by a coherent council plan setting out four clear priorities for the period 2016-20. Furthermore there are a range of key plans, such as the Town Centre Masterplan that relate clearly and as such the suite of council policies and procedures is coherent. Additionally, the council attends to its performance and we saw in place a simple but largely effective performance dashboard through which council leaders and managers can drive improvements

The council is very aware that it has a role in the leadership of place but does so through effective partnership with the commercial, public and voluntary sector. We saw or heard about many of these partnerships and how though for example, its relationships with its health partners its was targeting more effective commissioning of services, or through the Schools Forum seeking to improve school performance or indeed as part of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) actively promoting the infrastructure projects to deliver a modern Swindon.

Despite the range of strengths identified there are a core set of issues for the council to both consider and address if the aspirations of 'Swindon 2030' are to be met. During

our four days we met with a range of stakeholders who felt the image of the borough needed to improve. One resident perhaps summed this up best with their description, which was, 'Swindon as a place is not so bad!' It was clear to them and us that many of the core building blocks are there but the critical job is now for the council and its partners to develop a clear and compelling narrative about how the 2030 vision will be delivered. In our view this vision and narrative will require a plan mapping out the journey and milestones from the current day to 15 years hence so that priorities and progress can be properly set and marked.

The council recognises the need to invest in its own internal capacity and capability to ensure the vision is delivered. A key step will be the appointment to its new Director for Economy, Regeneration and Skills. This alongside restructuring its refreshed Corporate Management Team (CMT) will be instrumental in helping it achieve its aims. We feel this was mission critical for the council; there is a market upturn and significant regeneration plans for the town itself and housing development in train across the borough. It is crucial these do not stall due to lack of capacity or wherewithal and we strongly encourage the council to as one stakeholder said 'get things over the line' i.e. show through delivering projects that they are credible.

Against this backcloth of growth there are of course demographic and service pressures, especially in health and social care where increased demand for care support for older people, supported lodgings for young people and increased costs of accommodation for homeless families are just some of these core and growing demands. These demands and others besides are inevitably drawing resources from the council and creating financial pressures both within year and beyond and indeed begging fundamental questions about how the council can and should operate into the future as it seeks to address its budget gap of £49m over the next three years.

Given the scale of challenges and opportunities in play we felt that SBC should look to engage its residents more systematically through this period of change, assessing all of the time their satisfaction with progress and the outcomes being sought. The council's members are also crucial players in this change agenda, it will be important to support them in their community leadership roles and help them introduce effectively new ways of working, including the potential significant changes that new parishing arrangements may bring across the borough which is currently subject to consultation.

Finally, it is crucial that the council's staff are effectively engaged and led and supported through the next few years. We saw an internal previous change process lose momentum through the departure of a few key individuals and it will be crucial that the chief executive's renewed focus on staff engagement and development is mainstreamed and supported through to conclusion and renewal as this will be very important in determining whether the council's ambitions are met or not.

## 2. Key recommendations

- Underpin your compelling vision with a coherent narrative and plan which will take you from 2016 to the outcomes you seek for 2030
- Develop critical success factors for making choices about what initiatives to prioritise, to sit along your very clear principles
- Have a clear understanding of the council's purpose and then design its structure to ensure it can deliver the vision
- Place a greater emphasis on the execution of your plans and review whether you have the existing capacity and right vehicles to help you deliver them
- Review the breadth of responsibility at CMT level by reducing direct reports to the chief executive to create strategic space
- Ensure all corporate/enabling services are restructured to support front – line service delivery and review merging finance, HR, legal, IT, PPE and customer services into one strong enabling function to help deliver the change most effectively
- In respect of your Parish plans consider how you will most effectively ensure a smooth transition to devolving responsibilities in this new model
- Harness afresh your business and community partners to revive your One Swindon ambitions
- Look to engage more purposefully with your communities and seek their views and opinions in a structured manner
- Step up your ambition about digitalisation
- Utilise your great people to be even more effective and fill your skill gaps
- Call to arms, celebrate wins, create momentum, engage people to play their part and inform the public possibly via a community magazine
- Keep learning and be networked - look outwards and steal with pride--encourage others to steal from you-there is much to steal

# Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

## The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and were agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Swindon Borough Council were:

- Tony Williams, Chief Executive, Bournemouth BC
- Cllr Sean Anstee, Leader, Trafford MBC
- Chris Lee, Director of Environment and Regeneration, LB Merton
- Lesa Annear, Strategic Director Transformation and Corporate Services, Plymouth City Council
- Stuart McKinnon-Evans, Director of Finance, City of Bradford MDC
- Paul Clarke, Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

## Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components at 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?

## **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 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 onsite at Swindon Borough Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 140 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 50 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 240 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 6 weeks in Swindon.

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 (13-16 September 2016). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

### 3. Feedback

#### 3.1 Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?

The council has a clear understanding of the challenges and opportunities that the physical location of the borough creates as well as the needs of its current and future populations. It now stands at 216,000 and by 2030 is projected to grow to 265,000. As such the council's place vision 'A vision for Swindon', describes how by 2030 the borough will be renowned for being one of the UK's most successful economies with well managed housing growth areas and provides the core focus for the council's ambitions and plans well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This vision is contextually grounded with 4 core priorities and a council plan. This sets out clear aims: infrastructure and housing, education and skills, clean and safe streets and culture and supporting the most vulnerable. These priorities are made real by the 30 pledges which describe how these priorities will be realised, for example by working with all of the 1270 families in Swindon who are in most need of support or by building up to 3,500 homes in Wichelstowe and the development of new communities in East Swindon. The council has further grounded its vision, priorities and plans in outlining how they will be delivered through a focus on growth, localism and resilience, using these as the core tenets to describe the 'how' in terms of the way it will do things.

It is clear that overall the sense of understanding referred to above is real as we saw at first-hand how the plans the council and its partners has for some of its challenging areas, for example the need to improve educational attainment in the borough to create the skilled working population for the future, or how with its health partners it was planning for demand pressures in health and social care and finally with a range of significant 'blue chip' companies across Swindon its was having a post Brexit dialogue and increasing understanding of real world pressures. All of the above and more is importantly underpinned by a strong evidence and strategy base including the Local Plan and Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.

As well as understanding the borough, its people and resources, the council is active in responding to their needs. We made visits across Swindon and it is clear that the council has purposefully shaped parts of the wider borough in line with its aspirations, including a strong (albeit out of town centre) retail offer, green space and housing and is now turning its attention to the town centre regeneration and as part of this we saw some very positive outcomes in terms of developments, for example Regents Circus. We agree with the Council that the town centre should be a priority for its regeneration work.

We felt there were a range of approaches and actions the council could consider that would help it deliver its ambitions more effectively. For example, the vision would benefit strongly from what we described as a narrative, charting the course from 2016 to 2030 by outlining priorities and timelines so that all stakeholders and especially residents understand what is happening, when and why. As part of this we would encourage the council and its partners to be bolder in action. The 2030 vision is bold in terms of ambition but currently stakeholders we spoke with did not



describe Swindon in terms of that ambition or make the connection between the current and the future, indeed the impression we gained was somewhat passive and reflective of what one resident told us 'Swindon, it is not so bad'. We felt strongly that a focus on telling well Swindon's story and ambition is crucial if the vision is to be achieved and the council and its partners should concentrate on this and through that championing Swindon's identity, aspirations locally, regionally and nationally too.

Given the renewed focus on the future of the borough and the impact this will have on the physical location and its population we feel it's important that the council revisits how it achieves this and consider gauging residents views in a more systematic way and addressing some of the potential gaps we came across. For example: do your residents understand the town centre plans, have all stakeholders a clear sense of your plans for parishes, how are plans for a university or further education plans for the borough being developed and considered? We suggested to the council thinking again about a structured resident's survey (the last was 2012) and directly informing its residents via newsletters, which it suspended some time ago.

### **3.2 Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?**

We saw a clear ambition for Swindon and the Council too. This was manifest through the Swindon 2030 vision and most importantly is being led by the council leader who has an inspiring view of Swindon's future but is very aware and quite rightly proud of Swindon's heritage and history. That strength of leadership is enhanced with the very able support, energy and drive from the new the new chief executive. This is crucial since the ambitions within that vision are quite rightly challenging and will require not only the council but importantly its public and private sector partners across the borough to jointly take leadership. In such an environment the confidence and trust of partners is crucial and those we spoke with were complimentary about the political and managerial leadership of the council, as one said, 'the Leader and the Chief Executive put their money where their mouth is and will go that extra mile for Swindon'. In truth though we would have welcomed meeting with more of your commercial partners to be able to fully endorse this view.

We found many examples of leadership through effective partnership. The council and its health partners have a strong focus on improving the health outcomes for the borough's residents and we heard about a very effective Health and Well-Being board and a very proactive and engaged Community Safety Partnership. Its role within the Local Enterprise Partnership is effective and recognised and its focus on business growth and the retention of the many '*Blue Chip*' companies being 'centre stage' will be fundamental to the success or otherwise of the vision.

The council is also looking to explore opportunities and engagement beyond Swindon and Wiltshire to establish itself as a regional and national area for growth and real ambition. Its recent engagement seeking to be included in the Norwich/Cambridge/Milton Keynes/Oxford growth corridor is a good example of this.



We saw the council and most importantly its leadership always trying to be on the front foot to keep momentum and drive and demonstrate results. The council's housing delivery targets and plans are on schedule, its work on solar farms is a national story of success, knowing its challenges with skills and education we saw it working purposefully with its Academy Schools Forum. Furthermore we saw strong joint planning with Wiltshire Council on spatial planning and this is a good start for further exploration of shared services.

The council has a clear focus on the needs of its current as well as future residents. The town centre master plan is being developed to take account of the town's heritage, the council is developing a housing company and plans to drive its house building programme and also lead the charge in terms of being a more commercial council. Yet its plans are also longer term focused and are intent on building resilience for its future communities and more effectively managing demand wisely. The council's emphasis upon providing dementia friendly housing is evidence of this.

The narrative and plan required for 2030 will also help the council know, understand and make provision for the necessary capacity to ensure things are delivered. One such vehicle for this will be its delivery company 'Forward Swindon', where it is increasing its capacity. However it remains underpowered given the full scale of what will be required to get the many projects at the heart of the council's vision 'over the line'. This is more than just increasing the numbers of staff. It is also about having clear and crisp lines of accountability and responsibility between the council and its delivery partners. We felt this was one example of several where ensuring capacity will help the council execute its plans.

The business and housing market is on the upturn and again in terms of increasing the capacity of the council and deliver ahead of the curve we would encourage the council with the appointment of its forthcoming Director post to look at the range of options available to what we described as 'grabbing a bigger share of the financial uplift through the development of its existing assets and possible further acquisition at this very opportune time and this may involve a whole range of options such as a Joint Venture Vehicle, for example.

If the Council is to realise its ambitions for Swindon 2030 it will need to deliver sustainable growth in jobs and housing. For the local population to access the high value jobs planned for the borough a significant improvement in skills levels will be needed. Schools and the FE sector will be key to this and the Council will help shape this through its next iteration of the skills strategy and how it plays its community leadership role in influencing the FE Sector Area Review and the nature of the skills offer for Swindon. The Council will want to work closely with business and the colleges to ensure that the skills offer matches the ambition and plans for the town centre and seeks to develop the skills necessary to attract and retain high value added jobs as well as the lower skilled jobs necessary to sustain a thriving place.

We see the council's plans for regeneration as very positive. In terms of physical changes to the place and especially the infrastructure and fabric underpinning the town centre plans we were less clear what the plans were in terms of approach to both the quality of environment and public realm. Swindon places great store in its

history and has taken steps to maintain the fabric of the town centre that reflects this. In developing the town centre the Council will want to ensure that it has a real focus on quality and retention of this heritage so that Swindon is marked out as a unique and worthwhile place to visit, live and work in. Quality public realm will help ensure the town centre distinguishes itself from other 'clone town' centres and puts its place more securely on the map.

The quality issue referred to above will be very important in relation to the image of the borough, how it is marketed and what its 'brand' is. We know this is an issue that the council and its partners are aware of but we were not clear about how those partners were collectively leading this and what capacity in terms of resources they were allocating to tackle the issues of image that they all want to change. The borough has many attributes: its strong heritage, its open spaces, its iconic roundabouts, its physical positioning relative to the M4/M5 corridor, its 'blue chip' existing and growing company profile and the plans in place to build significant numbers of houses. All of these attributes and others combined with a first rate town centre regeneration we believe, if promoted and marketed well should put Swindon on the map.

### **3.3 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 met with many of the politicians and the managers at the council and in our view individual member / officer relationships are strong. At the senior level we saw a culture of respect between cabinet members and the directors within Corporate Management Team (CMT). This provides a solid bedrock for positive relationships and will help enable a focus on improvement to take the Borough and the council to the next level.

We strongly advocate for collective ownership by both senior managers and Cabinet to be seen more often to create and reinforce the one council message. Whilst the right things are being done to help start this we found that managers and councillors alike still had a tendency to slip back into comfort zone of individual directorates and portfolios and become at times distracted with detail. This will be important to address for two key reasons, firstly it will mean everyone is very clear about the key strategic priorities for the council as a whole. Secondly, in terms of delivery on the ground it should also mean that officers especially are crystal clear about the expectations of them and their accountability for delivery against those priorities. Equally, if this is not made clearer, it could create a lack of confidence from partners which would inevitably delay progress.

The council is aware of the challenges referred to above and is intent on addressing them proactively. One such way would be for Cabinet and CMT to have both external challenge and support to help them make a real success of achieving the right balance between operational / strategic discussions and drive the council forward at pace. As part of the next step to maturing these relationships we also recommend that there should be regular strategic discussions between CMT and

Cabinet. This will allow them to collectively focus on what one stakeholder called 'the really big issues' and help ensure that capacity is added to deliver the actions required to turn those strategic plans into action.

There is an encouraging breadth of cross party consensus on some key issues and we found pragmatism around decision-making, most especially in relation to the Town Centre Master plan and the recent taking back into the council ownership of some of the social care staff that had previously been outsourced. Indeed we heard about shadow cabinet members signing off key delegated decisions jointly which is a sign of very mature political management. We found that the Leader's style and approach encouraged that pragmatism across political groups. Various stakeholders described his statesman- like approach and his desire to seek consensus where he can.

The council benefits from positive engagement across its strategic partnerships, for example within People Services there were trusting and productive relationships with the Clinical Commissioning Group, the Acute Hospital Trust and indeed with the Health and Well-Being Board. As the council's focus on growth, housing and regeneration develops it will be key for the new Director post and the political portfolio holders overseeing these elements to show that same engagement and leadership into the future.

We found a good, honest and straightforward employee relationship climate in the council with very positive engagement with the Trade Unions who clearly value the style and engagement of the Leader and Chief Executive.

There was a range of good examples of well informed decision making with members, notably through the GLL leisure arrangement which saw a difficult and potentially tricky situation in respect of outsourcing leisure result in the creation of new reinvigorated service rewards. This was based on sound consultation, clear officer and member leadership and positive engagement with the new partner providing the service.

The council is open to exploring a range of delivery models. At times these arrangements for a range of reasons have not been as successful as was originally planned. From our very brief time with the council we felt that sometimes the client side management arrangements it has put in place need to be more robust, to make sure that there is effective oversight to ensure outcomes are delivered, recognising that the Council's active management of services provided does not end once a contract has been signed. The council would be wise to review its arrangements in respect of this and learn from past experience, although it is recognised that some models are implemented at a time when conditions are appropriate for that time.

The focus on delivery aspects in respect of economic growth and regeneration across the borough are crucial to enabling the council achieve its vision for Swindon. As such there has been a renewed emphasis on 'Forward Swindon' the council funded but independently run company. Its staff group capacity is growing albeit from a small base with specialisms in economic growth and inward investment, property development, senior business management, marketing and communications, and project management. It will be very important if they are to

deliver at the pace required that there exists a clear political and strategic framework from which it can be empowered to deliver and also be held account of proportionately.

The council needs to ensure it effectively engages its staff through change. SBC has in the past ran significant change programmes, notably 'Stronger Together' which have garnered interest and support but perhaps not fully been seen through. With a renewed focus on economy, going local and building resilience being mainstreamed into the council's way of working it is important that this doesn't just replicate another change management initiative but rather creates and sustains a closer corporate grip and focus to support the council's transformation and ensures future success against targets.

The council is modernising and managing commissioning and provision of services in a range of ways. It is undertaking a significant exercise in consulting about the future parishing of the whole borough area and devolving more powers to its parishes and communities and finally it has a new vision and corporate plan to help focus its future arrangements and structure. We felt now was an ideal opportunity to review the form and function of the council-essentially what it is there for and how it will operate as a consequence. As part of this it is crucial that SBC has an effective corporate resources function. As such we felt a key aspect of that review should be the shape and structure of its corporate resource and given the range of change that has occurred of late or is scheduled soon we believe this should be a first order priority as this will really enable the council to achieve its ambitions and so must be done soon and must be done well.

### **3.4 Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?**

SBC has a sound track record of financial management. In recent years it has time and again sensibly and pragmatically achieved its targeted savings. Like many other good local authorities it has done so through prudent financial stewardship and at the same time has sought to make efficiencies whilst seeking to minimise disruption to service provision. In doing it has created a relatively healthy balance sheet in both cash and land for the council, with a strong tax base as the Borough continues to build houses and welcomes and accommodates national and international companies.

We found that SBC's financial control regime is effective and the council's external audit opinion is positive. We saw effective financial reporting and have confidence in its rigor.

Whilst such efficiencies have taken the council to where it is now, it is clear with the scale of required savings ahead, specifically £49m required over the course of the next three years that new, different and more radical changes will be required. In response to these demands the council has developed a clear and coherent future financial plan that takes account of the various spending and demographic pressures underpinned by the council's sound analysis of its current and future

needs. At present SBC's financial plan, which is based on this set of assumptions, results in relatively small deficit forecasts in future years compared to others.

The council has shown a real intent and willingness to innovate and experiment in relation to seeking creative funding solutions including joint ventures, out sourcing, shared services etc. Some of these have been extremely successful, for example the leisure out-sourcing and others less so but where that has been the case, notably in relation to the recent return to the council of some previously outsourced social care staff, it has been decisive in making the change required. As such we see this willingness to explore, learn and improve as a significant strength.

The current financial team have served the council very well and have led the charge in relation to driving efficiencies. They have a very strong skill set as well as a real understanding of the council and its financial challenges. We were particularly struck by the change management skills the finance team had been encouraged to adopt. With the council's new vision and priorities and the changes afoot within the finance team it is very important that those skills and organisational knowledge are refreshed. Some of our interviewees felt there were opportunities to drive more internal efficiency, as well as keep the very effective grip on total cash spending. In addition, we perceive an opportunity for the council to utilize an even more rounded set of skills and perspective in driving costs out, by calling for example on the contribution technologists, organisation developers and process engineers – all of which we encountered during our visit.

There will need to be a change in emphasis going forward if SBC is to truly leverage the very best from its relative financial strength and that change is essentially about the business strategy, i.e. vision and council plan, leading the financial strategy. There was a sense that up until now this had been the other way around and whilst that has meant the council has achieved financial stability to date, the change in senior leadership provides a timely opportunity for the Council's financial performance to become everyone's accountability, and not the preserve of the finance team. In this, we feel the council can deal with the sense, which was echoed in several fora, that the council has been "too finance led". As part of that change in emphasis it will be very important that individually and collectively leaders across SBC demonstrate they own the whole council financial targets and demonstrate the same.

There is a current in-year projected overspend largely created by a combination of demand pressures in adult social care and children's services and changes within the gate fee costs of Public Power Solutions (PPS), which will require a credible re-plan so that you achieve the year end with a balanced budget.

From the information provided to us we were not clear whether your capital programme sufficiently provides for the council's role in regeneration and development into the future and we believe it would be wise to review this. In the same vein we questioned the council's appetite for borrowing to support/co-fund future investment to help place shape the borough at pace and help with its own longer term financial sustainability and again it would be useful for the council to reflect on this.



### **3.5 Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?**

We saw a renewed appetite for change and a focus on building the capacity and capability within SBC and its partners. The council itself has refreshed its change agenda and is building this now upon three core tenets: *Growing Swindon's economy and identifying new forms of funding*, 'Going Local' i.e. working in partnership with community groups, residents and parish councils to take services closer to local people and finally 'Building Resilience' aimed at working with those communities and enabling different responses to the challenge of increasing demand for services. We saw this as positive as it gives all staff a strong reference point for what one stakeholder described as 'the way we will go about our work'.

The relatively new chief executive has a personal determination to develop and nurture the staff group. That passion from him about having 'no glass ceilings' and seeking out and developing people to enable them to make their best contribution was very refreshing. The evidence from the staff survey and Trade Unions in respect of this was positive. Furthermore we read about the 'Swindon Manager Programme' and met with representatives of the 'Employee Influence Forum' and also met through the course of the peer challenge with a range of well-informed innovators in management roles who are committed to making the place a success. Inevitably there is still much the council can and will do to build its capacity but we saw at first hand that rhetoric of change was becoming a reality and through this a broad range of stakeholders were being positively engaged.

That engagement extended beyond the council and we were impressed with the way you built capacity through your effective landscape of partnership working. Your relationships with the CCG were particularly impressive and we were encouraged with your joint commissioning arrangements, use of the Better Care Fund and working relationships at Health and Wellbeing Board. This excellent working relationship was evident in your STP work and discussions over an Accountable Care Organisation. Furthermore we received a glowing reference from representatives from the not-for-profit sector we met with who were very complimentary about the way the council worked with them in respect of co-production, communication, and collaboration in respect of commissioning of services to adults.

We saw good performance management frameworks in place which showed a clear golden thread from the council's vision, to the council plan and on to individual performance appraisals, albeit that we feel you need a renewed emphasis on compliance with the latter.

Through this period of austerity members are having to take the most difficult decisions in the most testing circumstances that will impact upon their communities. The changes afoot in respect of parishing are an obvious example of this. As such now is a very important time for the senior officers of the council to work very closely with members over the longer term to support them in making these tough decisions, creating the narrative we have already referred to and focussing on delivery at pace.

As such we advise that now, given the range of changes that have happened or are in train you ensure that dedicated time and resource is allocated to the joint development and working of the Cabinet and the new CMT. Likewise, with range of changes in train or afoot, CMT will alongside your corporate resource function need to be reviewed. The chief executive in the view of the team has too many direct reports and both he and CMT need space now to become the strategic officer leadership body for SBC.

Some components of transformation were we believe not as developed as they might be, for example Organisational/ People development and workforce plans. We would advise you reflect upon how you support and equip your workforce of the future and build in capability for change: develop grow, buy –in (process architects and marketeers) and then mainstream it into a coherent workforce plan. Aligned to this we heard very little about how you are promoting and resourcing approaches to your demand management pressures and your progress in terms of your digital strategy. That is not to say you are not making progress, rather its absence from much of our discussions with people gave us the impression it was not front and centre.

The council's performance in terms of sickness is showing an increase and this is becoming an issue to review as we were unclear how this was being tackled. Likewise your compliance with appraisal is somewhat off its target, yet this is at the core of your engagement with and development of staff and again it would be wise to review this.

We have complemented SBC for its strong partnership focus. We found that there is so much goodwill and therefore potentially untapped capacity across your partnership arrangements. Given this we it would be useful to explore opportunities for further collaboration and sharing to build capacity and resilience with your partners.

Whilst the council has been creative in looking at new and different ways to commission and provide services we felt it needed to refocus on how well it manages those arrangements in terms of performance and outcomes. Given that some of these have been less successful than others it is worthy of reflection so lessons are learnt and capacity is used to drive performance not used negatively to deal with failure. We do advise you to continue to explore and be pragmatic about your range of delivery options but look at how you build your capacity and skills to champion your delivery priorities and commercial aspirations.

At our feedback we said we gained a view that 'commercialisation' was spoken about as the gift of a few people within the council. Our advice was that it needed to be more built into the organisations 'psyche' so that concepts and approaches such as being business-like, understanding charges and profits etc. were more mainstreamed. Perhaps this is a reflection of an organisation that has been too finance led and relied on a core team to do that for the council when in truth it is the responsibility of everyone. Likewise there are key people around the organisation in terms of the project change team staff group who are there to offer support and guidance but it is the services themselves that must own and embrace change in their own areas if the new focus on being more business led is to succeed.



Finally, we came across a whole range of expertise internally that wasn't necessarily explicitly being used for the benefit of the whole council and our advice was to embrace that culture of knowledge exchange and learning more. As part of that our advice was to encourage that learning and inquisitiveness beyond Swindon and shamelessly encourage your members, officers and staff as one manager told us 'to get out more' and learn and exchange knowledge on a national platform. In doing so you will also be putting Swindon and Swindon Borough Council on a national platform and there is much others can learn from you.

## **4. Next steps**

### **Immediate next steps**

We appreciate that you will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions with your senior managerial and political leadership in order to determine how the Council 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. Andy Bates, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). His contact details are: [andy.bates@local.gov.uk](mailto:andy.bates@local.gov.uk)  
Tel 07919562849.

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with you and colleagues through the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide additional information and signposting about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform your ongoing consideration.

### **Follow up visit**

The LGA 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 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 12-24 months.