Dear Jerry

North Warwickshire Borough Council - Corporate Peer Challenge
16-18 July 2013

On behalf of the peer team, I would like to say what a pleasure it was to be invited into North Warwickshire Borough Council to deliver the recent corporate peer challenge as part of the LGA offer to support sector led improvement.

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

- Ray Harding (Chief Executive, King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council)
- Councillor Caitlin Bisknell (Leader, High Peak Borough Council)
- Steve Blatch (Corporate Director, North Norfolk District Council)
- Paul Shackley (Corporate Director, Allerdale Borough Council)
- Ernest Opuni (Peer Challenge Manager, LGA)
- Ged Perkins (Peer Support Team, LGA)

Scope and focus of the peer challenge
You asked the peer team to provide an external view on several specific areas and issues relating to the Council’s ability to deliver its future plans and proposals. These included:

- The Council’s capacity and capability overall to deliver its ambitions
- Whether the Council could make better future use of its senior management capacity
- Whether the Council is getting the most out of its partnership working
- How the Council can build more effective resilience into its services
- Opportunities for greater shared working and sharing of service provisions.
The peer team covered these by considering the core components looked at by all corporate peer challenges. These are:

1. Understanding of local context and priority setting: Does the Council understand its local context and has it established a clear set of priorities?
2. 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?
3. Political and managerial leadership: Does the Council have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?
4. Governance and decision-making: Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?
5. Organisational capacity: Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

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

- Spoke to more than 70 people including a range of Council staff together with Councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 20 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 200 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 6 weeks in North Warwickshire.

This letter 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 onsite visit (16 -18 July 2013). 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.
Summary of feedback: overall messages

North Warwickshire Borough Council is a well-regarded Council characterised by good relationships between members and officers. Partners and other stakeholders consider you to be a partner of choice as well as a robust, critical friend. Your partnerships with the voluntary and community sectors look to be innovative and effective. There is evidently a well-established and sustained culture of partnership working built over a number of years in the borough. This is demonstrated by the work of the Community Safety Partnership (CSP), your work in relation to the health agenda and through the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) which is enabling you to deliver outcomes for your communities in areas where the Council, working by itself, would struggle to achieve.

The Council’s Executive Management Team (EMT) is clearly experienced. This, combined with clear political leadership and direction, and political consensus on key issues, has enabled the organisation to deliver impressive financial savings over recent years. This clear leadership is well supported by the organisation which demonstrates a ‘can do’ approach at all levels. The Council is adept at working collaboratively to overcome resilience issues, and is open to learning from elsewhere to improve practice and performance.

In terms of your finances, you appear to be in a reasonably good position at the present time. Solid financial management has provided you with the time adapt to the impact of the 2015/16 CSR and beyond. The healthy level of reserves will provide the breathing space necessary to deal with further reductions in grant funding and New Homes bonuses. However, whilst there are good levels of reserves currently, the future savings required amount to approximately 14 per cent of the net budget by 2016/17. Consequently the Council will, we think, face some difficult financial and strategic decisions in the near future.

It is clear that you recognise the importance of effective asset management. This is evidenced by your disposal of assets in some cases to community partners well placed to make best use of facilities and in other cases as a means of yielding capital receipts whilst also providing a boost to the local economy in Coleshill. You have undertaken concentrated activity to increase take-up of units at industrial parks and are sharing leisure facilities with local schools. The Accommodation Project will support multi-agency use of Council offices whilst a systematic review of all your buildings has been timetabled.

Nonetheless we think there is a more for you to consider as you seek to embed a more proactive approach to asset management and utilisation of both the Council’s land holdings and other redundant public assets as part of your financial strategy moving forward. We questioned how well you are aligning your spend to your priorities, and also suggested there is an opportunity for the Council to better allocate finance to specific projects. You are, however, aware of this and have taken action to address this. We encourage you to maintain the proactive approach you are taking to ensure that you have the project management capacity required to deliver such work. Exploration of the potential to become more financially self-sustaining by taking advantage of the strong growth in NNDR income and some expansion in house building could also form an important element in the Council’s medium term financial strategy we suggest.

The Council needs to be clearer on how it will resource its input into a number of complex issues which have a major impact on your strategic agenda for the area. These include the
High Speed 2 Rail Route and the proposed expansion of Birmingham Airport. We think there is also a need to identify how you will better resource your involvement in City Deal and the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) at both a county-wide and a sub-LEP level. In order to achieve your aspiration for economic growth in the area it will be important for the Council to clearly identify how it will resource the ongoing development of your relationships with, and support to, key businesses. There is clearly an opportunity to further develop relationships with private sector investors but it was not clear to us how this will be taken forward in a sustainable and robust way.

It was clear that the heritage of the borough is of paramount importance to both the Council and the communities of North Warwickshire. The rural character of North Warwickshire clearly warrants protection. However we encourage you to see this agenda not as a threat but rather as an opportunity to safeguard the borough’s character. The ‘green belt’ offers statutory protection and therefore supports this aspiration because it limits development in the areas you do not wish to see affected. Instead it gives the opportunity for North Warwickshire Borough Council to direct growth into the areas that you determine. Integral to this will be the vision in the Local Plan. We would encourage you to use this as an opportunity to demonstrate, and positively communicate, the Council’s ambition as part of the on-going work for promoting and branding the borough.

We think there may be value in reviewing the current service groupings to ensure a good fit in supporting the delivery of your corporate priorities. This review of current service provision and priorities should, we think, be undertaken against the Corporate Plan and its ten priorities. We questioned whether this affords you the focus required in delivering on the outcomes most important to the area at a time of shrinking resources. A robust review, and possible rationalisation, of priorities will help identify both what the Council should focus on and what it may deem less critical for the future.

Part of this review process should involve assuring yourselves that your workforce profile puts you in a good position to deliver on the areas you identify as key for the future. There is an opportunity for your Leadership programme to be given a higher priority to ensure the Council is able to support its staff in taking forward the Council’s vision. You might also consider risk-assessing all service areas to identify potential vulnerabilities and on the back of this develop a strategy which responds appropriately to the findings. As part of this, the Council should examine all approaches including shared services, strategic alliances, shared management, commissioning, trading, insourcing and outsourcing. This will build on your willingness and established track record of collaboration and joint working.

We feel that, moving forward, the Council has a great deal to be positive about. We encourage you to build on your effective relationships as these will be critical in you overcoming the future challenges faced as you work to to improve the lives of local people and to enable and assist them to take advantage of the new employment opportunities which continue to emerge. There are significant opportunities for economic growth in North Warwickshire and you are particularly well placed to capitalise on these due to the number of reputable and high value private sector firms who are already located in the borough. We feel that in taking advantage of this it will be important that you communicate clearly with all communities, partners and stakeholders that North Warwickshire is a place able to achieve the balance of cherishing its past whilst having the confidence required to seize the opportunities for the future.
Summary of feedback: current performance, ability and capacity to deliver future ambitions

Understanding of local context and priority setting

We found there to be a number of priorities which were recognised and shared by the majority of people we met. For instance, there is a wide recognition that economic development - (focusing on building technical level skills, development of infrastructure, improving educational attainment by young people and attracting higher value, better jobs) - is a key priority for North Warwickshire and that the Council is being proactive in delivering on this agenda. An example of you doing this is through your support for the Apprenticeship Training Agency (ATA) in partnership with Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council and North Warwickshire Hinckley College. Other work you are doing includes working with the Chamber of Commerce including the coordination of joint visits to businesses of strategic importance to help build intelligence and information about their needs.

You have rightly recognised that, in infrastructure terms, there are a number of opportunities for North Warwickshire. These include the A5 corridor (especially from Tamworth through North Warwickshire to Hinckley), MIRA Enterprise Zone and the presence of the technology park. All of these support the borough’s aims to stimulate a zone of high value, high tech manufacturing and can also contribute positively to your aspiration that companies remain in the borough (whilst also acting as a means of attracting other businesses into the area in future). There may be opportunities to secure localised business support through a source such as the LEP to enable you to continue this work.

Integral to your aspiration for further economic growth is how the mix of housing in North Warwickshire might support future growth and how this will be addressed in the borough. We think this needs a clearer understanding and encourage the Council to balance its desire to maintain the rural nature of North Warwickshire with the need for growth. In many of our conversations it was clear that, at present, this is viewed primarily as a defensive means of averting a perceived threat posed by economic growth and economic development.

We feel there is a need to review the priorities in the Corporate Plan. The number of priorities - (currently there are ten) - exposes the Council to a risk of lacking sufficient focus in what it is aiming to achieve at a time when it is important for the targeting of resources to be clearer. We question whether the number of priorities identified is sustainable going forward.

It was clear from our time in North Warwickshire that the Council is highly regarded externally as a good partner. You have developed good and productive partnerships with a number of neighbouring authorities based on both need and opportunity (such as the effective partnership with Nuneaton and Bedworth Council across a number of different themes). Another example is the refurbishment Council offices to enable closer working with organisations such as Warwickshire County Council (Adult Social Care Services) and Jobcentre Plus. This will also provide a community police base and space for the Careers Service. This project is clearly supporting your aspiration to retain local delivery of services.
Your partnership working with the voluntary and community sectors appears very strong. We were impressed with the many examples we heard about. In particular the BOB Community Hubs delivered through voluntary sector partners are using resources innovatively to ensure that residents have better local access to a range of services. In essence BOB is a model of working with the voluntary and community sectors to allow people in different areas to access a wide range of services from their own village or locality. It is clear this initiative is geared towards achieving the Council’s aspiration to ‘support people in difficult times’. We felt that the reduction of the seven themes to three key priorities for the borough is a positive move. The focus is now on (i) Health Improvement, (ii) Raising Educational Attainment, Aspirations and Skills and (iii) Access to Services. It is positive that the LSP has adapted over time in order to remain relevant to achieving the overall vision for the borough. It is doing so by identifying priorities which are complementary to the Council’s corporate plan.

There are, we think, clear opportunities for the borough to build on the presence in North Warwickshire of major companies such as BMW, Volkswagen and 3M. A more focussed and resourced approach to leading economic development may be required in light of High Speed Link 2 (HS2) which will run through the borough and the proposed expansion of Birmingham Airport into the borough. Currently two senior managers along with the Chief Executive are the only resource deployed for this function. Given the number of complex issues the borough is dealing with and the resource-intensive context of the LEP and City Deal in which the Council has to operate we questioned whether this is a sufficiently resourced area of priority work.

One challenge the borough faces is a shortage of the skills required by the major companies amongst local communities. You have identified an attainment gap in technical disciplines which also appears to be contributing to the fact that approximately fifty per cent of jobs created are benefiting non-residents of North Warwickshire. We recognise that some of these companies will choose to bring existing expertise from elsewhere with them when they set up new operations. Nonetheless we think there is an opportunity for North Warwickshire to better articulate its ambitions and ‘promote’ the local ‘offer’ more effectively to maximise opportunities for local people. We observed that the borough is surrounded by universities and wonder if there is opportunity to further exploit this capacity more positively in future. Currently this appears to be under-utilised.

There is an opportunity, we suggest, for the narrative about North Warwickshire to articulate more of a forward-looking strategy in terms of selling and promoting the district. This does not in any way seek to devalue the importance of the borough’s mining legacy and heritage. However we think more can be done to focus on exploiting opportunities with new investors by putting a future focus at the front and centre of all communications. This is about seizing the opportunity for North Warwickshire to renew its image and positively transform external perception of the area. There is an opportunity to communicate a clear narrative which makes the link between all elements of regeneration (including access to services, housing, education, employment and health) and how together these contribute to future aspirations for the area. With this we feel you will be able to align the expectations, and self-image, of your communities as much to the future as to the past.

There is also a key role for housing market development within this narrative however this element has not yet been clearly defined. Both housing and population growth are low.
The Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) for the borough is due for publication in 2013 and is thought likely to show a reduced overall requirement for new housing. Notwithstanding this, it will be important for the impact of a more vibrant housing market as an integral part of economic growth to be strongly articulated. You may wish to give greater consideration in this as to how the borough might address the opportunity for higher value executive housing within the context of an appropriate mix of housing as a means of capitalising on new investment in jobs.

A significant degree of concern about poor public transport links was shared with the peer team by a range of stakeholders. This is not however reflected proportionately in the corporate plan. We think it may be important that the corporate plan ambitions and the developing core strategy vision are in alignment in addressing this.

In terms of the current corporate plan, we feel there is a need to review the number of priorities to ensure that sufficient focus, energy and capacity are directed to what the Council is aiming to achieve at a time when it is important for the targeting of resources to be clearer. We question whether the number of priorities identified could compromise the ability for North Warwick Borough Council to deliver the outcomes it seeks.

**Financial planning and viability**

The Council currently has a good level of reserves which should enable the authority to plan for and deliver the level of savings required over the next three years. You have a high level plan in place and are confident of achieving this. You have a good record of delivering savings and, moving forward, you have built in levels of tolerance to manage unexpected outcomes such as a small ‘fighting fund’ for HS2 within your current levels of reserves.

Nonetheless we stress the need to ensure that any plans you have are sustainable and realistic into a future which will be characterised by a need for all Councils to make further tough choices. There is of course a difficult balance to be struck between not being over-cautious and having the assurance that the necessary speed of change required for achieving cost reductions remains appropriate.

We would encourage you to continue to assure yourself that you are focussing spend where this is required most. For instance whilst the borough cites challenges around transport access as a key concern it was not clear how clearly this is reflected in your priorities for spend.

The influx of new businesses, such as Ocado, into the area provides opportunities for increased business rates to be utilised by North Warwickshire Borough Council. This is important of course in light of the demise of the Daw Mill mine which will have had a negative impact on the Council’s business rate yield. We feel there are further examples of potential opportunities the Council can explore as regards income and revenue generation. These include consideration being given to the viability of charging for long stay parking and whether the Borough Care model (as currently configured) remains financially stable, sustainable into the future and remains the appropriate model. You have recently established a cross party task group to consider the Borough Care model. We recognise that partnering can be difficult for a small authority such as North Warwickshire. You have already demonstrated your understanding of the value in
‘growing’ activity through services to schools and exploring opportunities for shared services or providing services on behalf of other Councils. There may be opportunities to build in further resilience around sports and leisure services utilising your learning from your work with schools.

We also encourage you to ensure you have an appropriately robust approach to both reactive and proactive use of the Council’s property assets. There are opportunities for joint working on potential investment opportunities and we encourage you to progress with embedding a more a proactive approach to asset management and utilisation of both the Council’s land holdings and other redundant public assets as part of your financial strategy moving forward. There may value in utilising external professional support to help in your progress with this.

You are receptive to sharing services as a means by which to reduce spend and achieve value for money and have a track record of doing so. There are a range of shared services activities such as sharing Building Control, Joint Heritage and Conservation and Home Improvement Consortium with Nuneaton and Bedworth. There are a number of examples of shared sporting facilities with Polesworth School, Coleshill School and the Queen Elizabeth School and Sports College in Atherstone. There are joint elections systems with Rugby Borough Council and Stratford District Council whilst North Warwickshire shares its performance management systems with Warwickshire County Council. The sharing of Warwickshire County Council’s depot for refuse and recycling is also regarded as a positive move in value for money and wider efficiency terms.

Sharing services or outsourcing are not of course the only delivery models the Council utilises. On the Council’s recycling service, consideration was given to a joint procurement between North Warwickshire, Nuneaton and Hinkley. Ultimately the decision you took was to tender on your own and, based on cost considerations, this service has subsequently been brought in-house. There may be an opportunity for income generation by undertaking this refuse and recycling function on behalf of other Councils and we would encourage you to give some consideration to this.

It is clear that your current arrangements are yielding benefits on a number of fronts and that you are testing the appropriateness of such arrangements in future. You do this through your decision-making matrix which is founded on seven key criteria which must be satisfied ahead of investing in any shared service arrangements. This is clearly bringing robustness to the way in which you assess opportunities. However we feel that you should keep these criteria under review in order to assure yourselves that your matrix allows you to take advantage of all opportunities to innovate and be more entrepreneurial in future. There may be other (or additional) criteria which allow you to do this and we encourage you to consider these in any review.

You recognise that in the past you could have applied more robust project management practice to delivering larger capital projects. It is clear however that you are taking a proactive approach to working with external partners to give greater capacity and resilience to current schemes. This is exemplified by your work in appointing a Waste Manager as well as the Waterloo Housing Development Team. You have also worked closely with Coventry City Council in ensuring that there is appropriate project management capacity for both the Accommodation and Coleshill Leisure Centre projects. We would encourage the Council to continue to develop this good practice and continue
to learn from the lessons of the past as you are clearly doing. We encourage you to maintain your desire to continuously improve your current arrangements and achieve an even more focussed approach. You may wish to consider, for example, how you can influence the use of the top-sliced elements of New Homes Bonus to make a real difference within the borough.

**Political and Managerial leadership**

Senior councillors and managers are clearly committed to making a positive difference to the communities of the borough. Members are confident in officers’ ability to deliver their agenda and savings. They consider the organisation to have forward-looking officers who play an integral part in North Warwickshire delivering effective services. The Chief Executive is highly respected among his peers across the county and he is viewed as someone who represents the borough well.

The Council’s management structure is leaner than it once was and reductions to the middle manager numbers have been achieved without the Council encountering as large a level of pay-offs as might have been the case. It is important however that you remain mindful of any potential capacity issues as regards these reductions in numbers. Members feel that their model of the fourth option governance arrangements and utilisation of committee structures is supporting a robust task and finish approach in how the Council uses its various leadership groups. The politics of the Council appear to be mature with priorities formed around a broad consensus which allows for smoother delivery of these.

As regards communication, there is a will to allow public speaking at committees whilst effective use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook are being increasingly utilised. There is support for all Councillors being allowed to speak at Committee meetings including at the Planning Committee.

The Council is positive about utilising opportunities to add value through partnership working and you are working well under the duty to cooperate with many adjoining authorities. There is strong member commitment to this approach exemplified by the willingness to share resources related to health improvement with partners. Your appetite at a corporate leadership level for utilising future opportunities to work together with partners remains strong, demonstrated by numerous examples we heard about – including the focus on delivering accessible services to communities through the BOB Hubs, strong collaboration with the voluntary and community sectors and utilisation of a ‘one stop shop’ approach to administering bus passes and blue badges for Warwickshire County Council.

Your focus on social inclusion is demonstrated through the ‘Have your cake and eat it’ initiative where North Warwickshire Borough Council is collaborating with the local NHS, schools and JobCentre Plus. Your work on Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) is an excellent example of joint working via an integrated team drawn from the County and District Councils. The model was rolled out on the back of North Warwickshire and Nuneaton and Bedworth piloting this approach.

We were impressed by the Council’s appetite for learning as well as its willingness to challenge itself. It is clear that this was a major reason for seeking the peer challenge. It
was also made clear to us that the leadership of the Council (both political and managerial) is committed to continuous improvement. We are assured that the authority is very open to reflecting on its performance in order that it can identify where it could do things better or differently if necessary. The Leader and Chief Executive are committed to leading by example in challenging the staff at the Council to deliver as effectively as possible in all areas of the council’s business.

**Governance and Decision making**

The Council operates an improved Committee system as a ‘fourth option’ Council. There are four main Boards – (Executive, Resources, Community and Environment and Planning and Development) - together with a Licensing Committee. In addition to these there are four sub-committees with extensive delegated powers covering principally Housing, Safer Communities, Local Development Framework and Human Resources. There is a Standards Committee and four Area Fora. The latter are chaired jointly with Warwickshire County Council and these perform a major consultative role on policing issues for instance. You feel these committees give you the focus across the areas on which you wish to concentrate and provide a means by which the consensual politics in the borough can best be utilised in delivering.

There is also a Scrutiny Committee. You know that on occasion this has struggled to provide a robust means of challenge. This is primarily due to the extensive involvement of all Councillors in the decision-making process. You may wish to consider further how this committee’s operation can add greater value to the Council’s overall governance and decision-making functions.

The Leaders Group and Extended Management Team (EMT) work closely together to jointly consider future plans for the borough. EMT has worked together for a significant period of time and is regarded as a good team which works well across various services. It was clear to us that it is a ‘can do’ team which is nimble and facilitates speedy decision making. An annual presentation to the leading group on key issues together with regular meetings between the Management Team (MT) and Leader’s Group provides an opportunity for a focus on strategic matters. This interface provides an opportunity for these arrangements to drive the direction of the organisation and we would encourage you to ensure the focus remains on using this forum for that purpose.

The Chief Executive meets regularly with the Leader of the Opposition and MT makes an Annual Presentation to the Opposition Group. The Opposition group has appointed a Shadow Chairs group which provides a further opportunity for input into the Council’s overall policy direction. The ‘Task and Finish’ working groups deployed by the Council also feed into the various Boards which in turn facilitate input from outside organisations and partners. All in all there seem to be appropriate opportunities for members to inform and influence decision making and policy development.

You have a Strategic Risk Register which operates on a Red Amber Green (RAG) system. This is updated on an annual basis and describes the risks identified against the Council’s activity, the consequences of these risks being realised and identifies responsible officers for each of these. A gross risk rating is arrived at through a consideration of the relationship between ‘likelihood’ and ‘impact’ of the risks outlined. Furthermore it includes a consideration of how existing control procedures are mitigating
and reducing the risk described. Whilst the process looked clear, robust and relevant we felt there is an opportunity for the Council to strengthen the strategic use of the register by considering whether the review cycle could be undertaken more regularly than on an annual basis by both members and officers.

Whilst existing control procedures are listed, how qualitative an assessment is being undertaken of the success (or otherwise) of remedial activity? How clearly are the risks listed assessed for their impact on outcomes? Are the risks listed primarily focussed on operational considerations? Overall we would encourage the Council to assure itself that the current approach is affording you a systematic and robust approach to learning, and retaining understanding, of the lessons learnt as part of the Council’s ‘corporate memory’.

It was not clear to us how proactive a role the Executive Board plays in managing corporate risk through your current processes. We feel it important that you are satisfied that members are kept informed in a way which allows them to take a more active role in managing corporate risk. It may be that you explore whether further training to help them discharge this role is required and how this might help them further in undertaking a leadership role in this part of the Council’s business. We learned that audit training for members has been offered but not taken up in the past and you may wish to revisit this. Members undertaking this function more robustly would have the impact of building greater resilience into the Council’s service delivery.

We were made aware that a shared service for audit had been considered in the past with limited success in quality and resilience terms.

**Organisational Capacity**

There is a culture of willingness to learn from other organisations at North Warwickshire. Having done this you add your own innovation to such models. As mentioned already the BOB Hub services model is one such example of the Council taking a delivery model which worked in another authority, building upon it and ultimately developing an even better service than the original. These along with the Food Bank, Fareshare, Second chance furniture, ‘Have your Cake and eat it’ and ‘Bite back begins’ initiatives provide a suite of excellent good practice examples of North Warwickshire innovating to address social issues. It is clear that your approach to partnership and community development is fully embedded in all that you do. In particular your Community Development Service was well ahead of its time at the time of its inception and provided the strong foundation on which you are currently delivering.

Through a mature approach to partnership, you are well placed to supplement your internal capacity through shared services and partnering arrangements. External partners describe the Council as a ‘robust critical friend’ who will work with their partners to identify best ways of delivering efficiently. This includes learning equally the lessons from successes as well as lessons on what could work better. You have a reputation for using data available to you in a range of ways in order to ensure that services are targeted. You are also skilled at utilising the knowledge and expertise of partner organisations to ensure that the best possible service is delivered.

The Building Control service you share with Nuneaton and Bedworth is considered to be a success. This is mainly due to a loss-making enterprise being turned around to where it
is now likely to make a profit. The relationship between the two authorities is a product of the history of collaboration between the two and would seem to provide opportunities to work jointly on areas such as economic growth through the sub-LEP arrangements.

The morale, commitment and motivation of staff at North Warwickshire Borough Council is very good. It has helped you to deliver on your priorities. However in much the same way that capacity at the top of organisation relating to economic growth should be considered, it is important that the Council is aware of how stretched the workforce as a whole can become. It is important that the Council is clear about where and when any potential service vulnerability and ‘tipping points’ might occur. In a wider sense it is also important for the Council to focus clearly on what its approach to succession planning is in terms of developing staff who could be promoted to vacant positions when they arise.

For a relatively small borough, North Warwickshire has a significant number of complex strategic issues to contend with. As mentioned the HS2 delivery and Birmingham Airport proposed new runway brings a combination of challenge and, potentially, opportunity for the area. Leadership of this agenda has by default been taken up by the Chief Executive and two officers who are also expected to managed a wide-ranging portfolio of other activity. On the economic growth front alone these two areas are competing for priority with City Deal and the LEP both of which require a voice from North Warwickshire and other districts in the north if this agenda is to not be dominated by the south of the county.

There is additional capacity required for effective engagement with business and relationship management of private sector bodies. It was clear to us that the Council does not currently have the capacity to maximise the full benefits of influencing this situation as it might want to and we encourage you to give further consideration to how this might be addressed going forward.

North Warwickshire has TNT based in the borough which should represent a real opportunity for job growth but they too found apprenticeships difficult to recruit to. The Chief Executive has made arrangements for the County Apprenticeships Officer to work directly with TNT to resolve this. This may represent an example of the value of more proactive and positive communication and myth-busting campaigns to put forward the message about the borough’s aspirations. The team also believes you should continue to build on your previous efforts to maximise the impact of having businesses such as Ocado and the Belfry based in the borough. Better use could be made of case studies from Ocado to demonstrate that job opportunities are in fact gateways into successful, highly-skilled careers. However the lack of capacity may be compromising the Council’s ability to engage effectively in promoting a confident and positive image of the opportunities which exist. This is an area which needs to be supported on an on-going basis as there is rarely a reduction in demand for effective marketing. It is clear that officer capacity is extremely stretched and that this activity is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

There is a risk for the Council that you will not only fail to effectively influence agendas with a profound impact on the borough’s future but that the ‘corporate intelligence’ around this area could easily be lost as it resides in a very small number of your very senior individuals. If any or all of these officers departed the Council you would have no capacity or professional expertise to engage with these crucial agendas. This could lead to a
dependence on external resources such as consultants. We feel that there is an urgent need to address this area of the Council's delivery.

You need to be clearer on how you will achieve your objective of delivering employment growth particularly as there is no dedicated economic growth resource within the Council at the present time. You have identified economic growth as a Council priority which means you should give further thought to how effective delivery will be supported. We are aware that the Council took a conscious decision to remove a dedicated Economic Development team from the Council’s structure. Whilst we are not advocating that this be reinstated necessarily, we identify that a clearer assessment of what capacity is now needed to deliver on this priority would benefit you. This will be important if the Council is to proactively influence the opportunities you have as a strategic location for logistics and a strong base for the automotive industry.

Moving forward - suggestions for consideration

Based on what we saw, heard and read we suggest you consider the following actions to build on the Council’s undoubted successes. These are things we think will help you improve and develop the effectiveness and capacity to deliver your future ambitions and plans. These are linked to the five areas you asked us to focus on:

(i) Capacity and capability overall to deliver your ambitions and
(ii) Use of your senior management capacity

1. Review the Council’s overall approach to resourcing the delivery of economic growth. This includes identifying how relationships with key businesses will be resourced and how you will further develop relationships with private sector investors.
2. Identify more clearly how you will resource the Council’s input into strategically important high profile complex issues (e.g. HS2, Birmingham Airport, City Deal and the LEP).
3. Assure yourself that your alignment of spend to priorities is clear and robustly appraised.
4. Identify a proactive, strategic approach to communicating the Council’s ambitions for the borough through effective promotion and branding of North Warwickshire.

(iii) Building more effective resilience into your services

5. Review service groupings to ensure a good fit in supporting the delivery of the corporate priorities. This includes risk assessment of all service areas in order to identify potential vulnerabilities and developing a strategy which enables you to maintain a cohesive approach to service delivery.
6. Utilise opportunities for the Leadership programme in the workforce strategy to be given a higher priority.
7. Continue to develop a more embedded approach to asset management and utilisation both of the Council’s land holdings and other redundant public assets.
(iv) **Opportunities for greater shared working** and  
(v) **Partnership working**

8. Keep under review your current criteria for taking forward decisions on shared services. This is to ensure that you are able to take full advantage of all opportunities to innovate through a range of options such as shared services, strategic alliance(s), shared management, commissioning, trading, insourcing and outsourcing.

We have made available to you a set of slides that summarise the above feedback. The slides are the ones used by the peer team to present its feedback at the end of the onsite visit.

**Next steps**

You will undoubtedly wish to reflect on these findings, and suggestions made, with your senior managerial and political leadership before determining how the Council wishes to take things forward. As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of continued activity to support this. In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with you and colleagues through the peer challenge to date. We will endeavour to signpost you to other sources of information and examples of practice and thinking.

I thought it helpful to provide contact details for Howard Davis who, as you know, is our Principal Adviser (West Midlands). Howard can be contacted via email at howard.davis@local.gov.uk (or tel. 07920 061197). He is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Hopefully this provides you with a convenient route of access to the Local Government Association, its resources and any further support.

All of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish you every success going forward. Once again, many thanks to you and your colleagues for inviting the peer challenge and to everyone involved for their participation.

Yours sincerely

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On behalf of the peer challenge team:

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2. Councillor Caitlin Bisknell (Leader, High Peak Borough Council)  
3. Steve Blatch (Corporate Director, North Norfolk District Council)  
4. Paul Shackley (Corporate Director, Allerdale Borough Council)  
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