

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

North Warwickshire Borough Council

10th – 12th September 2024

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge



Contents

- 1. Introduction 3
- 2. Executive summary..... 3
- 3. Recommendations 5
- 4. Summary of peer challenge approach 7
- 5. Feedback 10
- 6. Next steps 24

1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involved a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance and governance information and then spending three days at North Warwickshire Borough Council to provide robust, strategic, and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of Sector-led Improvement (SLI) put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are: Responsible for their own performance, Accountable locally not nationally and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

CPC assists councils in meeting part of their Best Value duty, with the UK Government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years. Peers remain at the heart of the peer challenge process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

This report outlines the key findings of the peer team and the recommendations that the Council are required to action.

2. Executive summary

North Warwickshire Borough Council (NWBC) previously commissioned a CPC in 2013. This CPC in 2024 was an opportunity for the Council to consider its achievements and identify where further improvements could be made. In this spirit the peer team recommend that NWBC schedule in regular opportunities to undertake similar reflective improvement activity. This will assist Members and officers to

continue to effectively support the communities of the Borough which they have demonstrated to the peer team that they care so deeply about.

All NWBC staff and Members that the peer team met had a strong local focus on supporting the communities of the Borough. Members and officers regularly work well together and overall there are established, positive and productive relationships in place from senior to junior officers and with politicians, including cross-party Member-Member relationships. This is important and the Council takes pride in having these relationships in place.

NWBC is clear on where the Borough sits within the regional geography, and in the wider County context and how its needs differ from some of its neighbours across the 5 district/borough areas. There are distinct differences including employment and skills, HS2 and the needs of its communities and the Council uses a range of evidence to understand and identify its own areas of focus.

There are clearly defined areas of political priority but how these are translated into the Council's Corporate Plan could be strengthened. The priorities have been set out in the Corporate Plan 2023-27 but the peer team found that there was not a shared understanding of these from within, both by Members and officers, and outside of NWBC. Priorities should be more consistently embedded throughout the organisation and a strengthened culture and 'golden thread' with clearer delivery plans for the priorities would support this.

The peer team identified some significant governance issues. NWBC is aware of most of these already but these now need to be prioritised and resolved. Activity must now include: undertaking a review of the constitution; providing clarity around Member oversight of internal and external audit; development of the Annual Governance Statement 2023/24; and the finalisation of the performance and risk management frameworks. These are important elements of good governance and as indicators of the health of the Council need to be addressed at pace.

4

18 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ www.local.gov.uk Telephone 020 7664 3000 Email info@local.gov.uk
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Chief Executive: Joanna Killian

President: Baroness Grey-Thompson

The immediate financial position of NWBC is reasonable and future pressures have been recognised. The budget for 2024/25 was set without the need to identify savings. However, there are expenditure reductions of £2M required by 2026/27. NWBC is in a good position in the short term but it does need to now urgently develop a savings plan as part of its budget process. This plan requires a lead-in time to allow for it to be agreed, risk assessed, monitored and widely communicated. As NWBC is currently refreshing its Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) now is an opportune time to build its savings plan alongside this.

The peer team recognise that NWBC is on a digitisation/modernisation journey. This would benefit from effective programme management arrangements, especially as there are clear interdependencies with the budget savings programme and income generation proposals.

There is also an opportunity for the Council to be more outwardly focused. The peer team heard about positive relationships with other tiers of local government, partners and other organisations. Partners would encourage NWBC to be more proactive in asking for assistance and using its convening power and this would allow the Council to further extend its reach and impact through building on and maximising its partnership working and collaboration. This is particularly important for areas of priority for NWBC if they fall out of its direct responsibility or control where it is reliant on influencing others.

3. Recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

3.1. Recommendation 1

The Council's corporate priorities need to be consistently communicated and

understood throughout the organisation with an effective performance management framework and culture in place to monitor delivery.

3.2. Recommendation 2

The Council must strengthen its core governance arrangements.

3.3. Recommendation 3

The Council should develop a comprehensive budget saving plan, investing in the resources to deliver the savings needed in the medium term. The plan needs to be agreed with clear milestones and be resourced, risk assessed, monitored, and widely communicated.

3.4. Recommendation 4

The digitisation / modernisation journey needs to be clearly embedded in a transformation programme. It must be sufficiently resourced, with an appropriate skill set level with processes and governance in place to ensure delivery. This includes appropriate engagement and reporting lines to Members.

3.5. Recommendation 5

NWBC should strengthen its strategic leadership capacity and resolve the interim nature of the Senior Management Team, with a timescale to develop a permanent structure.

3.6. Recommendation 6

Establish regular staff session input from all senior managers and explore opportunities for political leaders to participate in these sessions.

3.7. Recommendation 7

Embrace the opportunities technology brings to increase access and improve communication across Council business.

3.8. Recommendation 8

Consider an environment that better supports Members to fulfil their role. This will include internal and external Member training and development and utilisation of

technology to improve access (e.g. hybrid briefings/meetings).

3.9. Recommendation 9

The Council should develop a systematic and strategic approach to engaging with key partners across Warwickshire and beyond, making use of both Member and officer skills to build profile and influence, and bring back insight and learning to the Council.

Leisure: Phase 1 Recommendations

3.10. Recommendation 10

Create a clear, shared understanding of the process to further develop the business case for the redevelopment and management of NWBC leisure centres, with adequate resources and a longer timescale for delivery.

3.11. Recommendation 11

Within this business case provide greater clarity on the drivers for the project, distinguishing between those relating to asset management, need to reduce subsidy, improve the health of residents; and then ensure a consistency of understanding and focus.

3.12. Recommendation 12

Within the delivery plan create clarity as to how to effectively integrate leisure provision with green and open spaces (including fees and charges), develop the asset management plan, and consider how community capacity building could support leisure and health needs including asset management.

4. Summary of peer challenge approach

4.1. The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers

were selected by the LGA on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- **Jackie King** - Chief Executive, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council
- **Cllr Louise McKinlay** – Conservative Member peer - Deputy Leader Essex County Council, and Cabinet Member for Communities, Levelling Up and Business Engagement, Essex County Council
- **Cllr Anna Smith** – Labour Member peer - Cambridge City Council, and Deputy Mayor of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority
- **Tom Dobrashian** – Executive Director of Place, Watford Borough Council
- **Sarah Parfitt** - Section 151 Officer and Director of Corporate Services, Gravesham Borough Council
- **Ian Leete** - Senior Adviser – Culture, Tourism and Sport, LGA
- **Raj Khera** - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA
- **James Millington** - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

4.2. Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?

4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges? What is the relative financial resilience of the council like?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

As part of the five core elements outlined above, every Corporate Peer Challenge includes a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance, and assurance.

In addition to these themes, NWBC asked the peer team to provide views on Phase 1 of its leisure improvement work. The peer team were asked to review the suggested approach and project plan and to provide feedback on the opportunities and risks.

4.3. The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. This included a position statement prepared by the Council in advance of the peer team's time on site. This provided a clear steer to the peer team on the local context at NWBC and what the peer team should focus on. It also included a comprehensive LGA Finance briefing (prepared using public reports from the Council's website) and a LGA performance report outlining benchmarking data for the Council across a

range of metrics. The latter was produced using the LGA's local area benchmarking tool called LG Inform.

The peer team then spent three days onsite at NWBC, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 35 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
- Spoke to around 100 people including a range of Council staff together with Members and external stakeholders and visited the MIRA Technology Park.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and Members.

5. Feedback

5.1. Local priorities and outcomes

North Warwickshire is a rural Borough which covers a large area of 110 square miles in Warwickshire. It has a population of 65,000 across more than 50 settlements and the rural nature of the Borough is a very important consideration for the Council. The economy of the Borough has seen an increase in employment land, particularly logistics, but a decrease in manufacturing. It is the location for many national and international companies including Aldi, TNT/Fed Ex, BMW, and Sainsburys. More than 90% of businesses employ 10 or less employees and more than 50% of workers commute into and out of the Borough. The Council is mindful of the need to strike a careful balance, for example around local growth where there is also an importance placed on protecting the rurality of the Borough when two thirds is classed as Green Belt.

NWBC's [Corporate Plan 2023-27](#) sets out the Vision/Mission as '*Protecting the*

rurality of North Warwickshire, supporting its communities and promoting the wellbeing of residents and business' and includes the following four priorities:

1. Efficient and sustainable organisation
2. Safe, Liveable, Locally Focussed communities
3. Prosperous, active and healthy
4. Sustainable growth, protected rurality

Although understood by the senior leadership political and officer team, the peer team found there is currently a lack of shared understanding of the Council's vision and priorities across the organisation with staff and Members and with NWBC's partners. Where priorities were articulated, they were very broad, which may also make it hard for teams to know where they fit into this, and what to prioritise. NWBC needs to be clear because this will drive the financial strategy and its capacity to deliver desired outcomes. A communications strategy will help ensure the priorities are shared throughout the organisation and with further activity to embed these to build on a common understanding, there will be a clearer 'golden thread' which runs through the organisation.

In delivering the Council's priorities the peer team recommend that NWBC distinguishes clearly between what the Council is responsible for and delivers on its own, what it can do in partnership – for example with the County and others - and what it needs to lobby for on behalf of its communities. NWBC identifies as a '*Service provider, enabler, point of contact, champion of North Warwickshire*' and it will need to ensure it keeps these guiding principles in mind. It is important to be clear that the Council cannot do everything itself but it can still have an influential and aspirational role with partners as that will contribute to common outcomes. This is also a great opportunity to strengthen the strategic relationships with Warwickshire County Council (WCC), other borough and district councils and partners to the benefit of the Borough.

The communication of priorities and outcomes to internal and external stakeholders, partners, and to the public, could be developed further. For example, the peer team met with parish and town councils who were complimentary about the ways in which NWBC supported them including providing briefings, meeting spaces and the input of Borough Councillors. There are opportunities to improve the approach to consultation and the feedback loop as the impact that engagement had made to final decisions was not always consistently communicated. This engagement at the hyper local level does have the benefit of adding local richness to strategies developed by the Council and the advantage of working closely with committed partners.

There is a strong shared passion for the local area from Members and officers the peer team met. NWBC's Members clearly value the work they are able to do in serving and advocating for their communities, and the ways in which officers support them in their role. At a ward level, Members speak very positively of effective cross-party working and have common shared goals for "*being the best they can*" on behalf of the community. Across the organisation, there is also a shared awareness of the importance of "*getting the basics*" right and NWBC is reflecting on how it can do this.

The peer team found that whilst Members are pleased that officers were so responsive to them and their enquiries, there was also some concern from councillors on how officers were resourcing this, particularly 'out of hours'. There was also concern from officers around perceived expectations from some Members to have the queries answered immediately. There may be benefit in developing a simple protocol around Member and officer working and agreed response times, to help guard against distracting officers from their day-to-day work and other priorities, but also to set parameters about out of hours working. This should not present a barrier to the good existing relationships but provide clarity on expectations on either side.

The Council is working closely with some local businesses and other partners to facilitate economic development. There is limited funding for this at a district level but NWBC recognises the important role it has and is working well in partnership. A

good example of this is through the Local Plan and the expansion of the MIRA Technology Park where planning permission granted within the Borough is anticipated to provide more than 2500 high skilled jobs on site, 3250 jobs in the supply chain and 1500 during the construction phase, with a Gross Value Added uplift of over £350M per year. NWBC is working closely with partners on this to maximise the positive impact for local people and allow them access to these jobs by developing a plan to accompany the section 106 agreement for the site. This is a great example of where the Council has seized an opportunity to ensure that local economic development provides the infrastructure to connect and house residents but also provides high quality opportunities for employment.

5.1.1. Performance

NWBC demonstrates strong performance across a number of areas when comparing published data with other councils. For example, when reviewing LG Inform data and comparing the Council to its [Cipfa near neighbours](#) (accessed Sept 2024) this shows impressive performance by the Council in areas such as the total households on the housing waiting list and in temporary accommodation where NWBC is lowest within its group. The Council effectively performs in many aspects of planning service activity including the processing of planning applications, where it is consistently among the highest within the comparator group.

NWBC has gathered good feedback including from the most recent Residents' Survey in January 2024 where 88% of respondents were satisfied in North Warwickshire and satisfaction with the Council was similarly high at 76%. This also identified areas of improvement including communications and crime/fear of crime after dark and the Council is now considering its own approach to external communications and how it can work with the Police and other partners to address concerns around crime/fear of crime locally. The published Community Safety Partnership Strategic Assessment is dated 2021/22 and there may be an opportunity for NWBC to consult with residents and partners on refreshing this to incorporate some of the feedback from the resident survey.

NWBC recognises the challenges facing its communities and it draws from a range of data sources for this to identify issues around the key indicators of health, skills, cost of living, deprivation and transport. It is also able to drill down and understand this on a ward level across the Borough.

There is currently a twice-yearly narrative report to the Executive Board on the key objectives in the Corporate Plan. NWBC has recently reviewed this approach and will be expanding how the Council analyses performance data to help drive decisions and service improvements across the Council and a new Data Analyst post has been created for this. A draft set of KPIs has been produced which will be considered at the next Executive Board together with a Performance Framework. The report to the Executive Board will therefore be more data driven, provide metrics and indicators to track progress in a more evidence-based way.

The peer team recognises that NWBC is on a journey regarding its planned approach to performance management. The team strongly supports this approach, which will clearly link KPIs to the Council's Corporate Plan 2023-27, service plans and individual workplans. This is currently missing across the organisation and it is essential to ensure Council priorities are monitored and measured. Embedding this new approach and developing a performance and risk management culture across the Council focused on improvement and efficiencies will also drive the development and delivery of NWBC's savings plan, which is an important next step.

5.2. Organisational and place leadership

The peer team heard how the Leader and CEX work well together and are passionate about the Council and the important role it has across the Borough.

The peer team saw how the political 'Leaders Group' are supportive of each other

and how they work together as Chairs of their respective committees. They have a good understanding of their individual remit but also the connections and cross-cutting issues which impact across the organisation.

Additionally, with these Members holding responsibilities at other tiers of local government they understand the functional responsibilities and contribute appropriately and navigate organisation boundaries and identify opportunities for NWBC. The peer team consider that there is an opportunity to make the political leadership more visible – both outside NWBC and within – so that the strategic role Members are playing is increasingly visible and also to model positive behaviour for the benefit of the Borough. The role of Members at a ward and parish level was valued by those the peer team spoke to with numerous examples where they have jointly led local activity and advocated for their areas.

The CEX's style and collaborative way of working is welcomed by staff, Members and partners. The peer team heard plenty of positive feedback about his availability "*he has an open door policy*" and willingness to get involved across the business and at all levels with partners. Whilst this approach benefits the Council, the peer team would recommend that the CEX continues to consider where his strategic presence is of most benefit to the Council. This is challenging as currently there is a lack of strategic leadership capacity coupled with the interim nature of the SLT. This needs to be resolved, along with the implementation of a permanent senior structure. This is no reflection upon the officers within these roles but this fluid position can be unsettling for an organisation. The peer team encourages the move to a permanent structure which would also allow for other members of the senior officer team to represent the Council externally, freeing up more capacity for the CEX.

The peer team met with some of the Council's loyal and dedicated 339 officers, many of whom had worked for the Council for a considerable time, and who described NWBC as a great place to work. The Council undertakes an annual staff survey and the latest results in 2023 unsurprisingly show that 92% of staff would recommend the Council as a place to work. The survey found that 82% of staff felt the Council was

committed to developing people and staff the peer team met with felt supported by managers and are confident that concerns would be addressed if raised. This is a great endorsement from staff on the leadership of the Council.

The Council acknowledges that recruitment and retention continues to be an issue, a challenge shared across the sector. Staff referenced capacity and resilience issues in some key areas such as within the finance and legal teams. There are some vacancies and pressures on workloads but overall the staff survey shows how 90% of staff were happy with the balance between their work and home life, although 30% felt that work deadlines were unrealistic. The peer team recommend that capacity issues and the impact on staff is kept under review.

Partners the peer team met with were positive about working with NWBC and are keen to explore further joint working. Additionally, there are opportunities to further develop relationships across all tiers of local government to central Government, where NWBC can leverage its good relationships to progress shared ambitions. The Council could extend working with partners and the community to build a shared narrative of place to communicate its vision and priorities. With or without additional funding collaboration will continue to be important and having clearly stated shared ambitions with partners will help with the delivery of outcomes.

5.3. Governance and culture

Following the Council's all-out elections in 2023, 17 Conservatives, 15 Labour and 3 Independent Councillors were returned and therefore NWBC has no majority party and is categorised as No Overall Control. The Council operates "fourth option" alternative arrangements, as a committee system comprising of Full Council, four Boards and with separate committees for Licensing, Standards and a Special Sub Group (which includes senior staff appointments, long term sickness absence and staffing issues). Both confirmation of the Board Membership and the Council leadership has been handled smoothly at its annual Council meetings. The peer

team observed good Member/officer and Member/Member relationships with regular and open dialogue between the senior top team. There is a culture of strong challenge and debate and overall there appears to be healthy and constructive dialogue on Council issues.

However, the peer team have identified some significant issues in NWBC's governance. These are issues which the Council is aware of and is developing plans to address but collectively these are significant and as key components of effective governance mean that the Council is currently not strong in this area. These issues include:

- The Constitution was last reviewed in 2018 and requires a full review to ensure it is fit for purpose. This would benefit from being reviewed regularly on a cross-party basis
- Responsibility for the audit function both internally and externally is unclear at Member level. External audit is discussed at the Executive Board and internal audit is discussed at Resources Board but it is unusual to not have an Audit Committee providing oversight of this – a view endorsed by the Council's newly appointed internal and external auditors. The peer team recommends that NWBC considers how to strengthen its approach
- Due to the audit backlog there is non-compliance with audit regulations and the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) for 2023/24 has not yet been completed. The peer team understand the reasons for this and that resources have been prioritised to address the annual accounts backlog, and the AGS will follow, but these are important to complete as soon as possible
- A performance culture is not sufficiently developed or embedded in the organisation. Members need to have adequate oversight and assurance in order to monitor progress. Plans NWBC has to expand this are important
- A recent risk management audit resulted in limited assurance. The new risk strategy needs to be formalised, reflecting the changing appetite for risk. This needs to be set out so there is Council-wide understanding alongside a

framework which enables regular monitoring at both a strategic and operational level

- The long-term interim nature of the s151 Officer role is a concern. Stability for the organisation is required in this statutory role and moving to a permanent role is important
- The peer team heard about an over reliance on some key individuals and concerns about the consequences for the business of any of these staff leaving.

The new Monitoring Officer will be pivotal in addressing many of these issues. Statutory officer meetings are a key part of governance and these meetings are now planned to take place and should form an important part of the NWBC's governance and oversight mechanism. These meetings should be regular, diarised and a priority. The statutory officers will need to work collectively to ensure that sufficient support and resource is put in place to strengthen all the governance arrangements and this is kept under review.

The Council's values and behaviours are healthy and staff recognise the work which has been done to develop the 'THRIVE' approach – this is alive within the organisation and owned by officers and senior management. The positive approach was referenced by officers the peer team met and endorsed by the staff engagement groups where subgroups have been established to look at communication, management and staff morale and are they are actively contributing to further developing the positive culture of the Council.

The peer team heard about the positive and constructive relationships with trade unions who feel they are listened to and consulted with.

The peer team heard that the Member induction and ongoing development programme could be improved. Additionally, regulatory training for members of the planning and licensing committees should be regularly refreshed and mandated in

order to comply with changing regulations. The Member Development Programme can continue to draw on internal delivery but also utilise support from other organisations, including the range of LGA offers available for councillors at all levels, to provide a package of support to equip Members with the skills they need to be effective in their roles.

Staff the peer team met appreciate the internal weekly email communications and briefings from the CEX. They would also welcome regular feedback sessions from all of the senior leadership team, including Directors. The Council could explore opportunities for political leaders to participate in these sessions to demonstrate the 'One Council' approach across NWBC.

5.4. Financial planning and management

The Council's financial position is reasonable in the short term, and future pressures have been recognised at a senior level with time to allow informed decision-making to address these. Pressures in the future are significantly impacted by NWBC's assumption that the business rate reset will occur in 2025/26 and it will not receive any additional income. This is a prudent assumption and the peer team encourage NWBC to ensure it uses the time now to address the identified savings gap of £2M to 2026/27.

The s151 Officer's recommended level of reserve is £1.2M and this is supported by a thorough risk analysis. The Council holds general fund reserves of £8.4M and although these are currently projected to reduce over the period of the MTFS are not projected to drop below the recommended level.

The Council currently does not have a robust savings plan to address the budget challenges. The peer team recommend it prioritises the development of a realistic, costed, timebound plan to deliver against the savings target within the MTFS with the

necessary governance arrangements and communications in place. The savings plan delivered alongside a transformation plan would underpin the modernisation of the Council to increase value for money and efficiencies. The Council has the time to do this in a measured way, but needs to start putting these in place now to meet the challenges of the future. NWBC can develop a well thought out plan to manage the budget as part of the process of updating the MTFS when this is presented to the Executive Board in November 2024.

The Council's statement of accounts has been delayed as well as the external audit process. Many other councils are in a similar position. The delays in the production and audit of the annual statement of accounts have impacted on the ability of the Council to financially plan with confidence. NWBC has now refocused on prioritising the production of the statement of accounts completing 2022/23 and work has commenced on 2023/24.

The Council's financial reporting is not strong. Budgetary control reports are provided for the services within each Board's terms of reference, but these are not consolidated into a single report to enable the overall budgetary position of the Council to be understood and reviewed regularly during the financial year. The Council recognises that it needs to be increasingly transparent in its financial reporting and is in the early stages of implementing a new IT system which will help it on this journey. The system can assist with budget setting and monitoring and enhance reporting to Members on key financial, governance and assurance matters for budget oversight. It may also be necessary for the Council to consider training and support to officers and Members to ensure that opportunities to enhance financial governance are embraced.

To address the weaknesses in the Internal Audit function around resourcing and production of an audit plan, NWBC commenced a pilot with Central Midlands Audit Partnership (CMAP) in October 2023. For both the Council and CMAP this feels like a positive move and will be monitored as a potential longer-term solution with the Council using this experience to make a decision about future arrangements before

April 2025.

The Council needs to consider the organisation and resourcing of the finance team. There are some long-term issues including vacancies and sickness absence at senior levels, heavy reliance on key officers and the level of professionally-qualified officers. This needs to be addressed and the Council will want to consider if it has the right level of resource to deliver its statutory obligations in terms of setting a balanced budget, as well as having strong financial governance and the capacity to support significant projects. Positively NWBC is committed to training and development with all three service accountants currently undertaking CIPFA training. A commitment for ongoing team meetings is important to share and collaborate and further build relationships within the team so it is clear on the priorities and its focus.

The Council has not been as successful as it would hope in its external funding bid submissions. There is an opportunity for NWBC to reflect on the learning from unsuccessful bids and to develop effective processes around bid writing, and perhaps looking externally, including to key partners who have offered support in this area, to seek advice, support or capacity for future bids.

5.5. Capacity for improvement

The peer team met a workforce that is committed and views the Council and their colleagues as supportive and who will work together “*to go above and beyond*”. Staff are focused on providing a good service to residents in NWBC and have a strong public sector ethos. This represents a solid foundation for future improvement.

The arrival of new interim directors has brought the opportunity to bring fresh thinking into the organisation. This has brought challenge for improvement to some areas of the business in the updating or implementation of new ideas and is a catalyst for change.

There is a modernisation/digitisation programme across the Council which initially is focused mainly on the update or implementation of IT systems. This includes an Environmental Health System, The Financial Management System (Unit 4), the new Council website, the Planning and Local Land Charges system and a range of 'mini systems'. New technology also brings opportunities to increase access across Council business and allows participation off site for officers and Members, and this can be further exploited. NWBC may want to consider further capacity to deliver this programme as this agenda will underpin the ability of the organisation to be more joined-up, transparent, efficient and smarter in how it operates in the future.

This programme would also benefit from a more clearly articulated and structured programme with timescales and resourcing requirements identified: dedicated project and programme management to deliver clear outcomes, ownership and oversight and clear reporting lines into appropriate member Boards. Due to the oversight and involvement of Members this also needs to consider the capacity of Councillors. Additionally, a clear understanding is needed about terminology to ensure consistent understanding of terms such as transformation, tracked and controlled budget savings (with agreed financial benefits and dates for delivery included) and project proposals. Currently there is no common understanding of these terms across the Council.

The Council holds a Housing Stock of 2,680 properties and these are being actively and well managed. This includes investing £4M in the re-development of flats due to latent defects. NWBC has also recently considered a business case for establishing a commercial housing company in response to some of the housing issues locally and how this would allow it to offer a wider range of affordable housing. Given recent reluctance for registered social Landlords to purchase s106 agreements the housing company could be a viable option to purchase units in the short to medium term, which may be a stop gap solution until the sector has stabilised. Many of the development housing company vehicles are not active at present due to the higher interest rates. NWBC should actively monitor how other councils are reacting.

22

18 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ www.local.gov.uk Telephone 020 7664 3000 Email info@local.gov.uk
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The peer team heard numerous examples of where individual learning is encouraged by managers for their staff. This includes opportunities at degree level as well as other formal courses as well as learning from other councils. Continuing to invest in staff will be important as part of the Council's approach to meet some of the capacity gaps it is facing.

Building on the CPC, the Council should continue to look across local government for best practice, inspiration and development opportunities. Officers and Members can take opportunities to learn from other areas and drive continual improvement at NWBC. The peer team heard how this is happening in some areas of the Council but doing this more systematically would benefit the whole organisation.

Phase 1 of the Council's leisure improvement work

The peer team agree that now is the right time for NWBC to review its leisure assets and consider the next steps. The peer team heard clear and consistent messages that leisure is a priority and about its plans for a new facility at Polesworth and the future provision in Atherstone.

There is strong and knowledgeable senior leadership driving this agenda and the peer team's overall assessment is that there is nothing in NWBC's processes which is incorrect but the timescales for delivery are challenging. In experience there are usually events which hold up plans and the peer team advise NWBC to allow time for this in its schedule and consider the timescales for phase 1.

The process to create a business case and redevelop the leisure facilities appears to be robust and this has been led by two of the Council's senior officers. However, the evidence base can be further expanded to also include detail on use and impact. Very soon the project will require a dedicated project manager to provide some consistent drive and deliver at the pace which the Council demands.

The peer team agree that these changes will also result in some savings but these will not be realised in the short to medium term. This means that the Council is likely to need to undertake some borrowing for the Atherstone investment.


The driver behind this priority would benefit from further communication for clarity. The peer team understand that there is an aspirational driver around improving the health and wellbeing of residents, which ties in well with the new Government's priorities and likely where it will invest, and the other driver is that the assets urgently need some investment and management. Then there is a driver to improve efficiency and operational savings. These are not mutually exclusive but the Council should consider which is the priority as this may impact upon the timescales for delivery and the priorities in the procurement of a leisure partner.

If NWBC is looking at the wider health and wellbeing landscape then there is an opportunity to work more with community organisations and look at building capacity, asset transfer or bringing an increased number of activities into these facilities. Similarly, enhanced working with community organisations could lead to better usage of the Borough's green and open spaces and its charging policy which would bring further opportunities for income to the Council.

The peer team recommend re-engaging with Sport England to minimise risk and slippage as there are a number of models which they can advise NWBC on and would complement the work the Council has engaged consultants on already. The LGA would be pleased to offer advice and support to NWBC in the future too.

6. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. The LGA will continue to provide on-going support to the Council. Following publication of CPC report you need to produce and publish an Action Plan within 5 months of the time on site. As part of the CPC, the Council are also required to have a progress review and publish the findings from this



within twelve months of the CPC. The LGA will also publish the progress review report on their website.

The progress review will provide space for a council's senior leadership to report to peers on the progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations, discuss early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC action plan. The progress review will usually be delivered on-site over one day. The date for the progress review will be confirmed with the Council in due course.

In the meantime, Helen Murray, Principal Adviser for the West Midlands, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Helen (Helen.Murray@local.gov.uk) is available to discuss any further support the council requires.