

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Bath and North East Somerset Council

8th to 11th July 2025

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge

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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 four days at Bath and North East Somerset 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 government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years.

Peers are 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

The council’s elected members and officers are the stewards of a fantastic set of places across Bath and North East Somerset. The organisation is delivering many good things that are making a difference and has examples of excellence in a range of areas. That said, given the council purpose of ‘improving people’s lives’, our sense is that the inequalities that exist locally and the whole geography of Bath and North East Somerset need to feature much more prominently in the council’s thinking, planning, narrative and delivery.



The political leadership style in the council creates an energy and sense of ambition. However, some officers reflected that it is difficult for them to see what matters most and where to apply their focus in a context of the range of ambitions and what is seen to be important but the decreasing level of resources. We see further dialogue being required across the political and managerial leadership to sharpen the focus on priorities. Without this, there is a risk of increasing tensions between ambition and capacity to deliver.

Key to the future is ensuring a consistent, collectively owned and strategic political direction which is focused on outcomes. This would enable officers to have a clearer sense of focus and priorities, which it is important they are then afforded the space to deliver. Underpinning this with an agreed set of performance and outcome measures would enable the council to demonstrate delivery and the difference that is being made.

The council is ambitious to reach more widely and deeply into communities as it seeks to ensure it is listening to a broad cross-section of society and not overlooking what may sometimes be the ‘silent majority’ or risking the ‘loudest voices’ unduly influencing things. This core policy of ‘giving people a bigger say’ is well understood across the organisation and there are a number of examples of good activity around it. A key consideration, however, is recognising that the response received from any given engagement activity may not always be what was anticipated or hoped for. Where that should prove to be the case and the political leadership either changes its mind or demonstrates ‘the courage of its convictions’ and continues as intended, it needs to be clear in its communication around such a decision.

The council is seen by partners to be much more outward looking now and it clearly recognises the importance of engaging widely. The Future Ambitions Board for Bath and North East Somerset comprises a number of very good, willing and ambitious partners and provides a tremendous opportunity for the council. The council and local strategic partners are also now much better positioned with the West of England Combined Authority (WECA). There is major opportunity for Bath and North East

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Somerset in the development of the spatial strategy under WECA and the council needs to ensure it has the necessary expert capacity to capitalise upon this.

The council was shortlisted in 2024 for the 'Most Improved Council' at the Local Government Chronicle awards. More hard work has been taking place since then, as the council seeks to establish key 'foundations' for the future. The core components to support transformation and change in the council are in place and what this has enabled so far is impressive. However, the council recognises the need now to establish a single and council-wide transformation programme and for this to be linked to the medium-term financial strategy. This is crucial if the organisation is to deliver the savings and increased income necessary to address the projected £30m financial gap across the period to 2029/30. Establishing and delivering this transformation programme requires significant 'grip' from the council's senior leadership.

Significant staffing structural change is taking place in the organisation. The amount of change being delivered has been, and continues to be, a major undertaking and the council acknowledges that there is learning to be drawn from the approach adopted. This includes aspects of scoping any given project/programme/initiative, the scale and sequencing of things, capacity and ownership and oversight.

There is 'churn' taking place currently at the senior management level. This, combined with the scale of the challenges and opportunities for the council and the area, present a set of risks that the organisation needs to be mindful of in terms of capacity.

The council's Policy Development and Scrutiny Panels have been delivering good work in certain areas over the last couple of years. There is dialogue between the Chairs of the Panels to co-ordinate activity, Cabinet Members are featuring more prominently at Panel meetings and the Panels themselves are keen to make more of a difference. As part of this, in a context of the Panels currently being slanted more towards the scrutiny than the policy development element of their remit, there is a

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desire to see this being re-balanced. The key consideration around Overview and Scrutiny is how the organisation supports and enables the Panels to play a more fundamental role.

Whilst the councillor induction programme following the elections is viewed positively, there is very little in the way of on-going development of elected members. The challenge is around the identification of need and the stimulation of interest amongst councillors and this remit does not appear to be owned within the organisation.

Informal Cabinet brings Cabinet and the managerial Executive Leadership Team together on a regular basis. There has been investment in development activity at this level and it will be important to continue this given the difficult decisions and challenges the council will face going forward and the strength of relationships and dialogue needed to navigate them.

The way in which Cabinet-level decision-making is slanted more towards individual Cabinet Member decisions than collectively at formal Cabinet meetings was widely commented upon during our discussions. People's perception was that the extent to which this is happening risks impacting a sense of collegiate working and undermining the council's commitment around transparency.

We developed an impression of an insufficiently clear, consistent and shared understanding of the council's decision-making framework across the organisation and this needs to be addressed. For example, it was difficult to determine the remit of elected members – in relation to oversight – of certain key projects.

The organisation has a track record of delivering balanced budgets but there is an underlying pattern of overspends and underspends across different services. Expenditure around Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), home to school transport and children's social care placements is the key financial challenge for the council. Work has been taking place to develop understanding and 'grip' here.

The council has a good track record of delivering savings. The requirement in the current year is to secure £14m of increased income and savings. A further £18.7m needs to be secured in the period across the medium-term to 2029/30. This level of financial challenge requires a robust set of arrangements for the implementation and monitoring of the initiatives to deliver it. This links back to the need to establish a single and council-wide transformation programme and the necessary related leadership 'grip'. The council has a relatively healthy level of reserves, which provides it with opportunities for investment to drive further transformation and improvement.

Staff reflected the friendly and supportive atmosphere that they enjoy with their colleagues. The office environment that has been established through the re-imagining of the civic centre in Keynsham is viewed positively and the flexible working arrangements are highly valued. This forms part of a picture staff outlined of feeling valued and invested in. It was good to hear the examples of people having been enabled to grow and progress within the council.

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

In line with the council purpose of 'improving people's lives', ensure the inequalities and whole geography of Bath and North East Somerset feature much more prominently in the council's thinking, planning, narrative and delivery

3.2 Recommendation 2

Develop an agreed set of performance and outcome measures to demonstrate delivery and the difference that is being made and which reflect a collectively owned and strategic political direction

3.3 Recommendation 3

Develop a shared place-based partnership narrative for use in influencing at the regional and national level

3.4 Recommendation 4

Ensure the council has the necessary expert capacity for Bath and North East Somerset to capitalise upon the opportunities in the development of the spatial strategy under the West of England Combined Authority, including the Bristol/Bath corridor

3.5 Recommendation 5

Establish a comprehensive programme of on-going elected member development

3.6 Recommendation 6

Establish a single and council-wide transformation programme for the council, linked to the medium-term financial strategy, with clear objectives, timescales and governance arrangements, including appropriate elected member oversight

3.7 Recommendation 7

Linked to the above, ensure there is a robust set of arrangements for the implementation and monitoring of the initiatives to address the gap outlined in the medium-term financial strategy

3.8 Recommendation 8

Provide demonstrable leadership around equalities, diversity and inclusion and ensure it is more actively 'lived and breathed' across the organisation

4. Summary of the 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:

- Denise McGuckin, Managing Director, Hartlepool Borough Council
- Councillor Ruth Dombey, London Borough of Sutton (Liberal Democrat)
- Councillor Jim Robbins, Leader, Swindon Borough Council (Labour)
- Gary Fielding, Corporate Director of Resources, North Yorkshire Council
- Stuart Wright, Director of Place Strategy, South Tyneside Council
- Chris Bowron, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

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.

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 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 for Bath and North East Somerset Council. It also included an LGA finance briefing (prepared using public reports from the council's website) and an 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 four days onsite at the council, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 30 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
- Spoke to more than 120 people including a range of council staff together with elected members and external stakeholders

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

5. Feedback

5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

The council's Corporate Strategy runs from 2023 to 2027 and outlines an organisational purpose of 'improving people's lives'. It features two core policies:

- Tackling the climate and ecological emergency
- 'Giving people a bigger say'

The strategy was agreed unanimously at Full Council in July 2023.

The council can be seen to be making a difference in a variety of ways in line with the ambitions of the Corporate Strategy. With climate and nature as a very clear focus and commitment, the council has delivered a reduction in the organisation's greenhouse gas emissions of 36 per cent in the period from 2016/17 to 2023/24. It has also led a 43 per cent reduction in such emissions across the whole area of Bath and North East Somerset in the period from 2005 to 2022. More than 300 electric vehicle charging points have been installed in the area; rewilding and nature recovery projects have been delivered; enhanced recycling facilities have been developed in various places; and climate literacy training is being undertaken across the council.

More than 5,000 homes in the area have been retrofitted and the council is setting high standards for housing development in relation to energy efficiency, climate resilience and biodiversity net gain. Further investment has been agreed to enhance the council's 'clean and green' street-scene activity and to decarbonise the council's vehicle fleet. The council does acknowledge, though, that it is not going to achieve the Net Zero goal set for the district for 2030.

The council is playing a key place-shaping role, for example through the Bath Quays commercial quarter redevelopment, and has been instrumental in the establishment of the net zero Somer Valley Enterprise Zone. Also, the council wholly owns three companies as part of Aequus Group Holdings Ltd, with these having been set up to deliver sustainable housing. Thus far, 95 apartments have been built and sold in Keynsham, along with seven social-rented apartments at Newbridge Hill in Bath plus other developments underway at Argyle Works and in Frenchay.

The Community Wellbeing Hub is a wide-ranging collaboration involving nearly 40 partner organisations and was born out of the pandemic. Thus far it has assisted more than 15,000 local people. At the heart of it is the leading edge sharing of data and information across different agencies and this element was integral in the project being highly commended in the Municipal Journal Awards 2025 in the 'Innovation in Public Private Partnerships' category.

The evidence base around the socio-economic benefits being secured through the Hub are starting to emerge and enhancing and understanding this data will be important in strengthening the approach to addressing inequalities across Bath and North East Somerset. Importantly, whilst the council is 'holding the ring' on the Hub initiative, in terms of providing the co-ordinating support, there is a sense of its potential not yet being recognised or bought into by the maximum possible range of council functions. There is seen to be significant scope, for example, for Public Health, Children's Services and Housing to play a much stronger role – with this being just one example of where there needs to be a greater willingness in the organisation to undertake 'difficult conversations'.

The council has been instrumental in facilitating the creation of a significant number of apprenticeships, both through local employer partnerships and as an employer itself, with around 100 apprentices now established within the council – reflective of its organisational purpose of 'improving people's lives'.

What is being achieved by the council is being done through talented people. It can be enhanced through the development of greater 'grip', increased join-up across the organisation and approaches being made more systematic, all of which we 'unpack' through the rest of this report.

The council's elected members and officers are the stewards of a fantastic set of places across Bath and North East Somerset. It covers a varied area, including the UNESCO World Heritage City of Bath; the market towns of Keynsham and Midsomer Norton; and a range of rural communities, including 50 parishes. It also includes two designated areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – the Cotswolds and the Mendip Hills. The area attracts over 6 million visitors per annum. The local population has increased by ten per cent in the last decade, to around 196,000, with the rise mainly being attributable to the growth in the student population. Around half of the population live in the urban centre of Bath.

People described a council that is 'data rich' but which is not yet translating that sufficiently at the corporate level into insight and intelligence. Enhancing the council's capability in this area is particularly important in a context of understanding and leading the response to the inequalities that exist in Bath and North East Somerset. These inequalities include the variation in educational attainment across the area and the challenges faced by some rural communities around transport links, digital connectivity and access to services. Also, whilst the overall local authority area is ranked 269th out of 317 in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (indicating it is relatively un-deprived), some parts such as Twerton and Whiteway, which are both in Bath, are amongst the 10 per cent most deprived council wards nationally. Enhancing the council's insight and intelligence capacity will be important in helping to fulfil the organisation's ambitions around evidence-based decision-making.

Our sense, looking at the above two elements and given the council purpose of 'improving people's lives', is that the inequalities and whole geography of Bath and North East Somerset need to feature much more prominently in the council's thinking, planning, narrative and delivery.

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Performance reporting at the strategic level to elected members and publicly is in a state of flux currently. Efforts have been made at certain points since the elections in 2023 to determine a reporting format and set of performance indicators that reflect what is most important to the Administration. The most recent aspect of this was the drawing up by Cabinet members, in consultation with the wider Administration, of a list of 'Category A' priorities and performance measures. Elements of this ranged from the political imperative of the redevelopment of the Fashion Museum to the detailed, such as the frequency of litter picking on the streets in Bath and ensuring urban street weeds are kept under control without chemicals.

The political leadership style in the council creates an energy and sense of ambition. However, some officers reflected that it is difficult for them to see what matters most and where to apply their focus in a context of the range of ambitions and what is seen to be important but the decreasing level of resources. We see further dialogue being required across the political and managerial leadership to sharpen the focus on priorities. Without this, there is a risk of increasing tensions between ambition and capacity to deliver.

Key to the future is ensuring a consistent, collectively owned and strategic political direction which is focused on outcomes and linked to the purpose of improving the lives of people right across the different communities of Bath and North East Somerset. This would enable officers to have a clearer sense of focus and priorities, which it is important they are then afforded the space to deliver. Underpinning this with an agreed set of performance and outcome measures would enable the council to demonstrate delivery and the difference that is being made. The desire that exists corporately to enhance the use of comparative data in the council's performance reporting is positive and would enable the organisation to be measured against similar councils, providing a key source of learning and informing decision-making.

The core policy of 'giving people a bigger say' is well understood across the organisation. There are a number of examples of good activity around this, including



the Parishes Liaison forum, Area Forums, the work of the Economic Development team and a variety of specific consultations. The ambition is also informing wider dimensions of council policy and ways of working, including the development of a Carers Strategy to ensure their priorities and requirements are better understood by the organisation and a forum that has been established for providers of adult social care services aimed at enhancing the way the council works with them and strengthening the market in this sphere.

The council is ambitious to reach more widely and deeply into communities as it seeks to ensure it is listening to a broad cross-section of society and not overlooking what may sometimes be the ‘silent majority’ or risking the ‘loudest voices’ unduly influencing things. A prime example of this ambition relates to consultation and engagement around the revised Local Plan. The Plan is being developed in a context of a growing demand for affordable housing and the housing target for the area having been doubled. The council’s commitment is to engage 10 per cent of the local population in the Local Plan process, ensuring that this comprises a statistically valid cross-section of the broad demography of Bath and North East Somerset.

With the council’s ambitions around engaging more widely, it will be helpful for the organisation to be aware that some of the partners that we spoke to, whom already have strong links into communities, are willing to play a role in enabling this. Thus, the council does not necessarily need to undertake engagement directly itself.

There are a number of considerations that are emerging around ‘giving people a bigger say’. This includes the opportunity to develop organisational understanding of the range of different approaches that can be adopted to reflect the objective of any particular ‘engagement’. This range is encompassed by Arnstein’s ‘Ladder of Citizen Participation’ model. A second consideration is that of recognising, particularly politically, that the response received from engagement activity may not always be what was anticipated or hoped for. Where that should prove to be the case and the political leadership either changes its mind or demonstrates ‘the courage of its convictions’ and continues as intended, it needs to be clear in its communication

around such a decision. Examples of where communication could have been clearer are the move not to continue with the Bath Area Forum and not changing course in the face of opposition to proposed changes to commercial waste collection in the city.

With 'giving people a bigger say' being a complex agenda, it could usefully form a key strand of the communications peer review that the council has commissioned from the LGA and which is scheduled for October this year.

5.1.1 Performance

Looking at the 'LG Inform' data and performance information system which the LGA hosts on behalf of the sector, the following can be seen for Bath and North East Somerset when comparing it with the other councils in its CIPFA 'family' grouping of similar authorities, using the most recently available data:

Where Bath and North East Somerset is amongst the better performers:

- Average Attainment 8 score
- The proportion of the population aged 16 to 64 qualified to at least Level 2
- Children looked after rate
- Care leavers in suitable accommodation
- Care leavers in education, employment or training
- Social care-related quality of life
- Overall satisfaction of people who use services with their care and support
- The time taken to process housing benefit new claims and change events
- The number of households living in temporary accommodation per 1,000 households
- The amount of residual waste per household
- The percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting
- The percentage of adults classified as overweight or obese
- The percentage of children in year 6 who are obese
- The percentage of children in reception year who are obese

Where Bath and North East Somerset is less high performing:

- The percentage of non-domestic rates collected as a percentage of non-domestic rates due
- The percentage of children protection cases which were reviewed within required timescales
- Percentage of children becoming the subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time
- The number of affordable homes delivered
- Processing of planning applications – minor
- Processing of planning applications – other
- Smoking prevalence in adults
- Percentage of people that received an NHS Health Check of those offered

Where performance in Bath and North East Somerset is around the average:

- The percentage of council tax collected as a percentage of council tax due
- Proportion of 16 and 17 year olds who were not in education, employment or training
- The percentage of vacant dwellings as a percentage of all dwellings in the area
- The number of households on the housing waiting list
- Processing of planning applications – major
- The percentage of adults who are active (150+ minutes per week)

The following is a link to the latest information for the council in the LG Inform system:

[Headline Report for Bath & North East Somerset Council - Bar Chart View | LG Inform](#)

5.2 Organisational and place leadership

The council is seen by partners to be much more outward looking now and it clearly recognises the importance of engaging widely. One example is being influential in the 'Key Cities' forum, with the Leader as its Vice-Chair and the Deputy Leader being the Portfolio Holder for the Climate Emergency. Another example is the way in which it is continuing to invest in the relationships formed through the Western Gateway following the formal body having been disbanded in April this year. It was established as a strategic partnership spanning South Wales and Western England and aimed at boosting productivity and driving inclusive economic growth. The relationships across the councils that formed it continue to have value.

The council has also dedicated the time and effort to reinvigorate partnerships at the strategic level more locally. The Future Ambitions Board for Bath and North East Somerset, comprising the leaders of key 'anchor institutions' in the area, provides a tremendous opportunity for the council. It comprises a number of very good, willing and ambitious partners. An Economic Strategy for the area has been developed through the Board. This includes a vision for the area into the future and there is seen to be benefit in now also developing a shared place-based partnership narrative for use in influencing at the regional and national level – essentially an 'elevator pitch' for the area.

The council and local strategic partners are now much better positioned with the West of England Combined Authority (WECA). There is major opportunity for Bath and North East Somerset in the development of the spatial strategy under WECA, including the enhancement of transport links along the A4 Bristol to Bath corridor. The council needs to ensure it has the necessary expert capacity to capitalise upon this opportunity.


Strategic partners in the locality highlighted the need for strong political leadership around some of the key challenges in the area. This includes resolving the long-running Planning issue in relation to the rugby stadium in the city; the fostering of

increased business 'start-up' space in the locality; and the facilitation of both more student accommodation and more affordable housing. These latter elements of housing and 'start-up' space are seen as crucial in the ambition for the area to retain a higher proportion of students when they graduate.

The council was shortlisted in 2024 for the 'Most Improved Council' at the Local Government Chronicle awards. This was a reflection in large part of the investment made in the re-imagining of the civic centre in Keynsham, where the majority of council staff are based, and efforts that have gone into enhancing the 'customer experience'. More hard work has been taking place since then, as the council seeks to establish a number of key 'foundations' for the future. This includes a fundamental review of pay and grading in the organisation; the establishment of a new customer relationship management (CRM); updated telephony systems; and the introduction of 'Power BI' software to the council.

The core components to support transformation and change in the council are in place. This includes the Business Change Hub and the Digital and Customer Service function. These are delivering impressive activity with, and in support of, the wider organisation, including the work around CRM and service re-design and improvement in spheres such as highways; the corporate landlord function; council tax collection; children's social care; special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); and home to school transport.

The changes and improvements that have been secured and the ways of working that have been demonstrated in delivering this range of transformation and change activity are impressive. However, the council recognises the need now to establish a single and council-wide transformation programme and for this to be linked to the medium-term financial strategy. This is crucial if the organisation is to deliver the savings and increased income necessary to address the projected £30m financial gap across the period to 2029/30.



Establishing and delivering this transformation programme requires significant ‘grip’ from the council’s senior leadership. This includes clear objectives, timescales and accountabilities and robust governance arrangements, crucially including appropriate elected member oversight. There is a model to follow, in terms of programme management, governance and the way things were undertaken generally, in the form of the recent major project to return adult social care to direct council delivery.

Significant staffing structural change has already taken place in the organisation, with a new managerial leadership set-up introduced in 2021 and, in 2023, the commencement of the ‘Being Our Best’ (BOB) programme. It is through BOB that the pay and grading review has been undertaken but the programme has wider dimensions around workforce culture, behaviours and structures. This has seen the revision of structures and ‘spans of control’ down to Head of Service level. This is now being followed by 50 service reorganisations, led by those Heads of Service.

The amount of change being delivered has been, and continues to be, a major undertaking and the council acknowledges that there is learning to be drawn from the approach adopted. This includes aspects of scoping a project/programme/initiative, with the ‘why’ of aspects of what the council embarks upon not always being clear, whether in their design or communication. Other learning includes the scale and sequencing of things, capacity and ownership and oversight.

Heads of Service that we met emphasised the importance, during the period of change and uncertainty that remains for many staff as the service reorganisations are conducted, of the organisation being empathetic and recognising the impacts of this on people.

More structural change is almost inevitable in the coming months, in a context of the ‘churn’ taking place currently at the senior management level. The council is currently recruiting a Director of Children’s Services following retirement; the Chief Operating Officer is leaving in August to head up North Somerset Council; and the Chief Executive recently announced his retirement, which will take full effect in early 2026.

Whoever is appointed to these senior leadership roles will be likely to want to consider the organisational arrangements and structures that are in place under them. In the view of the peer team, this might usefully include consideration of the status of the statutory officer functions in the council.

Staff that we spoke to described an organisation that demonstrates siloed ways of working still and one that is 'tricky to navigate'. They reflected that it is difficult to identify who to speak to on any given issue and would welcome the creation of more 'user-friendly' and accessible means to help them 'find' their way around, with frustration over the online people directory available on the Intranet. A 'Values Week' was held recently for staff, during which everybody was invited (and expected) to attend sessions helping to explore, on a cross-organisational basis, the values established in the council. Given human nature, this activity has inevitably been experienced by different people in different ways, with varying levels of commitment and enjoyment around it. What is clear, however, is the widespread recognition that has emerged of the benefit of bringing people together from across the organisation – irrespective of the purpose – and breaking down barriers. Many of the staff we spoke to would be keen to see this being built upon.

5.3 Governance and culture

Generally good relationships are felt to exist across the elected membership and between elected members and officers throughout the organisation. Elected members feel well supported by the Democratic Services function, both in relation to the administering of council meetings and the provision of general advice, guidance and signposting linked to their roles. There is, however, a 'patchiness' across the council more generally in terms of the level of responsiveness to ward member casework. The way such casework is brought forward is many and varied and there may be merit in the council looking at developing a more systematic approach, in order to help track the progress of cases and enhance organisational learning through the identification of patterns and trends. This would also help to identify those areas of the council where there needs to be a push around responding more


effectively to councillors.

The council's Policy Development and Scrutiny Panels have been delivering good work in certain areas over the last couple of years. Examples include shaping the enhancement of the recycling facility in Keynsham; constructively challenging the council's thinking in relation to revisions to community services funding, impacting the voluntary and community sector; approaches to tackling knife crime; support for local food growing; and the consideration of the approach locally to the 'School Streets' initiative.

There is dialogue between the Chairs of the Panels to co-ordinate activity, Cabinet Members are featuring more prominently at Panel meetings and the Panels themselves are keen to make more of a difference. As part of this, in a context of the Panels currently being slanted more towards the scrutiny than the policy development element of their remit, there is a desire to see this being re-balanced.

The key consideration around Overview and Scrutiny is how the organisation supports and enables the Panels to play a more fundamental role. The sense currently is that there is very limited officer support at the policy and research level and that this element of the council's governance arrangements is not seen as a particular priority.

Whilst the councillor induction programme following the elections was viewed positively, there is very little in the way of on-going development of elected members. Responsibility for this area seems to sit with HR. Whilst this function can take a lead on the organising of training and development activity, the challenge is around the identification of need and the stimulation of interest amongst councillors. This remit does not appear to be owned. Nor does there seem to be much appetite corporately around investment in councillor development, although we understand that there has been some participation in LGA Leadership Academy activity.



The consequence of the current approach is that, although elected members are provided with enough insight at the induction to ‘keep them safe’ and fulfil what is required to sit on quasi-judicial committees such as Planning, there is little ambition around councillors developing in their roles and ensuring they are fulfilling them to full effect. As an example, we understand there is an absence of corporate parenting training for councillors, which risks councillors not being fully aware of the responsibilities and opportunities that exist in this domain. This gap contrasts with the drive that the council has demonstrated in establishing ‘care experience’ as a protected characteristic; creating apprenticeship opportunities for care leavers; and delivering well in relation to care leavers being in suitable accommodation and in education, employment or training. The LGA can provide support to the organisation in seeking to enhance its approach to elected member development.

Informal Cabinet brings Cabinet and the managerial Executive Leadership Team together on a regular basis to consider collectively both the agenda for forthcoming Cabinet meetings and key strategic issues facing the council and the area. There has also been investment in development activity at this level, both separately with each of the two cohorts and jointly. This engagement has been very practically based, looking at learning that can be drawn from activity the council has undertaken. It will be important to continue development activity at this level given the difficult decisions and challenges the council will face going forward and the strength of relationships and dialogue needed to navigate them.

The way in which Cabinet-level decision-making is slanted more towards individual Cabinet Member decisions than collectively at formal Cabinet meetings was widely commented upon during our discussions. People’s perception was that the extent to which this is happening risks impacting a sense of collegiate working and undermining the council’s commitment (and indeed organisational Value) around transparency.

Whilst the concept of ‘Policy Leads’ linked to Cabinet is valuable in developing individuals, there needs to be mindfulness of the way this increases capacity

demands on the organisation. This comes in the form of increased briefing and liaison requirements of senior officers, with them potentially having up to six individuals linked to Cabinet who they need to keep appraised or take some form of direction from.

The above two elements link back to what we highlighted earlier in terms of the need to ensure a consistent, collectively owned and strategic political direction.

There is regular dialogue across the statutory officer posts of Head of Paid Service, Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer. Despite this, we developed an impression of an insufficiently clear, consistent and shared understanding of the council's decision-making framework across the organisation, including at senior levels. As an example, there appeared to be a lack of clarity on the part of some around the process and timescales for submitting reports for consideration and sign-off by statutory officers. As another example, it was difficult to determine the remit of elected members – in relation to oversight – of some key projects, including aspects of transformation and the 'Being Our Best' programme.

5.4 Financial planning and management

The council's net revenue budget for the current financial year is just under £152m. The organisation has a track record of delivering balanced budgets but there is an underlying pattern of overspends and underspends across different services, with some of these happening in the same budget areas as in previous years. The primary examples are overspending in Children's Services and underspending in Resources (which includes borrowing costs), with both being several million pounds in scale.

Expenditure around SEND, home to school transport and children's social care placements is the key financial challenge for the council. Work has been taking place to develop understanding and 'grip' here and additional senior officer capacity and

skills have been provided, at Assistant Director level, in recognition of the complexities and the need to develop more detailed delivery plans.

The council has a good track record of delivering savings, with the final forecast for 2024/25 being the achievement of £12.7m of the £16.4m (around 77 per cent) aspired to. A key aspect of the savings not achieved here relates to those to be derived from management and operating structural revisions which have not yet been feasible to undertake due to the pay and grading review becoming more drawn out than was anticipated. The requirement in the current year is to secure £14m of increased income and savings, which would represent the largest quantum achieved so far by the organisation in any given year. A further £18.7m needs to be secured in the period across the medium-term from 2026/27 to 2029/30.

This level of financial challenge requires a robust set of arrangements for the implementation and monitoring of the initiatives to deliver it. This links back to the council recognising the need now to establish a single and council-wide transformation programme and the significant ‘grip’ around this that is required from the council’s senior leadership, including appropriate elected member oversight.

The council has a relatively healthy level of reserves (based on the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy – CIPFA – ‘Reserves Sustainability Measure’ for 2023/24 when looking at the ‘family group’ of similar councils), which provides it with opportunities for investment to drive further transformation and improvement.

Underspends have been seen in the council’s capital programme, amounting to £19m in 2023/24 and £43m in 2024/25. This has been in such areas as Highways, Resources, Economy and Culture and Children’s Services. There is an acknowledgement within the council of a tendency towards a ‘delivery optimism bias’ around capital spending, albeit this is not unique to Bath and North East Somerset.

The council has a significant investment property portfolio of £242m which delivers key income through commercial lets within Bath and North East Somerset. Whilst this does not pose a significant financial risk to the council by way of asset value, it does present a risk in the event of any major downturn in the economy impacting upon the retail and hospitality sectors. The council is cognisant of the risks to its future financial position posed by the Fair Funding Review and the Business Rates Retention System reset.

5.5 Capacity for improvement

Staff whom we met from various levels of the organisation reflected the friendly and supportive atmosphere that they enjoy with their colleagues. The office environment that has been established through the re-imagining of the civic centre in Keynsham is viewed positively and the flexible working arrangements, with the common-sense approach applied to it by managers and teams, are highly valued.

This forms part of a picture staff outlined of feeling valued and invested in, which has been boosted by the recent introduction of the staff recognition event. Another aspect of this picture is the good provision of opportunities for training and development. It was good to hear the examples of people having been enabled to grow and progress within the council. This hasn't been universal or systematic, however, and a desire was expressed to ensure the council invests in the identification and progression of talented people from across the board.


The management and leadership development programme recently made available at Team Leader level has gone down well, with this due to be expanded to other management levels in due course. Loosely linked to this, there is a desire amongst the Heads of Service for their continued development, including enabling them to come together both as a cohort and with the senior managerial leadership to enhance shared understanding and jointly problem-solve.

The 'business partner' model in place in the organisation is highly valued, particularly in relation to finance support for managers. As expectations on managers and staff around 'self-serve' increase, they have a desire for the organisation to ensure they receive sufficient corporate support in the transition, particularly around IT systems and corporate processes. Linked to this, the organisation tackling bureaucratic frustrations and ensuring the refreshed Intranet is an enabler would be welcomed. As an example, we heard anecdotes of people submitting forms to areas such as HR and finance and being informed that the document they had sourced from the Intranet was several years out of date.

A range of staff networks, including a women's network, LGBTQ+ network, access and inclusion network and care experience network, have been established and are playing an increasingly important role. Whilst key individuals, including the Leader and Chief Executive, hold championing roles around equalities, diversity and inclusion, this agenda would benefit from more demonstrable leadership and needs to become more actively 'lived and breathed' across the organisation. This is important in a context of the need to address the inequalities that exist across Bath and North East Somerset and in ensuring that the breadth of staff insights and experiences are fully factored into service planning and the way the organisation operates. This links back to what we highlighted earlier in relation to ensuring the inequalities and whole geography of Bath and North East Somerset feature much more prominently in the council's thinking, planning, narrative and delivery.

The council is committed to carrying out a staff survey later this year and it is important that this is delivered and the findings shared. This should then become a regular undertaking to enable benchmarking to happen and patterns and trends to be identified and responded to.

The 'BEST' Values of the organisation – Bold, Empowered, Supportive and Transparent – have a high profile and are widely recognised and understood. However, there is challenge being provided from staff around them needing to be lived and breathed and consistently adhered to. They want to be part of an



organisation that is bold in its addressing of the challenges facing Bath and North East Somerset – including the inequalities; capitalises fully upon their talents by empowering them and more systematically managing the investment in their development and growth; is supportive of the large body of staff who will continue to experience significant amounts of uncertainty and change in the coming months; and maximises transparency in its decision-making and governance arrangements.

6. Next steps

It is recognised that the council's 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. 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 the 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 a day and a half.

In the meantime, Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for your region, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. He is available to discuss any further support the council requires and can be contacted via paul.clarke@local.gov.uk