

# Corporate Peer Challenge Slough Borough Council

*5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> February 2019*

Feedback Report

## **1. Executive Summary**

The Borough of Slough is a vibrant, economically successful borough on the cusp of major regeneration. The borough covers a small geographic area and has a highly diverse population. The borough is already incredibly well connected to London and connectivity is set to improve further with new cross London and Heathrow airport rail links. Slough is a place that people from all over the world have come to and made their home. Slough's councillors, employees and residents are rightly proud of their borough and its ability to weather change.

The council has recently faced significant political and senior officer instability and is now benefitting from a new chief executive, stable Corporate Management Team, and experienced political leadership. In addition to this instability there have been performance issues within children's services and their resultant move into a separate, arm's length children's trust. Children's services have now moved from an 'Inadequate' Ofsted rating to 'Requires Improvement to be good'. There is now significant political will and officer expertise working to ensure that children in Slough are safe and can prosper. The impact in the council of the new chief executive is already very positive and her calm and thoughtful leadership approach will play a major role in guiding the organisation towards a stable future.

The improvements in children's services, progress in town centre regeneration and increased stability are all clear indicators that Slough is moving from a difficult period towards one where the council's ambitions can be realised for the benefit of all Slough's residents.

The peer team found an organisation that is learning to move away from a time of crisis towards delivering an exciting new future for the borough. This journey will need a much deeper commitment to the principles of good governance and a clear roadmap of how the council will deliver this to ensure that the highest ethical standards are at the heart of every decision taken.

## **4. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach**

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement-focused and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement plans. The peers used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting this report the peer challenge team has done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit 5-8 February 2019. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time.

Peers reviewed a range of information to ensure we were familiar with the Council, the challenges it is facing and its plans for the future. We have spent 4 days onsite during which we have:

- Spoken to more than 90 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders
- Gathered information and views from more than 36 meetings, visits to key sites and additional research and reading
- Collectively spent more than 250 hours to determine our findings – the equivalent of one person spending almost 6 ½ weeks in Slough

Feedback was provided to an invited audience of staff and councillors on day four of our visit and this report will be accompanied with the offer of bespoke follow up. Some of the feedback may be about issues you are already addressing and progressing.

## **The peer team**

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

- Jan Britton, Chief Executive, Sandwell MBC
- Cllr Clare Coghill, Leader LB Waltham Forest
- Jacqui Old, Director of Adults and Children's Services North Tyneside BC
- Polly Cziok, Director of Communications and Engagement, LB Hackney
- Simon Machen, Corporate Director Growth, Peterborough BC
- Mark Nicholson, Assistant Director Finance, Newcastle City Council
- Lusi Manukyan, Adviser, Local Government Association
- Clare Hudson, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

## **Scope and focus**

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges. These are the areas we believe are critical to councils' performance and improvement:

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Financial planning and viability: Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
3. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

4. Political and managerial leadership: Does the council provide effective political and managerial leadership through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
5. Governance and decision-making: Is political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change to be implemented?

### **3. Key recommendations**

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report in addition to issues raised in the conversations onsite. The following are the peer team's key recommendations:

- Establish a stronger sense of where you want to get to – your vision
- Develop and deliver this vision which identifies what the future looks like for all parts of the community – for place and for people
- Consider and articulate what a 21st Century Council will look like for Slough to build unity around a common purpose
- Establish a more fundamental equilibrium between the council's ambition for people and place, and communicate this
- Progress the emerging transformation agenda and invest more time in rooting this in culture change
- Develop your governance from 'basic control' to good

Further recommendations can be found throughout the various sections of the report and a summary of recommendations is located towards the end of this report.

## **5. Feedback on the core themes of peer challenge**

### **5.1 Leadership of Place**

The political and officer leadership speak fluently about the future for Slough. Councillors are heavily engaged in the town centre regeneration and work closely with partners and officers to shape this. The local economy in Slough has in many ways bucked the national trend and growth has been consistently high, inward investment significant and population growth above average. There is a sense of the borough being a 'boom town' with a thriving economy and impressive and improving connectivity. The scale of growth already planned for is extensive and there is a prospect of growth reaching further heights if the council and partners can agree a future vision and build it.

In delivering its future vision the council needs to position itself as being the shaper of the future, otherwise there is a risk of being shaped by it. This is evident in the potential tensions that economic growth is already presenting in housing affordability and the resultant rise in homelessness presentations. Equally there is an almost universal recognition of the problems facing the borough of transport congestion. The council has an emerging transport strategy to tackle congestion and the council will need to be clear about how this will be funded.

The town centre regeneration plans presented to the peer team were impressive and potentially transformational. The council has already made significant investment in the town centre and there are signs of improvements to the public realm, however there is a risk that the council's focus on major regeneration programmes means that more immediate needs for smaller scale improvements in the public realm are not prioritised. There is an opportunity to continue to make swift public realm improvements to bring together the existing pockets of town centre regeneration in the short term.

The council must act now to bring together an overarching vision for the different neighbourhoods of the borough – linking this to the major town centre regeneration. This vision will set the guiding principles under which the strategies for delivery will sit. Investing in developing this vision now will give the council and its partners the chance to give more thought to what makes Slough unique. There are already many community organisations that are well placed to facilitate this and help the council's existing vision for housing and economic growth move to a vision of inclusive growth providing excellent services for all.

This vision can marry the existing focus on establishing iconic new buildings and improved connectivity with public realm improvements and agree with residents and partners what an inclusive growth vision will deliver for all. In doing this the council must make more sustained effort to engage with partners locally, and within the national and regional context. Everyone the peer team spoke recognised that the borough needs to overcome a negative perception of the town, and it is now the council's responsibility to be more outward looking, tell Slough's story and also learn from elsewhere. Where the council has shown placed based leadership, particularly in regard to the health and social care and the Integrated Care System and Wellbeing Board, this has been effective and well received. The council needs to maintain and extend this approach and establish a better equilibrium in how it will deliver excellent services for people and place.

## **Recommendations**

- Spend more time with residents and partners to collectively understand what makes Slough unique
- Consider creating two high level strategic forums – one for people and one for place that the Leader and Chief Executive convene to bring together major stakeholders. This could unify resources and harness strategic efforts throughout Slough's partnerships.
- Develop an overarching vision for inclusive growth encompassing all neighbourhoods – for people and place
- Continue to invest in public realm improvements to improve the town centre

- Keep up and extend the efforts to engage in place leadership to ensure Slough maximises the benefits of sub regional, regional and national engagement

## **5.2 Priority setting**

The council uses tried and tested mechanisms for priority setting and reports regularly on its progress through internal fora. The council uses data and evidence to inform its thinking, but the council could do more to move towards using insight to design services, manage demand and anticipate future need. There are early moves towards using insight to inform decision making but this needs a greater clarity of purpose in order to gain traction and become part of the day to day approach of decision making. This should be married with more sustained community engagement to involve the community in its overarching vision and priority setting. The emerging transformation programme includes steps to increase the use of insight, but the council needs to be careful about 'not putting the cart before the horse' – insight should guide the transformation programme, not be the result of it.

There is a solid understanding of place notable in leading members but there needs to be a greater coherence in how this understanding contributes to corporate priority setting. The council updates its corporate plan regularly, but it was not visible to the peer team to what extent this is co-produced with the community and partners and truly determines the delivery of priorities.

There is widespread recognition of the council's role in safeguarding the most vulnerable and building resilience in its communities. The term 'narrowing the gap' is frequently used, but it is not clear what the council is doing across *all* service areas to make this a reality. The peer team was impressed with the scale of integration with local health partners and the clear commitment to deepen this further to benefit the residents of Slough. The Wellbeing Board is highly regarded with strong partner buy-in and appears to be solidly progressing this agenda. The council is well placed to build on this within its Integrated Care System and should consider how the depth of partnership working in health could be extended to other key areas. The concept of health system leadership is recognised as necessary by the council and members and officers now need to consider how they can collaboratively lead this into the future.

The council participates in a wide number of partnership arrangements and meetings. The peer team counted at least forty different partnership arrangements that the council continues to participate in. The council should assess these partnerships and their role within them and consider focusing their resources where they can have most impact on both people and place. This would free up councillor and officer time to develop the roadmap for the council towards good governance and from there decisions can be taken about the future partnerships the council should focus its resources on.

In doing this the council should consider what further role there could be for the voluntary and community sector in working with the council to build resilient and thriving communities. The peer team heard of many instances of flourishing community groups that could be well placed to help ensure that growth planned for the borough can benefit all parts of the community. The capacity of the voluntary and community sector is not

uniform across the borough and the council should undertake a mapping exercise with a view to building capacity in those under-served areas and ensure that it does not allow local priority setting to be defined by those with the most active voices. This will be critical as the council works towards establishing a better equilibrium in how it will deliver excellent services for people and place.

The council is aware of and openly discussing the potential challenges that Brexit and any potential economic shock could pose for growth and income. The Corporate Management Team has appropriate mechanisms in place to understand and mitigate the potential risks to the council.

## **Recommendations**

- Undertake a mapping exercise to understand voluntary and community sector capacity
- Analyse the impact of partnership working and allocate resources against council priorities
- Seek to improve and deepen effective external partnerships
- Invest in further exploring the human richness of Slough and how the community, partners and the council can collectively deliver thriving communities
- Consider greater use of customer insight to determine priorities and design services
- Continue to progress collaboration building on the experiences of the local health system including further strengthening joint commissioning and provision of integrated care. There is scope for better integration of GP, community health, mental health and hospital services as well as home care and care homes through increasing partnerships of care providers and commissioners.

## **5.3 Financial Planning and Viability**

Slough benefits from significant land and property assets which have been effectively leveraged to generate sustained financial returns and have plans for these to contribute further to the council's budget position. The joint venture with Morgan Sindall, Slough Urban Renewal, has realised financial returns through regeneration utilising capital receipts (benefitting from buoyant land values), interest on loans and development profits. The council has previously used the financial returns received from the joint venture to fund revenue expenditure but is now phasing this out.

The council's capital programme is ambitious and will require tight monitoring. Within the planned capital programme the council is planning to borrow further to invest in commercial property to provide income to support its revenue account. This is an integral element of the council's financial strategy and the council should consistently and clearly articulate the risks that it may be exposed to because of this strategy – and what measures it is taking to mitigate those risks.

The council has made extensive use of prudential borrowing, particularly short term borrowing. Whilst this approach to borrowing minimises short term interest payments at a time when borrowing costs are low it does need to be carefully managed. Currently 44% of the council's borrowing is due to mature within one year and this potentially

increases the longer term financial risk the council faces. Given the uncertainty the economy is experiencing the council will want to regularly review whether this is the most prudent approach and should report regularly on their borrowing policy through appropriate governance channels.

The council maintains its own housing stock and is building more council owned properties as well as working closely with registered providers and arm's length management organisations. The council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) had a balance of £17.8m as at 31 March 2018 and appears to be well managed.

The council also needs to actively manage its financial contractual relationship with the Slough Children's Services Trust to ensure that there is clarity within the contract over the treatment of any future overspends and loan arrangements. The contract with the Trust is set to end in 2021 and the council is already taking steps to discuss the future of the service with the Trust, and other partners.

The council has measures in place to ensure strategic oversight of finance. The Strategic Finance Board meets regularly and has the potential to become a corporate vehicle that can provide a strong grip on budget delivery going forward. The Board operates a Red/Amber/Green rating of savings proposals and is well placed to undertake robust monitoring of delivery and implementation.

The council's finance function, like all service areas, must balance competing demands on its resources. The delay to statutory accounts being published three years in a row has meant that the function has had to focus significant resources on remedying this. The peer team heard that measures are now in place to ensure that accounts are processed more quickly and there is no anticipation of this occurring again. However, the function's resources will need to be carefully managed to deliver more timely year-end accounts as well as supporting the council through a period of transformation.

The council has an identified savings plan to deliver £7m of savings within the current financial year. At the time of writing there was a potential overspend emerging as £4.8m of savings had yet to be delivered according to quarter three monitoring. The Council is expecting to receive one-off income in the current year that would allow it to deliver a balanced budget by the end of the financial year, and the peer team are confident that the council can do this. The council is facing a significant cumulative deficit (estimated at £7.1m by the end of the current financial year) in its Dedicated Schools Grant high needs expenditure. This is not uncommon. The council is reporting on this and now needs to develop and report a plan for reducing the deficit.

Going forward further savings of approximately £20.3m are identified for the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) period, namely £12.4m in 2019/20, £4.9m in 2020/21 and £3.0m in 2021/22. However the peer team had some concerns that savings in years two and three of the MTFS may be understated. The council's 2019-20 budget savings include £3m from increased recharges to the HRA and capital projects. This is a significant figure and the peer team would question whether this is sustainable in the longer term. The council is also aiming to increase income from commercial property and has recently undertaken significant investment in commercial property assets. Although appropriate due diligence will have been undertaken the council needs to be

aware of the increased risk profile it now faces as a result of its increased reliance on commercial property income.

The council is planning for further savings and is taking a strategic approach to this by allowing for a 10% contingency for savings delivery. This is prudent given the fluctuating impact of demand and potential economic shocks. The peer team would also suggest that the potential pressures that could impact on demand led services are more fully accommodated into the MTFS, notably temporary accommodation, adult social care and children's services.

The council is set to benefit from the continuation of the Berkshire business rates pilot which will provide additional income of at least £1m in 19-20. The relatively high proportion of non-retail assets in the borough affords the council greater resilience in the business rates baseline meaning they are less exposed to retail sector downturn than other boroughs. The borough is also set to benefit from high levels of council tax base growth, which combined with the other income streams for the council, offer a solid basis for financial sustainability.

Slough has the potential to maintain financial stability, but this will be dependent on its ability to actively manage the financial risks to which it is exposed and deliver planned savings. Reserves are low as a proportion of net revenue expenditure and have been reduced in recent years. The Council are not budgeting to use reserves to support their budget in 2018/19, nor plan to do so in future years but there remains uncertainty over certain areas of the budget, notably children's services and the council needs to more clearly articulate its target level of reserves; how it will increase reserves to this level and over what timescale; to ensure it is more financially resilient.

## **Recommendations**

- Continue to take measures to reduce the Dedicated Schools Grant high needs deficit
- Seek to fully accommodate potential pressures of demand led services within the MTFS
- Actively manage the potential financial risks to the council through the contractual relationship with the Children's Trust
- Ensure regular monitoring of the appropriateness of balance of borrowing – short, medium and long term
- Strengthen the role of the Strategic Finance Board to oversee the implementation and delivery of planned budget savings.
- Introduce a budget sign-off process to ensure all planned budget changes are fully owned
- More clearly articulate the risks that the council is potentially exposing itself to – the rewards to date have been extensive but there is a need for a clearer articulation and deeper understanding of the risks
- Through this more clearly articulate the council's reserves strategy and how the council will increase its reserves in the short and medium term to provide financial resilience

## 5.4 Capacity to deliver

The borough of Slough is extremely diverse, vibrant and energetic. The council is already active in encouraging community capacity to help enable the council, its partners and community to deliver a new vision for Slough. There is a sense that the council is on the verge of investing greater resource in positioning itself in a listening mode to understand the challenges that residents face and how the council can help them. The focus in the material that was presented to the peer team was overwhelmingly about helping to improve life chances through physical infrastructure and capital projects. There are instances where the council has delivered an enhanced environment to improve the lives of residents and is rightly proud of doing so. This does not currently feel guided by an overall vision that determines the future of Slough for the borough as a place and for its people. The council needs to be careful that its energetic capacity to deliver change is not focused disproportionately on physical change at the potential expense of inclusive growth and excellent services for all.

The peer team were impressed with some interesting examples of community projects though it was not always clear how the council was engaging with them. The council is starting to communicate more effectively with residents, and to evaluate the impact of those communications. In order to properly engage local people with change the council should develop a more ambitious and consistent approach to community engagement, consulting with and listening to residents. The Chief Executive's listening style is a potentially powerful tool and the council should consider if there is sufficient strategic capacity devoted to maximising this.

The council's leadership wants to improve their communities and enhance the life opportunities of residents. There is a strong track record of delivery of regeneration in terms of new assets but also of housing repair and renewal. The council must carefully steer regeneration to allow it to enhance the lives of all parts of the community, whether there is physical regeneration or not.

The council is set to embark on a new transformation journey – from the peer team's understanding of the organisation this is an appropriate step now that the council is benefitting from stable leadership. The Chief Executive and senior leadership team are investing significant intellectual capacity in considering how transformation should be undertaken and resourced. This is being done alongside the planned move from the current headquarters to the town centre and the council will need to carefully coalesce the physical move with the wider transformation programme and approach to customer service.

The current customer service experience is rooted in differing approaches by service areas. Consequently the customer journey lacks coherence and strategic oversight, which is recognised by service leads and directors. Throughout the organisation there is an understanding that the customer journey is too often fragmented and results in duplication of effort. There are plans in place to refresh the customer service strategy including more systematic use of customer insight. There is opportunity now to unite the customer service strategy and transformation programme to develop a more customer centric and agile approach with a greater emphasis on technology and digital applications. This should be implemented along with a stronger sense of empowering

staff to help customers in a more modern and flexible way supported by appropriate support services and systems.

As the council embarks on its physical relocation and transformation programme it will need to address the current paucity of support services that underpins any well run organisation. The council's ICT provision, communications infrastructure and HR systems are not fit for the future and have resulted in many sclerotic processes becoming the norm. Indeed, the tendency towards workarounds illustrates the innovative and energetic nature of the workforce but is fundamentally not serving either the council's employees or customers well. The ambition to transform the council into a more agile, innovative organisation rooted in good governance and efficient processes will require sustained investment in system and ICT infrastructure as well as culture change.

The council has a 5-year corporate plan which is regularly refreshed and reflects the manifesto of the ruling group. The council has made some steps to align the corporate planning cycle with the MTFs and this needs further embedding. The deepening of this link will make it clearer to what degree the corporate plan consistently influences how the council acts. The council is rightly proud of its ability to respond to change and act quickly where it sees an opportunity to improve the borough. The peer team would not want this to be dissipated but the collective corporate and financial planning cycle and its articulation in strategies could be clearer. There could be a role for scrutiny within the council to provide a strategic analysis and steer over how the council does this. Equally, given its ambitious agenda and growing sub regional influence the council could invest greater resource in looking to the exemplars in the sector and beyond and reflect on learning implications for Slough.

The council is a respected partner and has a track record of delivery, notably with its urban renewal partnership but also more widely in the local health system and sub-regional business and transport environment. As it moves forward the council should work to export the skills of client management that have been gained in certain service areas across the organisation. The investment needed in ICT and system infrastructure to deliver transformation makes this more crucial than ever.

The current paucity of support systems and tendency to find work arounds is a symptom of the deficit of corporate grip and limited corporate capacity. That is not to say that the council is not providing valued services, but that it has not invested enough to ensure that these services are driven and overseen by a strong corporate function that is able to learn from itself and continuously improve.

There may need to be consideration of whether there is adequate strategic capacity and capability to deliver the council's transformation programme within current structures. This may require a more dedicated strategic resource in terms of programme management but to also ensure that transformation is rooted in culture change as well as physical and systemic transformation. Strengthening this corporate grip will help the council tackle some of the problems associated with system and process work arounds and the resultant silo working.

## Recommendations

- Evaluate corporate capacity and consider if corporate grip needs strengthening to deliver the transformation needed
- Align customer service strategy with transformation programme and focus on being clearer about the customer journey and council offer
- Continue the conversations with communities and be clear about how they impact on your priority setting
- Invest in ICT and support services and processes to deliver the transformation programme
- Adequately resource transformation and ensure it is rooted in culture change as well as physical and system change

### 5.5 Organisational leadership and governance

Having weathered a time of crisis, the governance of the council has stabilised but there is currently insufficient evidence that the council is firmly on the road to 'good' standards of governance and ethical behaviour. Governance within the organisation appears to be largely transactional with a focus on decisions being taken in the appropriate fora, minuted and actioned. Good governance goes far deeper than this and allows an organisation to look in on itself as well as to others and to constantly improve to ensure the highest standards of probity and ethics are the expected norm.

Good governance is the means by which a public authority shows it is taking decisions for the good of the people of the area, in a fair, equitable and open way. It also requires standards of behaviour that support good decision making – collective and individuals' integrity, openness and honesty. It is the foundation for the delivery of good quality services that meet all local people's needs and it is fundamental to showing public money is well spent. Good governance does not currently feel embedded in the council's organisational culture and there is currently limited articulation from members and officers of what good governance looks like and why it is important.

How members and officers can work best together is not always clear or well understood on both sides. There were instances cited to the peer team of inappropriate member behaviour, often resulting in a negative impact on the council or individuals. The current stability in leadership and the planned officer and member development programmes set to commence in 2019 present a positive opportunity to drive change. Within this programme the council should spend more time assessing current skills to identify learning and development needs as well as statutory training offers. Slough has many positive bases from which to move forward, members are ambitious and determined and the energy of the officer core is palpable. There is already an example of a well-founded initiative in the Slough Academy that can offer wider benefits for renewal within the organisation beyond those of simple training.

The organisation should be better placed to develop a tangible road map towards good governance with its stable corporate management team and strong asset base providing valuable foundations for financial sustainability and good governance. The senior leadership is visible and valued and making a tangible difference. Service leads

have pride in their organisation and place, and their role in helping the council through difficult times and identifying the council's improvement journey going forwards. The council now needs to establish more sustained corporate capacity to enhance corporate grip. This should start with more regular meetings of the three statutory officers who should consider the recommendations of the January 2019 report of the Committee for Standards in Public Life in local government and how they pertain to Slough. These senior leaders must drive a concerted focus on ensuring that governance standards move to good.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/local-government-ethical-standards>

The council should invite the LGA to conduct a bespoke governance review. This would allow the council to consider the principles of good governance for Slough. The review could involve peers considered as leaders in this field and could look to explore areas such as:

- How well are the benefits of good governance understood across the authority?
- How is good governance and ethical standards in behaviour managed and driven forward in the council?
- How well defined and understood are the respective roles of the Council, the Leader, the Executive/Cabinet, backbench Councillors and the Statutory Officers (HoPS, MO and S151) in (i) policy and decision making, and (ii) operational management?
- Does the council have appropriate controls, frameworks and support in place to support members and officers to make decisions in an accountable and transparent way?
- Are Codes of Conduct in place for, and respected by, elected Members and staff?
- Is a sufficiently robust standards regime in place, with a recognition of member and officer roles and responsibilities?
- Does Scrutiny provide effective challenge to the Executive, which improves policy and decision making?
- How is the council accountable for the decisions it takes, and how it does report on this?
- Does the council adopt leadership styles which are open, inclusive, and engender trust from staff, other partners, and the public?
- How does the council connect with residents and partners in its decision making, and do councillors and senior officers act as effective ambassadors for the council with residents and partners?
- How does the council ensure it is listening to all voices in the community?
- How does the council ensure it is a learning organisation and able to adapt its governance and decision making process to changing circumstances whilst ensuring continuous service improvement?

## **Recommendations**

- Introduce regular meetings of statutory officers to review progress on good governance road map, consider current governance issues, and hold the ring on governance matters
- Consider the recommendations of recent report of Committee for Standards in Public Life on local government – and how they pertain to Slough
- Invite LGA to conduct a review of good governance and ethical standards, against CIPFA principles for good governance in local government (2016)
- Establish a Slough vision and road map for good governance and ethical standards
- Engage members/officers in discussion about good governance for Slough and how this should be embedded in member/officer development

## **Conclusions**

As a place Slough has lots going for it, with much more to come. As an organisation the council benefits from a strong asset base, excellent connectivity and a buoyant economy. In many respects' communities are thriving both economically and socially, but this is not always being led by the council or offering every resident of Slough the best life chances and quality of life.

The people that the peer team met were proud and ambitious for their town and the council. There is an energetic and capable workforce ready to build a new future alongside more stable leadership, driven forward by a thoughtful chief executive and determined leader. If the council can harness these building blocks and embed good governance the council has the prospect of delivering good services, being financially sustainable, and delivering a new future of inclusive growth for all.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

### **Key Recommendations**

- Establish a stronger sense of where you want to get to – your vision
- Develop and deliver this vision which identifies what the future looks like for all parts of the community – for place and for people
- Consider and articulate what a 21st Century Council will look like for Slough to build unity around a common purpose
- Establish a more fundamental equilibrium between the council's ambition for people and place and communicate this
- Progress the emerging transformation agenda and invest more time in rooting this in culture change
- Develop your governance from 'basic control' to good

## **Recommendations on the five core themes of peer challenge**

1. Spend more time with residents and partners to collectively understand what makes Slough unique
2. Consider creating two high level strategic forums – one for people and one for place that the Leader and Chief Executive convene to bring together major stakeholders. This could unify resources and harness strategic efforts throughout Slough's partnerships.
3. Develop an overarching vision for inclusive growth encompassing all neighbourhoods – for people and place
4. Continue to invest in public realm improvements to improve the town centre
5. Keep up and extend the efforts to engage in place leadership to ensure Slough maximises the benefits of sub regional, regional and national engagement
6. Undertake a mapping exercise to understand voluntary and community sector capacity
7. Analyse the impact of partnership working and allocate resources against council priorities
8. Seek to improve and deepen effective external partnerships
9. Invest in further exploring the human richness of Slough and how the community, partners and the council can collectively deliver thriving communities
10. Consider greater use of customer insight to determine priorities and design service
11. Continue to progress collaboration building on the experiences of the local health system. Continue to progress collaboration building on the experiences of the local health system including further strengthening joint commissioning and provision of integrated care. There is scope for better integration of GP, community health, mental health and hospital services as well as home care and care homes through increasing partnerships of care providers and commissioners.
12. Continue to take measures to reduce the Dedicated Schools Grant high needs deficit
13. Seek to fully accommodate potential pressures of demand led services within the MTFS
14. Actively manage the potential financial risks to the council through the contractual relationship with the Children's Trust

15. Ensure regular monitoring of the appropriateness of balance of borrowing – short, medium and long term
16. Strengthen the role of the Strategic Finance Board to oversee the implementation and delivery of planned budget savings
17. Introduce a budget sign-off process to ensure all planned budget changes are fully owned
18. More clearly articulate the risks that the council is potentially exposing itself to – the rewards to date have been extensive but there is a need for a clearer articulation and deeper understanding of the risks
19. Through this more clearly articulate the council's reserves strategy and how the council will increase its reserves in the short and medium term to provide financial resilience
20. Evaluate corporate capacity and consider if corporate grip needs strengthening to deliver the transformation needed
21. Align customer service strategy with transformation programme and focus on being clearer about the customer journey and council offer
22. Continue the conversations with communities and be clear about how they impact on your priority setting
23. Invest in ICT and support services and processes to deliver the transformation programme
24. Adequately resource transformation and ensure it is rooted in culture change as well as physical and system change
25. Introduce regular meetings of statutory officers to review progress on good governance road map, consider current governance issues, and hold the ring on governance matters
26. Consider the recommendations of recent report of Committee for Standards in Public Life on local government – and how they pertain to Slough
27. Invite LGA to conduct a review of good governance and ethical standards, against CIPFA principles for good governance in local government (2016)
28. Establish a Slough vision and road map for good governance and ethical standards
29. Engage members/officers in discussion about good governance for Slough and how this should be embedded in member/officer development

## **12. Next steps**

### **Immediate next steps**

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Mona Sehgal, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Her contact details are, email: [mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk](mailto:mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk), Telephone: 07795 296001.

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

### **Follow up visit**

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the Council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the Council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 2 years.

### **Next Corporate Peer Challenge**

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the Council will commission their next Peer Challenge before 2023.

On behalf of the peer team:

- Jan Britton, Chief Executive, Sandwell MBC
- Cllr Clare Coghill, Leader LB Waltham Forest
- Jacqui Old, Director of Adults and Children's Services North Tyneside BC
- Polly Cziok, Director of Communications and Engagement, LB Hackney
- Simon Machen, Corporate Director Growth, Peterborough BC
- Mark Nicholson, Assistant Director Finance, Newcastle City Council
- Lusi Manukyan, Adviser, Local Government Association
- Clare Hudson, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

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