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Dear Alison

Brentwood Borough Council – Corporate Peer Challenge

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

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the 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 at Brentwood were:

- John Jory – Chief Executive, Reigate & Banstead District Council
- Cllr William Nunn (Conservative) – Councillor and Former Leader of the Council, Breckland District Council
- Cllr Colin Ross (Liberal Democrat) – Deputy Group Leader, Sheffield City Council
- Kirsty Cole – Deputy Chief Executive, Newark & Sherwood District Council
- Peter Rentell – Programme Manager, LGA

Scope and focus of the peer challenge

You asked the peer team to consider:

- The progress the council has made since the 2011 peer review
- The impact and effectiveness of the council re-structure, including Phase 2 which should be implemented by December 2013
- The impact and effectiveness of the new governance arrangements
- How the council might adopt a more entrepreneurial and commercial approach

In addition the peer team considered the ability and capacity of the council to deliver its future ambitions by briefly looking at:

- Understanding of the local context and priority setting
- Financial planning and viability
- Political and managerial leadership
- Governance and decision-making
- Organisational capacity to deliver your priorities

The peer challenge process

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

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing.

This letter provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (25th to 27th November 2013). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing. It was unfortunate that the opposition members didn't attend the feedback presentation in order to kick-start a process of relationship building across all political parties and with officers for the benefit of the council and its residents. LGA would be pleased to be involved with any further support to facilitate this issue.

We also hope the feedback provided will help stimulate further debate and thinking about the transformational change programme for Brentwood and how it might develop and evolve.

Summary of feedback: overall observations and messages

A Peer Review was undertaken in 2011. It identified some serious concerns about the Council and recommended a number of actions. Since the Peer Review, the Council has made good progress in several key areas. A Corporate Plan has been developed by members across the Council setting out some clear priorities and key actions. The Plan was subsequently adopted by the Council. There is evidence that progress has

been made against the Corporate Plan and its key actions. Work has begun to modernise the Council and activity has started to implement changes in the way services are delivered from the Town Hall (the new ways of working project) to drive out efficiency savings in mainly back office areas. A customer contact centre is to be established at the end of the financial year. Some major projects have also been progressed such as transforming the Town Hall site where the quality of the office environment will be transformed and a tenant secured for unwanted space. Some services have been improved such as in recycling. There is evidence that members and staff have a very good understanding of the key priorities and actions in the plan. The Administration and managers are proud of the progress made on this direction of travel.

Much improved finances have been achieved since the last Peer Review. The Council has achieved a clean bill of health with its accounts with an unqualified opinion from its external auditors. There is less dependency on reserves in setting the revenue budget and the extent of reserves has been enhanced. Planned efficiency savings have been delivered. These achievements have been made despite falling grant support from central government over the period.

The Council has begun to explore new funding streams such as taking a more commercial approach to the use of its assets. Additional resources were secured to undertake this work. This work stream is expected to identify some potential opportunities for members to consider around the end of the financial year.

A new Constitution has been developed by a cross party group of members giving greater clarity around the functioning of the Council's committee style of governance arrangements. It has been adopted by the Council. The new Constitution, though, is being repeatedly used by opposition members to seek to interrupt the working of the Council and this behaviour is impacting on the pace of progress of the Council, and on other matters discussed later. The peer team believe that the council need to look at the root cause behind this behaviour. There is a perception that committee papers are being published without all necessary information and too many are in "pink". This could be rectified if there was a system of cross-checking amongst officers so that obvious errors were spotted. At present opposition members feel they have to resort to FOI requests as information is being denied to them.

Furthermore, a number of the actions identified by the Peer Review in 2011 have either not been progressed or only limited progress has been made as identified in the document you provided as part of the peer challenge pre-reading. This is a reflection of the continuing and deteriorating way member to member and member to officer relationships are operating within the council.

Members, officers and stakeholders all identified a mismatch between the workload of the Council and available staff resources. Relative to elsewhere, managers and other staff are spending a disproportionate amount of time responding to member enquiries, including a high level of Freedom of Information Act requests exacerbated by repeat requests and continual challenge over the same request from different members. The

extent of such enquiries is accompanied by particularly poor behaviour between political groups and between predominantly opposition members and officers. External partners beyond the Borough boundary recognise the mismatch between workload and staff resources, the high volume of member enquiries and inappropriate member behaviour all of which does little to engender confidence. They are reluctant to work in partnership with the Council because of its perceived dysfunctional reputation which appears to be largely based on the member arena. In turn, this makes effective partnership working difficult for Brentwood and negates opportunities to build capacity. Partners told us that the council don't appear to bid for future funding like other councils and they could learn better practice from neighbouring authorities.

We believe these issues have deteriorated since the last peer review and have not been properly addressed though we acknowledge attempts have been made to rectify the situation. They are having a serious destabilising effect of the working of the Council. We believe the Council's managers and staff cannot continue to work to deliver Corporate Plan key priorities and other agreed activity, and respond to the scale of enquiries from members. Staff cannot be expected to continue to work in such an environment.

The Administration and management team need to urgently take action to ensure those member/officer relations continue to be strong with visible confidence in one another. The Administration and management team also need to identify the steps to be taken to ensure that officers provide a consistent and proportionate amount of time to support all members and communicate that this level of support will be less than for those members leading the organisation. This action will help the Administration and the management team to be much more confident that there is a reasonable and realistic balance between workload and officer capacity and resources. In that way the Council's Corporate Plan, service plans and budgets can reasonably be expected to be delivered. Managers and staff will much more clearly understand what is expected of them. If this action is not taken, the Councils service and financial plans will not be achieved and the Borough's residents and businesses will suffer.

Similar action needs to be taken around Constitutional matters. There is recognition by members across the council that changes are needed to the current Constitution. These need to be made quickly so that it becomes a better tool to support the workings of the Council. In the meantime, the Administration and management team need to agree and communicate a simple message that the current disruptive behaviour, particularly in committee meetings, will not be tolerated. Group leaders also need to take responsibility for maintaining discipline within their group.

Whilst some progress has been made since the Peer Review in 2011 to modernise the Council and improve office leadership by beginning to restructure the management team, the pace of improvement in managerial leadership has been limited by the distractions described. The management team told us they have now reached the point where they wish to operate more cohesively as a single team with a strategic focus in order to run the business of the Council better. To do so they recognise they need to develop a narrative with senior members of the Administration about the steps they will

use to better balance workload and staff capacity which must involve spending less time on Constitutional queries and opposition member matters. They then need to communicate their narrative to everyone within the Council and deliver the agreed actions at a crisp pace.

As a consequence of the imbalance between workload and capacity, the management team have been unable to progress important initiatives such as the systematic development of all staff through a workforce strategy. As a consequence many staff we met don't feel valued and morale is low. This stream of work now needs to be actioned urgently so that steps can be taken to develop skills, make the best use of potential and to best manage the Council's change programme. Staff also need to be better supported and recognised for the efforts they make by the Administration and managers.

The management team also need to better evidence visible strategic leadership to staff, members and partner organisations in support of the Leader of the Council and Managing Director. An important step would be to develop a forum of senior members of the Administration and management team which could act as a focal point for sharing and reaching informal agreement on how to progress key business activity including how to better balance workload and capacity. Having done so, the forum needs to keep matters under review to ensure continuous improvement is maintained.

The forum also needs to be the focus for progressing the Council's service and financial plans. Like all local authorities, the Council faces many challenges going forward. Whilst there are plans and strategies in place to better manage the Council's finances over the next couple of years, the Council needs to look beyond that period and consider how it wishes to change and deliver services for residents and business. It is important the Council continues to modernise itself, and the pace of that programme might need to be accelerated if potential new commercial opportunities do not materialise.

Whilst partner organisations within the Borough spoke well of the Council, those beyond the Borough boundary did not. Local government is facing significant challenges and strong relationships with public sector bodies, beyond the Borough, is fundamental. Steps need to be taken to build these relationships. Steps also need to be taken to evidence the use of best practice and benchmarking from elsewhere to continue to ensure value for money is delivered and members can be satisfied with the way managers run the Council day to day.

Finally, we recognise that the Council has made progress since the last Peer Review in 2011 but the pace of much needed progress has been slowed and disrupted by the dysfunctional behaviour and impact of members and a requirement for the management team to take more decisive action to rectify matters. This state of affairs is a reflection of the current culture of the Council which has formed over many years.

We are clear from all of our discussions and from what we have seen, there is now a real desire by the Administration, management team and others to seize the moment

and address these fundamental matters holding back the Council. We recognise that local elections bring with them the chance of a change in political control, therefore, issues raised by this challenge need addressing before the elections to ensure officers and members operate in a different manner to provide the council with more effective leadership both before and after elections in order to meet community expectations. This must be seen as a corporately owned issue, rather than a single party or CLB in isolation, and all sides need to put significant effort into making their council function properly and effectively. We very much hope the Council grasps this opportunity quickly and delivers on the commitment they gave us to change for the better.

Other agreed elements of the corporate peer challenge:

1. Progress since 2011 peer review

Since the peer review in 2011 there has been considerable progress made against recommendations from the review team.

In December 2012 the Council agreed its Corporate Plan for 2013 to 2016. The plan sets out the Council's Vision and Priorities for the Borough and a framework for a modern, efficient, cost effective way of operating. The plan was developed in parallel with the Medium Term Financial Plan in preparation for the 2013/14 budget setting exercise. With the Plan adopted the council now needs to move away from its current operating model to adopt the "New Ways of Working" initiative, in order to position the Council as:

- an excellent provider of services;
- an organisation that secures savings through a lean back office structure;
- an investor in front line services; and
- entrepreneurial in its approach to drive up income and achieve efficiencies.

As part of the Corporate Plan the council recognised the need to move away from their current operating model and have adopted a 'New Ways of Working' model as part of a three year transformation programme. Central to the transformation journey is adopting an entrepreneurial and commercial approach with a leaner organisation that delivers customer excellence through creation of a One Stop Shop (customer hub). We did consider that the business transformation agenda was well resourced with a solid team of business analysts and project managers.

There has been promising progress on finances with less dependency on reserves in setting the revenue budget and the extent of reserves has been enhanced. There is a financial plan for the next three years and the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) confirms a funding gap of £3.7m over that period, which will require further efficiency savings to be made. Almost half of the council's budget is aligned to accommodation and back office functions and these costs and overheads need to reduce with resources channelled into providing excellent front line services. All budgets should be aligned to delivering the Council's priorities as outlined in the Corporate Plan and echoed by

customers. Planned efficiency savings have been delivered. These achievements have been made despite falling grant support from central government over the period.

The council's Corporate Leadership Board (CLB) is being re-invigorated with key appointments creating a catalyst for transformational change e.g. Head of Business Transformation. A new governance system as a fourth option authority was adopted in March 2013 to streamline decision making and improve the quality of debate with a new Constitution also established in May 2013 based on the Model Constitution. However, we have evidence from members across all parties that they are dissatisfied with the way the new Constitution is operating and they believe it is not fulfilling its key objective to improve debate and decision making. Regardless, the peer teams view is that members behaviour is still considered to be the key obstacle to healthy and constructive debate and informed decision making with the constitution acting as the vehicle to deliver that.

Some major projects have also been progressed such as transforming the Town Hall site where the quality of the office environment will be transformed and a tenant secured for unwanted space. Some services have been improved such as recycling.

Despite good progress there are a number of areas that need further consideration and development:

There appeared to be a lack of confidence between officers and members with officers feeling they were not always treated with respect by some members citing overly long meetings, little regard to the impact of this on the officers and challenging behaviours. There appears to be an issue with Planning Committee and members overturning officer recommendations and disregarding officer advice without fully understanding the consequences for the authority and officer challenge being seen as offensive. This has contributed to problems in recruiting planning staff due to low staff morale though this was anecdotal as the team did not observe a Planning Committee meeting.

We saw limited evidence that CLB were standing together collectively to challenge member behaviours and they tended not to operate strategically but focus on operational issues. The CLB agenda we observed was operational not strategic, seemed to be a forum to receive updated information and was potentially too large a group to operate effectively with 11 officers at the meeting we observed. CLB need to stand together against poor member behaviours and re-focus on the 'big issues' such as the transformation agenda, budget savings and demand management. CLB need to create the capacity to effectively lead and manage as a collective and cohesive team with members and delivery of a top team development programme may assist this. Many CLB members appear to be involved in a disproportionately large number of member FOI requests and must be freed from this to lead with a re-focus on looking at the root cause to see if that can be addressed rather than dealing with consequences. We saw clear evidence of a willingness from both CLB and the administration to build relationships and this must be driven through.

There needs to be an injection of pace to corporate improvement as we saw evidence that the council were considerably 'behind the curve' compared to other similar authorities, for example they have only recently embarked on agile working, have very limited work and data on customer insight and we saw little evidence on how you are getting to grips with demand management and the prevention agenda. The authority must be more outward facing in order to compare and learn from others and look at the potential for shared services. One quotation we noted said *"The next step is to get the authority to look outside of the Town Hall. It doesn't happen as fluidly as it should at the moment."* The current evidence of learning from elsewhere was from bringing in external consultants and pro-active recruitment of senior staff e.g. Head of Transformation.

Greater improvement in corporate and service processes is required as we evidenced both Human Resources and Legal Services working on paper based systems with no on-line access to cases, a backlog in invoice payment resulting from the move from FMS to E-financials and performance management within individual service areas not being managed corporately by CLB.

2. Impact and effectiveness of the council re-structure

Efficiency savings have been achieved through a reduction in staffing costs and senior management costs, streamlining the council's depot services and renegotiation of supplier contracts. These savings have been re-invested in frontline services and have been achieved throughout an organisational re-structure without any perceivable impact on service delivery. We saw evidence of actions to meet budget targets, e.g. outsourcing of certain back office functions. Feedback from the initial pilot for customer contact was encouraging with depot staff receiving fewer telephone enquiries and staff generally receptive to the changes.

With the on-going re-structure and New Ways of Working model the council have made significant steps in modernisation of the organisation and better understand what needs to be done to achieve the future funding gap. The authority has recruited interim support to help work through asset management issues and work is underway to recruit a permanent team to focus on strategic asset management, estates management and exploiting development opportunities. Importantly, the council have recruited a Head of Business Transformation with project support to drive the transformation programme and maintain a focus on delivery of key projects. There is also a shared service arrangement with Thurrock and Barking and Dagenham, through a SLA for legal services, which is delivering efficiencies through case management and time recording.

Service level planning and personal appraisals do appear to link to the corporate priorities. We saw evidence that some staff understand the direction of travel for the authority to meet future challenges and it will be critical to identify these staff members as champions for change.

The council are currently in Phase 2 of three phases of a re-structure, mainly around back office functions, and frontline staff acknowledged that lessons had been learnt

from Phase 1 to drive improvements in Phase 2. In contrast, some staff were critical of the lack of consultation and engagement in the Phase 1 work and felt communication could have been better providing greater clarity around future re-organisations.

We evidenced some low staff morale as a result of the changes and the tensions created by working relationships between officers and members, however, this was not universal with some staff confirming the re-structure had given them new opportunities. Areas of dissatisfaction were generally around progress on single status, the perception of extensive use of consultants and agency staff, loss of experienced staff and a presumption in favour of outsourcing denying staff a chance to prove themselves. They did feel they were now “just a number on a payslip rather than a person” and would like an opportunity to make suggestions for improvement that were objectively considered. There is also an issue that Brentwood don’t always pay ‘market rate’ on salaries compounded by the fact they are on the border of London which results in good staff moving away attracted by higher remuneration with a London Allowance. The council needs to consider alternative methods to attract and retain staff.

Generally staff didn’t fully understand the journey for the council with a lack of narrative around the direction of travel. An improved and regular communication strategy would greatly assist which could also help negate the numerous negative press stories often as a result of sensitive details being leaked. For staff moving into new roles there is a need to support them better in developing new skills with improved training. This should include training on the constitution as neither members or staff appear to fully understand it and officers need to better understand delegations. Other than the recruitment of an interim Strategic Asset Manager and Head of Business Transformation, we saw limited evidence that the council had identified what skills it needed to deliver the new agenda and this must be underpinned by a Workforce Strategy. At the moment the council is in a state of transition with regard to HR provision and the development of a workforce development agenda including talent management. This is critical to successful delivery of the transformation programme.

3. Impact and effectiveness of the new governance arrangements

A new governance system as a fourth option authority was adopted in March 2013 to streamline decision making and improve quality of debate with a new Constitution also established in May 2013 based on the Model Constitution. The new Constitution has been developed by a cross party group of members giving greater clarity around the functioning of the Councils formal committee governance arrangements and the day to day operation of the Council. The key principles for the new system were:

- Faster decision-making process
- Quality not quantity of debate
- Regular cycle of meetings
- Strengthening the role of overview and scrutiny
- Governance structure that mirrors the business of the council
- No reduction in democracy
- Delegated powers

- Strengthening the role of Ordinary Council

There are real efforts being made to better engage members with extensive informal member and officer briefings taking place. In addition, the Administration is proud of the council's achievements believing they are 'punching above their weight' for a small council. Aligned to this CLB are being re-invigorated with good key appointments which are creating a catalyst for change to meet future corporate priorities.

We evidenced a real desire on the part of CLB and the Administration to tackle poor member behaviour and to do things differently. CLB and the Administration want to work more closely together to enhance the reputation of the authority with residents and strategic partners alike and we picked up evidence of CLB officers starting to challenge members. Opposition members also told us they wished to address the limitations of the current Constitution and member behaviour.

Despite the changes the new Constitution is being repeatedly used by members to seek to interrupt the working of the Council and this behaviour is impacting on the pace of progress of the Council, and on other matters discussed later. Opposition members told us of their frustration with the new Constitution. Furthermore, a number of the actions identified by the Peer Review in 2011 have either not been progressed or only limited progress has been made. This is a reflection of the continuing and deteriorating way members of the Council are operating. There remains a distrust between officers and certain members who need to understand the damage they are doing to staff and the organisation. In our view your staff can't continue to work in the environment member behaviour is putting them in.

Members, officers and stakeholders all identified a mismatch between the workload of the Council and available staff resources. Managers and other staff are spending a disproportionate amount of time responding to predominantly opposition member enquiries, including a high volume of Freedom of Information Act requests exacerbated by repeat requests and continual challenge over the same request from different members. Members need to be realistic in their demands and CLB firm in delivering messages about what they can do. These issues are having a serious destabilising effect of the working of the Council.

There is an urgent need to develop an understanding between members and officers in order to define mutual expectations and stick rigidly to them. Each side needs to understand and acknowledge what they expect from one another including defining what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. There needs to be clear boundaries to avoid lines between officers and members becoming blurred such that members focus on policy issues and avoid getting drawn into detail with officers which in turn will allow officers to be more agile and feel empowered. Agree what is important and have the courage to say 'no' as the current practice of constantly responding to frivolous and vexatious requests for information is draining capacity from the organisation. Regardless of how divergent their views may be the leaders of the various political groups must sit down together with statutory officers to talk openly about the issues that matter most to them and the council and build professional and constructive

working relationships going forward. We note the Leader's commitment to this as evidenced by the establishment of monthly Leaders' meetings, however, attendance from all political groups has not been consistent with subsequent opportunities to improve working relationships lost.

We strongly recommend the council creates a mechanism to review and revise the Constitution so that it becomes a tool for effective decision making and not a weapon. Protocols and procedures could be strengthened to assist in creating a smoother administration (this has already been suggested by Head of Legal) and the need for retention of Overview and Scrutiny could be explored as it is currently being used as a vehicle to slow down decision-making and is seen as divisive. There is also a case for a reduction in the cycle of meetings to avoid reports being taken just to feed the "committee machine". This can result in reports which focus on detail not strategy and can be of poor quality giving opportunities for the opposition to raise numerous constitutional and information queries. Opposition members told us they would support this approach. Reduce these opportunities for challenge and you will reduce the need for call-ins, FOI requests and general frustration, therefore, consider a standard report template to include comments from all relevant officers (Legal, Finance) to avert some difficulties arising at Committee.

4. How the Council might adopt a more entrepreneurial and commercial approach

Building on the opportunities afforded in the Localism Act the council are focusing their efforts over the next three years on:

- Utilising our assets
- Selling our services
- Improving recycling performance
- Exploring opportunities for the council to operate on a commercial basis
- Being a commissioner of services where it makes business sense

A report was commissioned from East of England LGA on options, which was presented to members in November 2013. The report is comprehensive and covers all the potential options for considering a new operating model for the council but it is too early for the peer team to make any further comments as to whether this will achieve the desired savings and efficiencies.

What we did see was a managerial and political consensus being developed around a commercial strategy with a clear recognition that there is a need to consider adopting a more entrepreneurial approach. There are some good early examples such as the Town Hall re-development being agreed by the council with partners from the commercial and voluntary sectors involved in the project, the council securing additional resource to develop a more strategic approach to assets and appointment of a Head of Business Transformation to drive the transformation agenda.

We noted a lack of common understanding on what an entrepreneurial approach actually means with a need to develop a common understanding between officers and members to ensure they have the necessary skills, capacity and courage to deliver. This will require a fundamental shift from a 'risk averse' to 'risk aware' approach in order to secure delivery.

Currently there are different officers delivering the asset strategy and the Town Hall project and another officer looking at agile working and transformation. These individual work strands will need to be joined up and owned at CLB in an integrated strategy. The governance and project management of any transformation programme will need to be clear and robust. You will need to ensure the arrangements you are putting into place enable the linkages, sequencing and inter-dependencies between the various projects and activity to be clear. Robust monitoring and accountability will need to be a key feature of your programme governance to ensure the contribution to the budget strategy. Such an approach will be required for the linkage of asset rationalisation, agile working, digital inclusion and customer access. We acknowledge that the new Head of Business Transformation has already started to look at this.

The new commercial approach will require strategic discussion on outcomes to determine what is driving the approach e.g. efficiency savings, growth and prosperity, housing. We acknowledge the report commissioned from East of England LGA to identify commercial opportunities as a first step towards delivering this commercial approach, however, at the moment there appears to be a lack of clarity and understanding as to what is driving the agenda and how success will be measured. Inevitably there is a need to have a dialogue at political leader level around commercial opportunities to ensure they will be maximised, for example the waste partnership, joint outsourcing and shared services.

Other corporate issues

- Members need to agree what their non-priorities are and stick to them. Members' expectations also need to be managed, for example, the fact that the council has no responsibility for highways should mean that no highways enquires for work should be dealt with by officers. This is as much about taking the gold plating off services as it is about stopping services, or it can be about introducing/increasing charges for non-core services, or delivering services via community resources. If non-priority or lower priority areas can't be identified then everything ends up as equally important and nothing is protected or promoted.
- Look medium to longer term as we saw no strategic plan or horizon scanning beyond 2016. One quotation was *"we don't have an answer beyond the next two years"*.
- Ensure plans are evidence based and resourced as future demands need to be better understood and evaluated. We saw limited evidence of customer insight work which led the team to consider how well you know your communities and where future demand is likely to arise and create additional pressures.

- Resilience is a key concern across the council and will become an increasing concern as staff numbers reduce through future re-organisation. We saw no clear evidence of how this is being addressed. Celebrate success to give a more positive vibe across the organisation and generate more positive media coverage.
- Improved performance management with corporate ownership in terms of key performance indicators linked to achievement of the council's priorities to ensure meaningful discussion around key priority outcomes. On key performance indicators members only talked about exception reports and as most were in 'red' we would have expected a more searching analysis. Both CLB and members need to be fully engaged in this development in order to take corrective action early.

Suggestions for consideration

Based on what we saw, heard and read we suggest you consider the following key actions. These are things we think will help you improve the effectiveness and capacity to deliver your future ambitions and plans:

- Develop constructive relationships between officers and members and CLB – Leaders of the organisation need to display respect for each other and demonstrate that values are being upheld throughout the organisation
- CLB need to act as a single team with a strategic focus and run the business better – it is now time for CLB to adopt a unified approach
- Urgently address the workload v capacity issue
- Focused support for members – consider further tailored training and development programmes that result in an effective ruling Administration, committee chairs and opposition. This could include mentoring from an independent LGA opposition peer to work with opposition members over a specific duration.
- Implement an officer development programme for the top team and middle managers, including appropriate support, mentoring and learning from other high performing organisations. This programme will need to be funded.
- Develop a shared narrative, communicate it and deliver it
- Support you staff and develop them – staff we met are loyal and committed
- Review and revise the constitution so it becomes a tool for streamlined decision-making and not a weapon
- Build more effective relationships with other partners and learn more from others on both a regional and national level
- Build on the peer challenge findings and consider an away day for CLB and senior members to agree a fresh approach that puts the council and it's residents first – LGA would be happy to provide experienced and appropriate facilitators to assist you in running such an event

Next steps

You will undoubtedly wish to reflect on these findings and suggestions made with your senior managerial and political leadership before determining how the council wishes to take things forward. As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of continued activity to support this. If you wish to discuss in greater detail how this might be utilised please contact me to arrange the detail of such activity.

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with you and colleagues through the peer challenge to date. Rachel Litherland, Principal Adviser (London and East of England) is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Rachel can be contacted via email at Rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk or by Telephone (07795 076834) and can provide access to our resources and any further support.

All connected with the peer challenge would like to wish you every success going forward. Many thanks to you and your colleagues for inviting the peer challenge and to everyone involved for their participation. In particular, please pass on our thanks to Lee Taylor for his sterling support in organising the challenge and the onsite visit.

Yours sincerely



Peter Rentell
Programme Manager
Local Government Support Team
Local Government Association

On behalf of the peer challenge team