

# Corporate Peer Challenge

## **Chelmsford City Council**

25<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> November 2013

Report

# 1. Background and scope of the peer challenge

On behalf of the team, I would just like to say what a pleasure and privilege it was to be invited in to Chelmsford to deliver the recent corporate peer challenge. The team very much appreciated the efforts that went into preparing for the visit and looking after us whilst we were on site and the participation of elected members, staff and partners in the process.

This was one of the corporate peer challenges delivered by the Local Government Association as part of the approach to sector led improvement. Peer challenges are managed and delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The peers who delivered the peer challenge were:

Laura McGillivray, Chief Executive, Norwich City Council
Councillor Paul James, Leader, Gloucester City Council (Conservative)
Liz Borthwick, Assistant Chief Executive, Spelthorne Borough Council
Ged Bowles, Assistant Director for Transformation, Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands (shadowing role)
Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

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

The guiding questions for all corporate peer challenges are:

- Does the council understand its local context and has it established a clear set of priorities?
- Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
- Does the council have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?
- Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?
- Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

To tailor the challenge to the needs of Chelmsford, we also considered the following:

- The effectiveness of the parks and leisure services, placing a particular emphasis on the issue of value for money

- The council's work on economic development and growth and whether Chelmsford City Council is embracing the challenge of becoming a city following the awarding of 'City status'

As you will recall, we undertook to write to you to confirm the team's findings, building on the feedback provided to you on the final day of the peer challenge and, in particular, expanding upon those areas that we highlighted as likely to benefit from some further attention. This report sets out those findings.

## 2. Executive summary

Chelmsford, both as a place and a council, represents a success story. The city and borough offer a very good quality of life and it is a place where people aspire to live and are keen to remain. There is a strong, diverse and resilient local economy – as part of this, although there is an element of good fortune about Chelmsford being located where it is, it is also clear that the council has proactively enabled and driven the growth agenda. The authority is committed to working in partnership and is seen as collaborative and supportive.

The council itself delivers very high quality services. There has been tremendous consistency and continuity in the leadership and direction of the council and the borough. There is a positive organisational culture and the council has very high calibre staff. There are very good relationships between officers and elected members. Relationships between the political groups are also positive.

There is an absolute commitment in the council, both politically and managerially, to doing what is right for local people and delivering to the highest standard. Such consistency and continuity in leadership and direction has served to give people certainty and confidence, both within and beyond the council. The authority has been forward-looking, planned ahead and demonstrated a willingness to take tricky decisions and address difficult issues.

The authority is in a strong financial position. Clearly financial challenges are being faced but the strength of financial planning and management, combined with the relatively good position that the council is in, stands it in good stead to meet these. However, the reality is that the council simply won't have the resources available to it in the future to carry on doing what it does now – meaning difficult decisions will be required, entailing some things needing to be compromised upon or sacrificed. Out of this situation, two key questions emerge for the council in our view. The first of these is concerned with what the authority's aspirations and ambitions are for Chelmsford, with this essentially being about ensuring a focusing of resources on those issues that are of the greatest importance to the borough and the activities that can achieve the most significant impact on them. The second key question relates to what type of council the organisation needs to be in the future in order to meet the challenges being faced in the borough. In our view, the council is nearing an important decision point regarding these two questions.

Given the relative position of Chelmsford and the council, in terms of the authority's budgetary position, the range and quality of what the council delivers, the positive state of the economy and the exciting growth agenda, what exists for the authority in relation to the financial challenges being faced is a 'priorities and choices' agenda. The elected

membership of the council has the democratic mandate to determine those priorities and choices – nobody else can fulfil that remit. This is a council that stands out for all the right reasons – maintaining that requires clear, determined and collective political and managerial leadership in the face of the financial challenge. What is crucial is being clear about where the council as a whole is going.

### **3. Detailed findings**

#### **3.1 Chelmsford – a story of success**

Chelmsford, both as a place and a council, represents a success story. The city and borough, which are home to 168,000 people, offer a very good quality of life and many references were made during our discussions to it being a place where people aspire to live and are keen to remain. In 2012 Chelmsford was ranked the seventh best place in the UK in terms of quality of life – making it the best city in the UK. There is a high quality environment, with 700 hectares of parks and green spaces. Local schools have a very good reputation and educational attainment is high. The leisure and cultural offer, much of which is provided through the council, is comprehensive and highly valued. People spoke with pride of the quality of outdoor events that the authority delivers, including the ‘Three Foot Festival’, the ‘Fling’ and ‘Street Diversions’. Chelmsford also hosts the ‘V Festival’, which takes place on council land, although it is promoted independently.

It is important to recognise that the leisure and cultural offer in Chelmsford delivers benefits not just to residents – it contributes to the perception of the place and the anecdotal evidence suggests it influences inward investment decisions. The retail offer reflects Chelmsford’s position as a regional centre and work begins soon on the construction of a major new development, including the first John Lewis store in Essex along with a new cinema and entertainments complex. Whilst there are issues around the relative affordability of housing, there is a good mix of housing type and tenure.

There is a strong, diverse and resilient economy in Chelmsford, with low levels of unemployment (2.4 per cent) and very significant levels of housing and business growth taking place or planned - including planning permissions being in place for around 6,000 new houses. The diversity of the economy is reflected in the breadth of employment sectors, including finance, engineering, retail and an expanding small and medium sized (SME) business sector. Whilst there is an element of good fortune about Chelmsford being located where it is, it is also clear that the council has proactively enabled and driven the growth agenda. The creation of the Local Development Framework around ten years ago represents a key component of a clear planned strategy to secure the right type of development for Chelmsford in the most appropriate places.

The borough acts as a source of employment, drawing in people to work there from across a wide geography. Its closeness and accessibility to London also makes the borough a good place to locate for people looking to live within easy commuting distance from the capital and for businesses looking for a cheaper alternative to London. More than 20 per cent of the UK population live within an hour’s drive of Chelmsford.

The council itself delivers very high quality services. The 2012/13 residents’ survey showed satisfaction with refuse collection was 91 per cent, whilst the figure for doorstep

recycling was 87 per cent. Safety in the local area scored 94 per cent and the proportion of respondents feeling safe after dark was 71 per cent. The revenues and benefits service is much improved – moving from more than 150 days to process a new claim in 2004/05 to 19 days now. Sixty one per cent of respondents were satisfied with the way the council runs things – up from 51 per cent in 2009/10.

The authority is in a strong financial position, including having healthy levels of reserves and a number of sources that provide a fairly stable and reliable level of income, including car parking and commercial property. There are clearly financial challenges being faced but the strength of financial planning and management, combined with the relatively good position that the council is in, stands it in good stead to meet these.

There is a positive organisational culture and the council has very high calibre staff. Officers that we met, at all levels, were enthusiastic and proud about their work, the place and what the council has achieved. There is a very strong staff development programme, including the 'Managers of Chelmsford Tomorrow' programme, an award-winning intern scheme and an apprenticeships scheme. There are low levels of sickness absence. The council has deservedly established a very good reputation and received a wide range of accolades for both its approach to its staff and their development and for service provision. Examples include the Investors In People 'Gold' award, 'Green Flag' status for several parks and a 'Purple Flag' for its management of the night-time economy. Chelmsford is a World Health Organisation (WHO) 'Healthy City'.

### **3.2 The factors behind the success to date**

There has been tremendous consistency and continuity in the leadership and direction of the council and the borough. There has been political stability, both in terms of a long-standing Conservative Administration and the Leader, and the Chief Executive has been in post for around ten years now. The vision and direction for the place, balancing a growth agenda with preserving the quality of the environment and providing a good quality of life, has been clear for a number of years. The ambition to firstly achieve improvement and stabilise the organisation, starting around the time the Chief Executive assumed his role, and then to progress towards being a top-performing authority, has also been clear and consistent. All of this has provided clarity around what people, both within the council and partner organisations, are working towards. Similarly, the type of organisation, essentially the culture it has sought to develop, has also been clear. There is an absolute commitment in the council, both politically and managerially, to doing what is right for local people and delivering to the highest standard. Such consistency and continuity in leadership and direction has served to give people certainty and confidence, both within and beyond the council.

There are very good relationships between officers and elected members. There is mutual respect and councillors are able to approach officers right across the authority and at all levels, to seek their support and help in progressing issues. Relationships between the political groups are also positive. The main Opposition chair the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and elected members are able to ask questions at Cabinet as well as at Full Council.

The authority has been forward-looking, planned ahead and demonstrated a willingness to take tricky decisions and address difficult issues. This is reflected in the ambition and

direction set for the council as an organisation and Chelmsford as a place. It is also demonstrated in the leadership of the growth agenda and the council's approach to its finances, as outlined below.

The council has planned carefully for growth and seems to have taken local people with them. The planned development of 6,000 new homes in the borough would be tricky to bring about in many places of a similar nature but what is in train appears to have created very limited controversy. The authority's development of its LDF and the related community engagement and consultation has served to smooth the way on this and enable development to take place that appears largely to be viewed as benefiting the city and the borough. Lessons have clearly been learnt around the importance of ensuring the infrastructure necessary to support development on such a scale is established – including schools, key amenities and transport, much of which has involved close working with Essex County Council. Planning officers have also worked closely with staff elsewhere in the council to shape the infrastructure development, including people in the parks and leisure services. Chelmsford City Council has also successfully jointly lobbied with others for the re-development of the existing railway station in Chelmsford, the creation of a new railway station at the heart of the Chelmsford North development, the upgrading of the railway network as part of the 'Norwich in 90' campaign and key developments along the A12 as the main arterial road through the borough.

The council's financial planning and management has proved to be very effective and contributed to the relatively strong position that exists. In the last three years, approximately £4million has been removed from the council's budget. Recognising, several years ago, the need to achieve significant levels of savings, the council moved to reduce the staffing establishment by around 300 posts – equating to approximately 25 per cent. The authority has also been willing to deliver Council Tax increases, despite pressures to resist going down this route. These are further examples of the council being forward-looking, planning ahead and demonstrating willingness to take tricky decisions and address difficult issues. The council has also been willing to utilise capital investment to secure greater financial returns than would otherwise have been available, including the purchase of commercial property. With welfare reforms appearing to trigger a rise in levels of homelessness, and assessing the financial implications of this, the council has been purchasing properties and agreeing long-term letting deals with private sector landlords in order to provide it with a cheaper source of accommodation than bed and breakfast provision. The council demonstrates something of an entrepreneurial spirit, looking continuously at ways of boosting income generation. A recent initiative is the harvesting and selling of hay at Hylands and other areas of grassland! The authority is also driving the efficiency agenda hard. One of the approaches it demonstrates is seeking to deliver change and achieve savings within services by retaining them in-house rather than taking what many councils see as an easier route of out-sourcing functions in order to try and secure improvement. Another example is the volunteering programme that it has established to support maintenance of Chelmsford's parks.

Investment has been made in council staff and services to secure a transformation. This can be seen in the approach to staff development, including the schemes for interns and apprentices and the 'Managers for Chelmsford Tomorrow' programme. The investment that has been made is welcomed and supported by staff. The council has acted as a good employer and is highly regarded and valued by staff as a result. In terms of investment in services, we have already highlighted the turnaround achieved in the revenues and

benefits area. We also saw for ourselves the investment that has been made at Hylands, including the play space and facilities for disabled people, and at the Chelmsford Museum.

The authority is committed to working in partnership and is seen as collaborative and supportive. There is good work going on to develop community volunteering, especially in relation to parks. One partner organisation described the council as “a pleasure and a delight to work with”. The council works effectively with Essex County Council, as seen with the housing growth agenda and related infrastructure development. It shares a couple of services with Maldon District Council, including the emergency planning function, and leads the South Essex Parking Partnership which involves a total of six councils. Chelmsford is very much seen as the ‘go to’ council by others locally in terms of support and advice. When something needs doing amongst councils in Essex it is invariably at the forefront, demonstrating leadership and a willingness to help. It is also regarded nationally as a good council to draw learning from. Something that the council may wish to bear in mind going forward is the benefits for it and for other authorities in the area of encouraging and enabling others to more regularly lead on issues – adopting a stance of nurturing them to be able to come to the fore.

Essentially, this is a council that stands out – including how it performs, the way it looks after its people, how it works with others, its leadership on issues beyond Chelmsford and the magnitude of the growth agenda.

### **3.3 Challenges and opportunities going forward**

Based on the council’s latest financial modelling, by 2018/19 its controllable budget will have reduced by 12.5% from its position in the current financial year. The council simply won’t have the resources available to it to carry on doing what it does now – meaning difficult decisions will be required, entailing some things needing to be compromised upon or sacrificed.

However, the council is much better-placed than most authorities to cope with the financial challenge it faces. Given some councils are facing a budget gap of up to 30 per cent, the scale of the challenge being faced is less. The council also has a range of options available to help it meet the gap – compared to some that have no alternative than to implement dramatic cuts. Within this, there is the potential to further develop income generation – something that the council already has a good track record of and where it is constantly challenging itself and looking to devise further opportunities. Whilst the council’s services appear to us to represent good value for money, which by definition constrains the potential to secure further efficiencies, the fact that services are high quality offers the likely possibility of being able to secure savings by reducing the standard of what is provided.

Within this, and looking to the future, two key questions emerge for the council in our view. The first of these is concerned with what the authority’s aspirations and ambitions are for Chelmsford. Currently, the council’s aims for the borough are extensive and its ambition and civic leadership in this regard is to be applauded. Into the future, the hopes can and should remain high and the targets should be stretching. However, the scope of them will need to be narrowed – in that context of diminishing resources being available. Essentially this is about focusing resources on those issues that are of the greatest importance to the borough and the activities that can achieve the most significant impact on them.

The second key question relates to what type of council the organisation needs to be in order to meet the challenges being faced in the borough. At present the council is defined by its emphasis on high quality delivery across the full range of its responsibilities and levels of investment in staff and services that reflect both this emphasis and the importance attached to having a positive culture. The council also appears to have a natural inclination towards maintaining direct control of services, although also being very happy to work in partnership. Going forward, the authority will have to make decisions around what it continues to maintain current levels of investment in and where things might need to be pared back or even ceased. There will also need to be choices made around what it delivers directly and what is delivered through or in conjunction with others, including what is commissioned and what further opportunities exist for sharing services.

In our view, the council is nearing an important decision point regarding the two questions outlined above. The sooner the above issues can be faced up to, the more options that are likely to be available and the more time is gained to formulate the related plans and implement the necessary changes. We therefore encourage the council to act now in order to capitalise fully on the strong position it has established rather than risking being drawn in to procrastinating and obfuscating.

### **3.4 Options and choices into the future**

Given the relative position of Chelmsford and the council, in terms of the authority's budgetary position, the range and quality of what the council delivers, the positive state of the economy and the exciting growth agenda, what exists for the authority is a 'priorities and choices' agenda. As we have already outlined, the council cannot continue to deliver as it has to date but equally it is not in a position of having to adopt a 'slash and burn' approach. The elected membership of the council has the democratic mandate to determine the way forward – nobody else can fulfil that remit. Local people, partner organisations and council officers (including the interim Commercial Manager) can contribute ideas and help to inform the thinking – but that is all. They cannot take the decisions. Once those decisions are made, the council's very capable group of officers will undoubtedly again demonstrate their ability to implement them effectively.

The issue of value for money in the parks and leisure services that we were asked to probe is an example of this. We are absolutely clear, based on all of the factual and anecdotal evidence made available to us, that there is very high quality provision that represents excellent value for money. Thus, this is not a value for money issue. Instead, it is a question going forward that the council has to answer in relation to how much of a priority the services are that are currently provided and, if it is a lesser priority relative to other functions and activities, what needs to be compromised upon in order to achieve what level of savings. Whilst officers will carry on being imaginative and creative in looking for ways of generating further income, it is not possible to continue to maintain such high quality delivery without also retaining the same level of investment.

Given the financial situation means the status quo on the council's overall resource allocation isn't an option, there are decisions to make over the future direction. There is clearly a strong hope that the authority can generate more and more income going forward. Whilst ideas continue to be generated and opportunities are always being looked at, this cannot provide all the answers – or even a major proportion of them. There will,

instead, need to be a balance struck by the council between 'growing' and 'cutting' its way out of the financial challenge – being clear about what is realistic in terms of income generation opportunities and targets relative to how much spend will need to be reduced by in order to achieve a balanced budget overall. There are also the decisions that need to be made regarding the relative priority levels of different services and functions. We have already cited the example of parks and leisure. As another example, it is clear that the council operates a very comprehensive and high quality HR function. This has been integral in establishing the positive organisational culture that exists, ensuring that staff feel valued and developing a high calibre workforce. The council is rightly proud of this function and what it has achieved. What is in place, though, obviously costs more money than would be the case if the council provided a function geared to ensuring it merely fulfilled its legal obligations as an employer.

There is also something for the authority to consider in relation to how and when its capital funding is best utilised. Such funding can obviously only be used once, after which it becomes tied up, and the level of it is reducing – with a view within the council that it will run out in the next few years. Whilst capital invested in commercial property to generate financial revenue is felt to be providing good returns, and could be made available to the council again by relinquishing the related properties, this is not something that can be done at short notice and is not without risk. Where capital expenditure is made on a specific project, such as the development of the Chelmsford Museum, such funding cannot be re-utilised. Given these constraints, the council will need to decide how best to utilise such funding going forward and really challenge itself in doing so. As an example, with the findings from a conditions survey of the Riverside leisure centre expected shortly, elected members will wish to be clear about the relative importance of this facility, in its current or potentially different future form, when compared to other projects competing for capital funding.

All of this requires clear, determined and collective political and managerial leadership. The managerial leadership has a responsibility to inform elected members' understanding, provide them with professional advice and then implement the decisions that the elected members take. For the political leadership, essentially in the form of the Cabinet, it is important that clear decisions, albeit difficult ones, are taken and that there is collective sign-up to, and ownership of, them. Whilst robust debate should be enabled amongst Cabinet members during informal discussions, and everybody should both be willing and enabled to have their say, it is vital that the necessary decisions, once taken, are jointly owned and adhered to by the whole Cabinet. The managerial leadership needs to show a similarly united front. Clear and consistent messages from the Cabinet and senior officers to staff, other elected members, partner organisations, key stakeholders and local people are essential. Anything else will serve to cause disquiet and confusion within the organisation and damage its credibility and reputation in the eyes of others. What is crucial is being clear about where the council as a whole is going. The 'can do' staff the authority has will get on and do whatever is required of them and they will do it well – they simply need clarity on what it is. The tension that we came across regarding the decision to ask us to consider the issue of value for money in the parks and leisure services is an example of the risks that are run when there isn't collective sign-up to, and leadership of, a situation.

### 3.5 Our thoughts on the way forward

Over the coming weeks, Cabinet and Corporate Management Team should take the opportunity to consider and discuss the findings outlined in this report – both as individual bodies and jointly. There is much that we have fed back that is extremely positive but there are also a small number of significant issues that need to be thought through and responded to. We noted the limited extent to which Cabinet and Corporate Management Team meet together. Doing so, which happens regularly in most councils, provides the opportunity to consider emerging strategic issues. Whilst there is clearly good engagement between Portfolio Holders and their respective Director, and indeed strong relationships can be seen to exist, the risk is that this essentially sees bonds being formed bilaterally around directorates and services rather than collectively in relation to the overall strategic direction and leadership of the council. In short, there is a danger that Portfolio Holders and Directors create what in effect are silos which work against the very positive collaborative culture which operates across the council at middle management levels and below.

In a context of the council nearing an important decision point regarding the ‘priorities and choices’ agenda that we have outlined, we would emphasise that planning ahead has served the authority well in the past and that now is the time to plan ahead again. The council is much better-placed than most authorities to deal with the situation it faces and has time to consider and plan its future carefully. This should be capitalised upon.

A starting point would be the articulation of a clear vision and strategy regarding the distinctiveness of Chelmsford as a place to live, work and visit into the future. This does not involve starting from scratch – people have a clear sense of what Chelmsford is all about, what it stands for and what it offers. Its physical development in the short to medium term is also clearly outlined in existing plans. This piece of work is more about capturing the essence of Chelmsford – the characteristics that make it stand out – and whether/how this will change into the future. The rationale for suggesting this piece of work is two-fold – it will help to determine what ‘City status’ means for the place, and how it can be capitalised upon, and provide a framework within which priorities for the council can be set.

‘City status’ is a source of pride and excitement for people we spoke to – “a shot in the arm” as one person described it. However, at the same time, there was no clear sense of what it means for the future and how the council and the borough might proactively utilise it to secure an advantage over other places. There is anecdotal evidence of benefits such status has brought to date – in the form of the media attention at the time it was awarded, the ‘feel good’ factor it generated amongst local people and the greater prestige that is now attached to the city. It adds a new dimension to the way the place is promoted, for example by estate agents to people seeking to relocate or by the council to potential inward investors. People spoke of it also gaining Chelmsford ‘a place on lists it hasn’t been on before’, including some in Whitehall offering opportunities to bid for external funding or take part in government initiatives or consultations. However, many of our conversations on the subject provided a sense of the status having been awarded and things having moved on without anything further being exploited from it. Others thought there was no clarity on what it meant to Chelmsford or the advantages that are being sought from it.

A clear vision and strategy for the future will serve to inform a clear set of council priorities that, in turn, need to be used to determine how the council allocates a diminishing set of resources. This is vital given the council cannot continue to deliver such breadth of high quality services, functions and activities that it has to date. It is also important to establish a clear and transparent process through which the council's budget gap for the following years will be addressed. Good work has taken place in recent years to achieve budget savings without seeming to compromise council delivery. However, with opportunities for efficiencies diminishing and any significant continuation of 'salami-slicing' likely to see an unnecessarily broad range of services and functions negatively impacted upon, a new approach needs to be found. This will entail being very clear as a council about where the priorities lie and ensuring the authority is able to maintain, or even increase, investment in those areas whilst disinvesting in others. The latest approach adopted by the council in its effort to deliver a balanced budget for 2014/15 has involved each directorate being asked to identify savings equating to five per cent of its employee costs. This does not mean the proposals need to involve staff cuts – it is simply a mechanism of determining a financial target. However, such an approach has no regard for relative priorities and, although equitable in theory, would have a majorly disproportionate impact, if implemented, on those services whose budgets are largely compromised of staff costs. There is tension that has arisen as a result and this is proving damaging to relations and corporate working. This type of approach encourages divisions between services instead of promoting corporate opportunities for savings and efficiencies, for example around channel shift, which require collaboration across services.

Inevitably there will be change within the organisation's leadership over time, both politically and managerially. Whilst not a pressing issue yet, the ability that the council has demonstrated in a range of spheres to plan ahead could usefully also be deployed in thinking about how key people will be replaced when they move on. Taking the opportunity at this point in time to develop succession planning arrangements would stand the council in good stead. How will the wealth of knowledge and experience, and the corporate memory, that is vested in some key senior figures be transferred to or developed in others? What opportunities are available currently or likely to arise in the coming months that people at Corporate Management Team, 'Managers for Chelmsford Tomorrow', Cabinet or backbench level can be encouraged and enabled to take up to help them develop and be ready to assume other responsibilities when the time comes in the future?

Whilst elected members generally feel well supported by the council, and there is an effective elected member development programme in place, a more comprehensive package needs to be established in order to ensure councillors are equipped fully to fulfil their current roles and responsibilities and adapt to new ones in the future. There would seem to be a particular set of requirements around those councillors who were elected more recently and are seeking to balance work, family and council commitments. This entails ensuring they have access to the ICT kit that enables them to operate in the most flexible way and that the range of provision, in terms of dates and times of day, of training, development and information sharing/briefing sessions offered by the council is as broad as possible. A more formalised system for monitoring ward casework might also be worth considering, in order to make it as easy as possible for councillors to highlight an issue to officers and keep track of its progress. Another aspect that is worth considering is the fact that some Cabinet members see themselves as still being new to the role generally or their Portfolio specifically and as a result they and the council would be likely to benefit from

some tailored development activity. This issue applies more generally as well, with the breadth of the elected membership reflecting different levels of experience, skills and interests. Whilst not easy, the more that development activity can be tailored to individuals the better the likely take-up and outcomes and the better councillors can perform their roles.

In planning for future major projects, the council should look to learn from previous experiences in order to ensure maximum benefits are derived. Generally, the council's delivery of key projects has been extremely good. However, some people talked to us about the council not being sufficiently systematic in ensuring the anticipated benefits of a project, or the learning from it, are realised. This is not a major issue – it is simply people highlighting that greater benefits can be secured through the investment of a little extra time and effort and taking the opportunity to reflect ahead of moving on to the next thing. There were no specific projects that sprang to mind for people, although ICT projects were referred to in a general way. It was more a case of people reflecting on the pace at which the organisation moves on from things and what might be missed out on as a result.

Effective challenge and debate within a council is a key aspect of good governance and sound decision-making. An overall conclusion that we have drawn from our activities is that the extent to which it takes place in the authority, particularly within the Corporate Management Team and Cabinet groupings, could usefully be enhanced. The tensions that we experienced as a result of the peer challenge being asked to focus on the issue of value for money within the parks and leisure service and the establishment of the five per cent budget savings modelling exercise, highlighted for us the risks that are being run in issues not being bottomed-out through challenge and debate. The bad feelings that have resulted serve to highlight the way in which similar issues in the future, if not collectively decided upon, owned and led, risks undermining all that is good about the council and the place it serves.

Through the peer challenge process we have sought to highlight the many positive aspects of the council and Chelmsford but we have also outlined some key challenges. It has been our aim to provide some detail on them through this report in order to help the council understand and consider them. The council's senior managerial and political leadership will therefore undoubtedly want to reflect further on the findings before determining how they wish to take things forward.

Members of the team would be happy to contribute to any further improvement activity in the future and/or to return to the authority in due course to undertake a short progress review. Rachel Litherland, as the Local Government Association's Principal Adviser for the region within which the council sits, will continue to act as the main contact between the council and the Local Government Association, particularly in relation to improvement. Hopefully this provides you with a convenient route of access to the organisation, its resources and packages of support going forward.

All of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish Chelmsford, both as a council and a place, every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

Chris Bowron  
Programme Manager – Peer Support  
Local Government Association