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Chief Executive
Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury councils
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Dear Ian

**West Suffolk councils: Corporate Peer Challenge
13-15 November 2013 and 12-14 February 2014**

On behalf of the peer team, I would like to say what a pleasure and privilege it was to be invited into West Suffolk councils 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 West Suffolk were:

- David Clarke – Chief Executive of West Dorset and Weymouth and Portland councils
- Councillor Paul Middlebrough – Leader, Wychavon Council
- Councillor Tony Ball, Leader, Basildon Council
- Martin Hammond, Deputy Chief Executive, Kettering Council
- Jon McGinty, Deputy Chief Executive, Aylesbury Vale Council
- Heather Wills – Principal Adviser, LGA

Scope and focus of the peer challenge

You asked us to provide an external 'health-check' of the organisation in the context of your ambitions for the further economic growth and development of West Suffolk, the maximisation of partnership working, and the development of a more commercial approach to service delivery. We have done this by considering the following core components looked at by all corporate peer challenges:

1. Understanding of the local context and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and has it established a clear 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. Political and managerial leadership: Does the council have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?
4. Governance and decision-making: Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?
5. Organisational capacity: Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

At your request, we delivered this challenge in two tranches: the first focused primarily on the five core components, and the second focused more on your ambitions for growth, partnership working and commercialisation.

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 councils' 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 presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that 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 councils and the challenges they are facing. The team then spent two sets of 3 days onsite in West Suffolk during which they:

- Spoke to more than 135 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 60 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 172 hours on site to determine their findings (in addition to pre-reading and preparation) – the equivalent of one person spending around 5 weeks in West Suffolk

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 two on-site visits (13 – 15 November 2013 and 12-14 February 2014). 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.

Summary of feedback: overall observations and messages

You have much to be proud of in West Suffolk. You have made significant progress at pace on a challenging journey to put in place your shared service management arrangements. You have done this through a strong, shared political vision and direction, and clear, visible managerial leadership. These will stand you in good stead as you seek to achieve your ambitions for economic growth, and build capacity through commercial approaches and partnerships.

You are a valued partner across a range of important partnerships in the sub-region: your partners in particular are impressed by what you have delivered in terms of shared management and associated savings, seeing you as councils who will deliver what you say you will.

Your services have been maintained through this very significant period of change, and staff have understood and 'bought in' to the reasons for it. There is still work to be done to complete the move to shared management and services, while at the same time, progressing your ambitions for the future. Greater and continuing engagement with all stakeholders (for example, staff, frontline councillors, the County Council, parish and town councils, businesses, voluntary and community organisations) will build local capacity to achieve those ambitions.

The councils are, we think, in a sound financial position relative to many other authorities. You have rightly recognised that in order to meet the further financial challenges of the coming period, fresh approaches, beyond shared management and services, will be essential. You have wisely spent time with leading members developing a clearer understanding of what you are aiming to achieve with your commercialisation work: this will stand you in good stead as you move to implement new approaches. There is a widespread eagerness to embrace these new ways of working. Some further thought now about the ways in which you will make investment decisions based on robust business cases, and the resources and expertise you need to do this will position you well for the future.

Given the local context and challenges facing the local government sector more generally, economic development and growth is unsurprisingly becoming a greater focus for the council and is one of your key objectives. Your wide and robust political commitment to the growth agenda is based on coherent and realistic ambitions. There are still some significant challenges to be addressed, but you have good capacity and many opportunities to build on.

Summary of feedback: current performance, ability and capacity to deliver future ambitions

Understanding of local context and priority setting

The achievement of an agreed, focused set of shared priorities for the first time across the two councils is a significant achievement (and one that councils which have shared management for longer periods than in West Suffolk have not yet achieved). The work bringing together both Cabinets to develop these priorities has helped to build mutual understanding and trust. There is a clear sense of ambition for the place, and a recognition that the councils must change the way they do things in order to deliver the things that matter most to local residents and businesses in the context of significantly reduced financial resources.

You are aware that further work is required to develop these overarching priorities into SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound) objectives. Crucially, you will need to link these priorities to your financial planning. We encourage you not to under-estimate the challenge of this further work— particularly the associated decisions as to what will not happen as a result of this prioritisation. This will need to include some honest and open conversations both internally (with all members and with staff) and externally (with the full range of stakeholders).

We think there is potential for you to progress these priorities further not just in what you do, but the way that you do it. Effective and sustained engagement with the voluntary and community sector and with parishes and towns will help you to build the capacity you are seeking through your families and communities strategy. As you move forwards, such engagement with all of your members and partners will enable you to be confident and demonstrate that your priorities are based on a thorough understanding of local needs. Finding non-bureaucratic, fleet-of-foot ways of making and implementing decisions will demonstrate to business partners that you are serious about prioritizing growth and becoming more commercial in your approach.

There is clearly a balance to be struck between plan-making and ensuring effective implementation: we would encourage you to consider which of the plans and strategies currently existing separately for each authority you will prioritise for early review and development into joint plans, as you move to joint planning as the norm.

Members and stakeholders clearly understand the financial climate and context in which you are operating, and the continued need to save money and improve efficiency. Staff are well aware of the scale of the challenges and are keen to be involved in addressing them. Your approach to shared management is well understood in light of that financial context.

Effective demand management can also make an important contribution to addressing the financial challenge. Managing service demand is complex and requires the development of adult conversations with the community about future service expectations, facilitating self-delivery by communities and re-organising customer contact and customer intelligence.

You have embarked on an ambitious transformation of customer contact on a phased basis, which you expect to support a demand management approach. This will expand into a considerable programme and you will need to ensure that it is well planned, resourced and managed in order to ensure you achieve the desired outcomes of improved customer relationships, demand management and lean delivery. Part of this programme includes channel shift and you are already giving thought to the improvement/ combination of websites to secure delivery to efficient customer contact channels. You recognise that developing customer relationship management will bring the benefits of customer knowledge which in turn can help tailored delivery and “up-selling” additional services to support your commercialisation agenda.

In light of the financial challenge, and also your analysis of the social and economic profile of the area, it is clear why you have prioritised economic development and growth in your plan. We believe that you have coherent and realistic growth ambitions, backed by a widespread and robust commitment to the growth agenda. Your 6-point plan is a good start on your economic development journey.

Financial planning and viability

The councils look to be in a sound current financial position. This undoubtedly has been partly down to prudent financial management and the implementation of your shared management and services arrangements which have delivered significant savings and enabled you to protect and preserve your key services. Looking ahead, a medium term financial strategy is in place for each council, albeit this will need to be kept under review as the Government makes further funding announcements.

Your decision not to use New Homes Bonus for core revenue purposes, and your healthy reserves, put you in a position of comparative strength as you face the further challenges to come. These, and the Leaders’ fund arising from business rates pooling (an example of notable practice), offer you the potential to invest strategically to develop new ways of working and to support the achievement of your priorities. You have already started to consider the potential to borrow for investment, and your challenge now is to develop an appropriate mechanism that will enable you to make investment decisions, based on a robust understanding of risk and return and priority ambitions.

The identification of a balanced budget for 2014/15 at an early stage is a significant achievement of which you can be proud. As you progress the delivery plans for that budget, you may get some windfalls or new income streams and we urge you to consider how you will decide to use these to best effect. There may be timing/phasing issues on the delivery of some savings, and you will need to pay attention to programming and prioritisation as your work progresses. In doing so, you may wish to consider whether your approach to managing the savings programme, with themed lead officers, delivers the added value you were seeking when creating those roles.

You have progressed the development of budget plans for 2015/16: we strongly encourage you to continue to press ahead with the detail of these in good time before the 2015/16 budget process, and to start developing your plans for 2016/17 and beyond as well.

There is still work to be done to design the mechanism for the identification, prioritisation and management of corporate investment opportunities. We advise you to be realistic about your expectations for investment income: there may be times when it is prudent not to invest, and therefore it will take time to build up a portfolio of income streams. It will be prudent to model your projected reliance on Government grant in light of this: what will the percentage split between central and locally generated funding be in 4-5 years' time?

We questioned whether priority-led resourcing and budgeting needs to be a more prominent feature of your financial management and a bigger driver of the financial strategy. Can the alignment of your strategic plan and medium term financial plans be further developed? Have you sufficiently (re-)directed resources in order to ensure achievement of your priorities?

While your reserves and New Homes Bonus are certainly a positive that many other councils would envy, there is also a risk that they become a 'comfort blanket', reducing the pressure to identify and deliver savings. You are fortunate enough to have a strategic choice: to maintain a safety net, or to use your financial resources to drive more vigorously the achievement of your priorities for efficiency and growth.

You clearly understand the benefits of economic growth, both for the residents and businesses of West Suffolk, and for the councils' own finances. We would question whether you are ready to proactively influence the generation of business rates as an increasingly important income stream for the councils as opposed to benefiting from windfall developments.

You have analysed extensively the sources of information that identify new business and therefore potential changes in business rates. You may now wish to consider whether there are significant unbilled business rates and, more importantly for future

planning, how best to predict change/growth and major reductions in the business rate base so that both the benefits of growth and threats to the base are easily identified and managed.

Engagement with businesses which are looking to grow, and supporting them to do so, alongside the LEPs and County Council, will be one way of maximizing the financial and economic gains; using businesses to be your ambassadors to other audiences will also assist. You could also explore using business rates flexibilities to create inward investment incentive schemes. Being light on your feet and responsive will bring more rewards than trying to gather or analyse large amounts of data.

We heard during our visit that you are starting to consider how to move from a relationship based on sharing savings, to one of cost sharing, and of taking opportunities for each council to support the other for mutual benefit. We encourage you to continue your momentum in this direction in order to fully realise the benefits of shared management and services. As with all such strategic discussions, open and transparent engagement with all members will be essential to ensure that all benefits and implications are fully understood and owned.

You may wish to consider, once cost sharing mechanisms are in place, the identification of the full financial implications of new initiatives/projects within formal reports. This would need to include the cost of staff to ensure members are aware of the full cost implications, thus avoiding potential tensions around shifting staff resources towards one partner authority from the other (e.g. IT, HR, or other technical staff suddenly working on a major project for one authority).

Political and Managerial Leadership

The two Leaders are providing strong political direction, underpinned by mutual trust and understanding which delivers essential consistency of vision across the two councils. The Leaders together with the Chief Executive provide visible leadership which is valued and respected internally and externally. The new senior management structure, which frees up the directors to lead on many of the externally-focused programmes and partnerships, freeing up the Chief Executive to be a visible leader within the organisation, appears to be working well, and is understood by most, if not all, staff.

In terms of political leadership, the Cabinet appears to have an excellent grasp of their portfolios, and are showing leadership, passion and commitment to their areas of responsibility. Our observation of a Joint Cabinet planning meeting suggests good and effective relationships across the two Cabinets, which are assisting the development and delivery of coherent and consistent plans and services. Excellent collaboration between Portfolio Holders is supporting their work in the wider county and sub-region.

We understand you are considering how the synergy and alignment between Cabinet portfolios across the two councils, the Joint Leadership Team and strategic plan objectives can be further developed, and would welcome this.

Officer / member relationships appear positive and based on mutual respect, trust and a growing understanding of the socio economic geography of West Suffolk. There is regular dialogue not only between portfolio holders and senior managers but between portfolio holders of the two councils who on occasions substitute for each other at regional events. There were a few instances where the two portfolio holders did not appear to be completely aligned in terms of strategy: we would suggest you consider whether this is a significant issue, and if it is, how you will address it?

There is a risk however that, portfolio holders are sufficiently high profile that external stakeholders and potential investors mistake them for individual decision makers, and engage in dialogues which are not appropriate. Members need to be supported to prevent that occurring.

Members and staff demonstrate ambitious and constructive engagement with the priorities of the partnership. It may be advantageous to consider expanding exposure and contact of third/fourth tier staff to members, portfolio holders and committees to help develop broader capacity.

Your political direction is strong: you will be aware that the other side of the leadership coin is taking people with you. Frontline councillors (of all groups) are a considerable potential resource to the councils in engaging with communities and leading the conversation about what will be different in the future. How will you consistently engage with them to ensure that they are fully equipped to do this? The first of a series of member engagement events, which took place in January, was a good step in this direction.

While there was clarity about the overall direction in terms of shared management and services, we encountered a wide variety of views, from staff, members, stakeholders and the community, about what this will mean in detail. Perceptions varied between no further change to a complete merger. Confusion is exacerbated by the transition process: a combination of different email addresses, phone numbers and stationery. Work to develop and communicate widely a clear narrative about your 'West Suffolk journey' will help avoid unhelpful speculation and assist staff to focus on your wider priorities.

In addition to a clearer explanation of the journey that you are on, there was a strong appetite among business and community stakeholders for more effective communication. They believe you have many good news stories to tell – they just want to hear them! Again, the first meeting of the business forum in January was a

good first step – the challenge will be to ensure this enables regular, two-way communication and is used as an opportunity for wider engagement.

Effective engagement and communication are key, ensuring all stakeholders feel listened to and communicating a message that is coherent and cohesive about the vision and strategy for the area. Agreeing ‘lines to take’ and common language, using a single set of facts and figures will help create a more consistent articulation of the vision, objectives and council activity to support them.

You have a unique opportunity in Suffolk to build on strong partnerships with other public agencies in order to drive out further savings and deliver your objectives through joined-up working. Most other councils would covet such an opportunity. We posed the question of how will you further develop your vision to ensure that the objectives of both West Suffolk and your partners are achieved? And how will you engage all of your stakeholders in this?

Governance and decision-making

Joint Cabinet Planning is clearly a strong driver for joint policy development and planning, and appears to be working well.

We have already mentioned taking the opportunity to consider how alignment between portfolios and strategic objectives, and senior officers can be developed further. We suggest another area for development might be the information and communication provided to frontline councillors to assist them in their ward representative roles. While you do produce a regular member information bulletin, it appears to be quite a weighty combination of a variety of other documents: we think there is scope to consider a revised version which would be more focused towards engaging and supporting members to play their full role as community leaders.

We referenced above the importance of engaging all members in the identification of the councils’ priorities. Again, the way in which you engage members in developing and defining their roles as community leaders (particularly in relation to the families and communities strategy, and growth) will be important to secure buy-in, and to enable you to identify and meet any needs for support.

In moving to a model of shared management and services there is always potential for concerns amongst members, staff and community about a ‘takeover’ by one council or the other. As the implementation of the changes has progressed, this fear appears to be receding amongst staff and members: the development of a clearer narrative about the ‘West Suffolk journey’ as suggested above will help to allay any such concerns in the community.

West Suffolk is very clearly in the middle of a process of transition – not only towards shared management and services, but also towards a new focus on economic

growth, taking a more commercial approach, and a different relationship with communities. In light of this, we suggest it is now timely to reconsider your approaches in a few key areas:

- You have started to consider the levels of risk that you think are appropriate in this new context: how will you manage them?
- What is the role of Scrutiny in this new model? You have started to implement joint reviews and we would suggest West Suffolk would benefit from the wider perspectives and challenge that more of these will bring. These will include the potential for more scrutiny of external agencies and partners on issues of significance for the area, and those that are key factors in the delivery of the council's objectives and overall determinants of quality of life. You have discovered that joint Overview and Scrutiny brings its own energy and challenges: the LGA/ Centre for Public Scrutiny would be happy to discuss how they can help you in the development of this new approach.
- A clearer narrative about the role and nature of the West Suffolk identity (whether or not fully developed into a brand identity) will enable you to clarify when you are communicating or acting as a single council or as a joint entity, and ensure this is consistently applied. This is particularly important as you develop your approach to marketing West Suffolk as a place for inward investment.
- What are the forums which will enable you to engage most effectively with your partners and stakeholders? How will you involve those stakeholders in making those decisions?

You have rightly identified the potential for IT, for new approaches to customer access and for new ways of working with communities to deliver savings in West Suffolk. Since our first visit, you have increased the scale and effectiveness of the programme management of your transformation work to good effect. There is still some work to be done to ensure that benefits definition and realisation, and the understanding and management of risk is of a consistently high standard across the councils.

Organisational Capacity

Your achievement in completing this scale of organisational change in a short space of time, delivering a 14% staffing reduction without noticeably impacting on customers or services, is significant. Service managers spoke positively about the increased management capacity and resilience that they believe the new structure has delivered. They feel empowered to get on with the operational management of their services, while heads of service and directors work with members to develop policy and strategy.

The creation of a Resilience Fund to enable temporary backfilling, and the secondment of a union official full-time to focus on the restructure, are both examples of notable practice and ones which we believe played a part in your achievement. We think that your commitment to, and track record of supporting apprenticeships are also exemplary.

The clear understanding among frontline staff of the scale of the financial challenge still to come, was matched by an eagerness to be part of finding and delivering the solutions. The staff we met, on the whole, clearly enjoy working in West Suffolk and are committed to their work and the people they serve. Some teams (both frontline staff and managers) were cited as having worked 'above and beyond' to keep services going through the restructure and there were concerns about how long this would be sustainable. The peer team gained the impression that greater senior member recognition (simply saying 'thank you') of those working abnormally long hours would go a long way toward maintaining goodwill.

Similarly, while most managers have been visible and supportive throughout the process, there is scope to ensure that all achieve the standards of the best. Since we first raised these issues in November, we know that considerable work has gone into your organisational development strategy, which includes a number of measures which will address staff recognition and reward and performance management. We heard a number of examples of the organisation seeking to celebrate success – and we encourage you to continue to do this.

The degree of positivity in frontline staff (and some managers) about the restructure was evidently a function of their current state of progress through the transition: those whose teams had been appointed for some time, had done the work on identifying and implementing new processes, and had come together as teams, were by far the most positive. While this had clearly progressed further when we came back in February, we encourage you not to under-estimate the scale of the work still required to re-align processes and develop new teams where this has not yet happened.

Almost everywhere we went, the capacity of ICT systems and staff to support the completion of the staffing restructure and deliver further changes was a key issue. In November, it was clear that expectations were far outstripping the ability of the team and associated resources to deliver. In February we found that your work to increase programme management capacity has been effective in terms of developing and communicating clear, joined-up plans for ICT and wider transformation.

However, we would question whether West Suffolk has the full capacity and expertise necessary to deliver a future-proof ICT strategy. Do you fully understand the current and future state of the ICT market? At present it appears there is a risk that strategic ICT decisions are being made on a service-by-service basis without a longer-term overview being taken. We understand that expertise from elsewhere is being drawn

on, but suggest that consideration be given to bringing in some temporary expert capacity to develop your ICT strategy.

Your use of internal service managers to drive forward key projects within the transformation programme will help to build experience and capacity in the organisation. We would however advise you to guard against 'optimism bias'- is everything really deliverable within existing resources? There are many customer strategy projects which, once the ICT elements are delivered, will still require considerable process re-engineering and transformation work before they are fully realised.

We raised the question of where will the external challenge, necessary for successful project and programme management come from? Your current models of corporate governance serve you well for the current 'day job' – but are they adequate for what you will be doing next – and your journey to get there?

Some further thoughts on the capacity required for commercialisation, economic growth and partnerships are considered in the relevant sections below.

We fully understand the imperatives that led to the accelerated implementation of the restructure, and know that you are now turning your attention to wider organisational development, addressing issues such as organisational culture, values and skills. We were impressed by this work when we saw it in February: it contains a number of innovative approaches, and believe that, when implemented, it may be notable practice from which the rest of the sector can learn. This work will also provide an opportunity to embed the focus on commercialism, and also partnership working, in West Suffolk.

The savings and associated efficiencies you have achieved to date are considerable and you should be proud of them. We encourage you, however, not to lose sight of the continuing costs and impacts on wider capacity of maintaining two sites, and three democratic processes.

Economic growth

West Suffolk is in the fortunate position that, generally speaking, there is a public acceptance of the need for growth in the area. This has undoubtedly been influenced by a widespread and robust political commitment to the growth agenda, and a proportionate amount of planned growth, which has led to the councils being able to positively influence the LEPs' approaches to housing growth and infrastructure. As districts, you have a distinct role to play within the LEPs: partners recognise that role and you are making a good contribution.

The councils' coherent and realistic growth ambitions are underpinned by a clear understanding of the scale and detail of infrastructure required to support them.

You have made good progress on your planning policy framework, and we came across some examples of notable practice, such as the Suffolk Growth Group (an officer meeting linking through to the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders) and the work on modelling traffic impacts in Bury St Edmunds, funded by developers. You have good quality staff in your planning team, and good working relationships with the utilities and other strategic partners, who also understand your growth objectives – could you work more closely with them on this agenda?

In terms of your approach to economic development, your 6-point plan is a good base from which to build. Again, you have an energetic and committed Economic Development team- an unusually strong resource for district councils. An impressive array of projects and work to secure key infrastructure (eg the Mildenhall hub, Haverhill research park, Home of Horseracing, the A1307) are being delivered. There are good plans for business relationship management, and the Business Forum has started to meet. You will want to consider how best to direct the energy and capacity of the Economic Development team to ensure maximum impact on your priorities.

You are well aware of the risks of a lack of a 5-year land supply and robust Local Plan in Forest Heath: this is clearly a priority for you to address. We encourage you to consider the speed at which you can move to a Core Spatial Strategy for the whole of West Suffolk.

You will also be aware of the work still to be done to close the infrastructure funding gap for the achievement of the Bury St Edmunds masterplan. You have made good progress with this, and we are sure you will not underestimate the scale of the challenge, or the complexity of assembling multiple funding sources.

We heard of a few cases where Forest Heath council had successfully challenged developers' viability claims in order to ensure the delivery of affordable housing and essential infrastructure. We would question whether you have all of the skills and tools you need to be able to do this consistently, at the scale you will need to achieve your ambitions.

You may also wish to look at whether you have or could generate the expertise to improve the design standards for new developments, for example by design masterplanning at the early stage of a major application.

You are fully aware of the importance of effective planning and development control services to support your growth objectives, and are focusing on the improvement of performance in this area. Clearly some of the issues have been temporary – the impact of the restructure, the introduction of new IT systems and processes – and no doubt the benefit of a new, fully resourced team will begin to be felt. However, we suggest that, in addition to considering how to address the backlog, you

consider whether caseloads are manageable ongoing, particularly in light of planning officers' additional responsibilities in relation to enforcement. You may find it useful to work with the Planning Advisory Service to benchmark your processes and performance.

As you do address the capacity issues within the Planning team, we encourage you not to lose sight of possible bottlenecks elsewhere in the system which may impact on your ability to turnaround planning applications in a timely manner. These will include consultees within the councils, but also other strategic partners: do they have the capacity to keep pace with your levels of growth, and if not, how can you work with them to address this challenge?

Parish and town councils are, of course, key partners with the districts in relation to the growth agenda, as with all other areas of local government work. At present, the effects of the restructure, issues with planning performance, communication issues relating to the reasons for planning decisions and inconsistent engagement on a range of matters are getting in the way of effective engagement with the parishes and towns. We understand that development sessions do take place with parishes and towns, but these have not yet been as successful as you would like in enabling all clerks and chairs to fully understand either policy issues (for example, the thrust of the families and communities strategy) or more technical issues such as 'material' planning considerations. More proactive engagement with clerks and chairs after decisions are made to help them understand the basis for planning decisions would, we think, help with this.

Having addressed these fundamental issues, we would encourage you to have a more detailed and continuing conversation with the parishes and towns about the benefits of growth, engaging with them to better understand what benefits they are seeking from development in their areas.

There is scope to further benefit from the synergies between your key priorities, and to achieve join-up across different areas of the councils. For example, this could include closer connections between the work of planning officers and the Economic Development team, and consideration of the role of Families and Communities Officers in facilitating growth in local areas. How will you use the intelligence arising from your business forum to inform strategic planning across the councils? Can the economic growth business account manager role you are developing provide a one stop approach into the organisation, making it easy for businesses to deal with West Suffolk?

There are clearly many opportunities for potential investors in West Suffolk. In a competitor climate, it is essential that your 'elevator pitch' is as sharp as possible – by which we mean, are you ready to pitch the benefits of investing in West Suffolk to maximum effect whenever the opportunity arises? We believe there is some more

work to be done to ensure that key messages are articulated and consistently delivered as opportunities arise – whether by the leaders, portfolio holders, frontline councillors or relevant officers. A clear narrative about the kind of economy you want West Suffolk to be is fundamental to this, and an external marketing and communications strategy to guide your approach will be essential.

As we said earlier, you have an unusually strong Economic Development resource, and you are rightly seeking to take the lead on this agenda for your place. As you do this, we encourage you to consider drawing on resources and expertise at, for example, Suffolk County Council in relation to the skills agenda, supported by LEP/ EU funding. There are real opportunities to the West Suffolk partnership of nurturing relationships with Suffolk County Council to continue and improve two way input on the strategic and delivery front, and it is important for West Suffolk to be well placed to influence the direction of skills development. This builds on your ability to have had a “disproportionate” influence on the LEP’s plans and funding. Greater clarity about who is doing what and how join-up is achieved will enable all partners to play to their strengths.

Commercialisation

On our February visit we found that strong political leadership for the commercialisation agenda has now been complemented by a deeper understanding of what it means to be commercial. The Task and Finish group has performed a valuable role in enabling important discussions about the organisation’s attitudes to commercial and political risk. There is now a greater, shared understanding of the kinds of values and approaches you will bring to this work – what is your ‘Unique Selling Point’.

You have made strong new appointments which will help you to take this work forwards – and the strong enthusiasm of staff to get involved (which borders on impatience) is a real asset. We heard some excellent examples of West Suffolk empowering individuals to strike tailored deals which will benefit both of the councils and local residents/ businesses.

Now that the work of the Task and Finish Group is drawing to a close, you will need to consider the respective roles of members and officers, and to find appropriate governance mechanisms for this work ongoing. Your experience in developing shared management provides a useful precedent, where members set the policy framework, and officers were empowered to get on with the detail.

In November we recommended that you be careful not to get bogged down in process and bureaucracy. While this remains a risk, we are equally concerned that you find an appropriately robust methodology to capture and consider the business

cases for each commercial opportunity that arises. To use a locally-relevant metaphor: how will you decide which horses to back?

In addition in driving forward your aim of becoming less reliant on government grant, you will be considering corporate investment in income-earning assets which may or may not be related directly to services (e.g. retail and commercial development). You may want to consider how this corporate investment is driven and whether you have got sufficient expertise to assess such investments, identifying choices which maximise benefits against manageable risk levels.

As you move to scale up your commercialisation activity, we encourage you to consider issues of capacity, and where it is most appropriate to standardise and take a corporate approach. The activity which is being planned and delivered to date is being led within service areas below JLT level: this has its own value, but will not deliver, in most cases, the big-ticket investments and approaches. Where will the cross-cutting projects come from and how will they be led? For example, what is the role of procurement across West Suffolk?

Some of these projects can be delivered by officers within their day jobs- indeed for many they are the day job. However, that is not the case for all initiatives that you might wish to pursue: how will you resource these? We also recommend that you consider areas where there is value to the organisation in having a corporate approach – for example, a corporate pricing strategy, and/or a single sales team. The corporate provision of resources to support service-based activity can bring efficiencies, as well as sending a powerful message about the importance of this agenda: for example, Aylesbury Vale DC have a ‘costs ready reckoner’ on their intranet that allows staff to look up their own personal charge-out rates, and identify pricing options on a full or part-cost recovery basis for any consultancy opportunities that they identify.

There is still some work to be done to ensure a shared understanding of this agenda within and outside the organisation. Not all portfolio holders and officers understand the implications of this approach for the priorities and services that they lead on: for example, will funds raised within services be retained within those services, contribute to wider strategic objectives, or are they required for funding corporate investment projects yielding annual returns? There is a continuing need for honest, mature conversations with partners and communities about the rationale for this approach, and a clear consistent narrative will be necessary to support this.

Maximising the potential of partnerships

We were delighted to see continued momentum and a further strengthening in the relationship between the two councils in our February visit. Trust and transparency to support this were clear at both member and officer levels, giving you a very strong base from which to develop other partnerships. We also saw evidence of

strengthening relationships with business, the LEPs, the health sector, housing partners and other districts – within and outside Suffolk.

We saw excellent examples of Portfolio Holders developing strong, strategic relationships with partners – for example, in the fields of health and housing. There is also clearly a maturing relationship with the County Council.

West Suffolk House is a fantastic opportunity to build strategic service delivery partnerships, as well as contributing commercial benefits to the councils. You have rightly identified that co-location in and of itself will not deliver the new ways of working you seek across agencies such as social care and health, and will be seeking to build on this opportunity by setting clear expectations of how staff will work together.

We heard some excellent examples of notable practice – for example, the use of Section 106 funds to create a room in a community centre for use by a GP, bringing a much-needed benefit into the community in a cost-effective way for the CCG. Occupational Therapists, working closely alongside housing services in relation to Disabled Facilities Grant, is another example.

You have rightly identified the need to focus on desired outcomes rather than structures and budgets in your discussions with the county. We are confident that time spent building this relationship and mutual understanding will bring benefits for both sides.

As mentioned earlier, the parish and town councils, and the voluntary and community sectors are important partners for you. You also recognise the importance of developing further your relationship with the County Council in supporting the delivery of your priorities and outcomes in a coordinated way. There have been some examples of good practice in engagement – we strongly encourage you to build on these, to make this consistent across West Suffolk. You will continue to face very difficult decisions: it is essential to have adult-to-adult conversations about these with your partners, and to engage openly and honestly about possible solutions. The answers will not come from West Suffolk alone, and by engaging partners at the earliest opportunity you will open up the potential for new solutions. Robust relationships are best built through face to face conversations – and not through emails and technical documents.

The Families and Communities strategy is a proactive, innovative approach to building capacity and partnerships at local level and we were encouraged to see good progress being made in its implementation. We heard a number of different interpretations of the roles of the Families and Communities Officers and their relationships to ward councillors. We suggest you have a small window in which to

ensure a consistent understanding of these roles if you are to maximize the potential benefits they could bring and ensure that this is a sustainable strategy.

We think there is further potential to ensure join-up between the Families and Communities strategy and other priorities. For example, how do the families and communities officers help to address childhood obesity, or promote growth? And how will you prioritise their work to ensure it makes the difference you are aiming for?

Our recommendations: suggestions and ideas for your consideration

In addition to the many questions posed above, the peer team developed some key recommendations for you to consider. These are based on what we saw, heard and read. Drawing on our experience of the sector and knowledge of local government improvement, the following are things we think will help you to make best use of your skills and experience, deliver some quick wins, and develop the strengths you will need to progress your areas of focus:

1. Continue to develop the West Suffolk councils' narrative as relevant to your various different audiences, to ensure clear, consistent messages are heard and understood
2. Develop your approach to engagement with frontline councillors, County Council, parish and town councils, voluntary and community sectors and the business community to enable West Suffolk's very many willing partners to contribute fully to the development and delivery of new solutions.
3. Clarify the respective roles of members and officers in relation to your commercialisation agenda, and develop a robust approach to decision-making on strategic, cross-cutting projects
4. Support all councillors to understand their role in relation to all of your priorities - particularly the families and communities strategy, and the contributions they will need to make to building capacity and partnerships at local level
5. Consider the skills, tools, capacity and techniques you need now and into the future to drive through your commercialisation, economic growth and transformation agendas

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. In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with you and colleagues through the peer challenge to date. We will endeavour to signpost you to other sources of information and examples of practice and thinking.

I thought it helpful to provide contact details for Rachel Litherland who is our Principal Adviser (East of England). Rachel can be contacted via email at rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk (or tel. 07795 076834). She is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Hopefully this provides you with a convenient route of access to the Local Government Association, its resources and any further support.

All of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish you every success going forward. Once again, many thanks to you and your colleagues for inviting the peer challenge and to everyone involved for their participation.

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On behalf of the peer challenge team

Appendix 1 – feedback slides