

David Buckle
Chief Executive
Vale of White Horse District Council
Abbey House
Abbey Close
Abingdon
Oxfordshire
OX14 3JE

22nd September 2011

Dear David

Vale of White Horse District Council – Corporate 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 the Vale of White Horse to deliver the recent joint peer challenge with South Oxfordshire District Council. The team very much appreciated the welcome we received, the openness and honesty with which people engaged in the process and the support provided in the lead up to, and during the course of, the challenge.

This was the second corporate peer challenge delivered by the Local Government (LG) Group as part of the new approach to sector led improvement, with the first taking place only a week prior to yours. It is testimony to the drive and ambition of the Vale of White Horse that the council commissioned the peer challenge so early on. This was also the first ever peer challenge of two councils with shared arrangements that the LG Group or its predecessor bodies have undertaken.

As you will recall, we undertook to write to you to confirm the team's findings relating to the specification agreed with yourselves for the challenge and, in particular, to expand upon those areas identified as 'emerging challenges'. This letter sets out those findings.

You requested a broad ranging 'health check' to test how well the two councils are currently managed and were keen for the team to consider the impact of joint working between the two councils in terms of improved service delivery and

efficiency gains. This was within a context of considering a set of ‘high level questions’ agreed with yourselves relating to leadership and governance, delivery against local priorities and organisational capacity.

It is important to stress again that this was not an inspection. 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 team’s overall conclusions were summarised in a set of key themes delivered at the final feedback session.

There is a story of good progress on many priority areas within the Vale of White Horse, with this having been achieved at the same time as delivering a challenging and innovative agenda centred on the implementation of the shared arrangements. Performance improvement has been delivered in priority areas and the council is held in high regard by citizens and partners. A very strong focus has been placed on efficiency which is seeing the council moving to a more financially sustainable position. The two councils are at the leading edge in relation to progressing shared arrangements, with the extent of the joining up of staffing structures being amongst the most extensive nationally – the achievement of which has involved managing major organisational and cultural change very effectively in difficult circumstances. All of this has been achieved in the relatively short period of time since 2008.

All of the above is extremely positive and of great credit to the council and all those connected with it. However, the timing of the peer challenge was opportune because it helped to confirm that a set of key challenges are now emerging which potentially represent a significant risk. The remainder of this document is given over to outlining the story of good progress and the emerging challenges in greater detail.

The table below highlights the key strengths noted by the peer challenge team.

<p>The story from 2008 to date</p> <p>Significant performance improvements</p> <p>Effective performance management arrangements</p>	<p>In recent years, the council has delivered significant improvement in performance in a number of priority areas including revenues and benefits, recycling and dealing with fly tipping. A key contributory factor is the effective performance management arrangements that have been put in place by the council. As examples of this, the team were impressed with the Board Report, which provides an easy to understand graphical overview of performance in key areas on a monthly basis, and the ‘Communication Points’ and ‘Performance Points’ concept which enables teams to see how they are performing and discuss key issues on a</p>
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<p>Effective management of change</p> <p>Hard work and professionalism amongst staff during difficult times</p> <p>Pride and enthusiasm amongst managers and recognition by staff of the benefits that the changes have brought</p> <p>Strong political leadership</p> <p>Senior managerial leadership – many complimentary comments</p> <p>Range of achievements on issues that are local priorities</p>	<p>regular basis both amongst themselves and with senior managers and politicians.</p> <p>There has been a significant amount of organisational change within the Vale of White Horse in the last couple of years, related to the establishment of the shared arrangements with South Oxfordshire. This has involved a number of people leaving the organisation through one means or another. Whilst nobody is seeking to claim that this process has been easy for anybody, and we did not meet with anybody who has moved on from the council during that time, we were left with a very strong sense that the changes have been handled in an effective way. The number of compulsory redundancies has been kept to a minimum and there has been no disruption in service provision. We were impressed by the hard work and professionalism shown by staff during what must have been difficult and challenging times. In meeting with a range of staff, we saw a great deal of pride amongst managers about what has been achieved and enthusiasm about the future challenges, whilst many other staff could see the benefits that the changes have brought in terms of improved performance and reduced costs.</p> <p>Both the driving ahead of the shared arrangements and the performance improvement in relation to local priorities reflect strong political leadership within the council. We also heard many complimentary comments about the senior managerial leadership of the council, including staff valuing and respecting the way in which, during the change process, the chief executive had met regularly with them and had open and honest discussions about issues of concern to them.</p> <p>The strength of the political and managerial leadership is reflected in the range of achievements on issues that represent local priorities including Science Vale UK, the Enterprise Zone Bid, community safety, the growth agenda and the LEADER project aimed at supporting rural communities in relation to such areas as enterprise</p>
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<p>Sound use of outsourcing and additional external capacity</p>	<p>and business innovation, improving tourism and addressing climate change..</p> <p>The council has a long track record of outsourcing services and functions and uses this to good effect, as has been seen with the waste management contract (the new joint contract is saving £1.2m per annum across the two councils) and leisure management contracts. It also draws in additional external capacity through framework agreements relating to specialist areas, such as contracts management and legal advice, in a way that minimises the council's overheads whilst also ensuring the necessary technical and professional expertise is available to it.</p>
<p>Good engagement by officers in external networks</p>	<p>Officers are engaging well in external networks, both within the county and nationally, in order to tap into resources, raise the profile of the council and develop themselves professionally. Examples include the procurement and legal services hubs within Oxfordshire, from which the council can secure services and support, and engagement in the District Councils Network. Members of the corporate management team have also expressed an interest in becoming local government peers and this is being followed up.</p>
<p>Good communications with residents</p>	<p>Residents that we met with indicated they felt there was generally good communication with them by the council.</p>
<p>Relationships with partners</p>	<p>Partners generally saw themselves as having good relationships with the council and valued working with them. Integral to this was the good accessibility to senior council decision makers, both politically and managerially, that partners felt they had. The voluntary sector felt valued by the council but, helpfully, also felt they had more to contribute both in respect of information and knowledge about the communities the council serves and as service providers. Organisations and individuals involved with the Local Strategic Partnership are demonstrating a tremendous amount of goodwill, effort and commitment</p>

	<p>although the role of this body going forward is unclear, which is a matter that needs to be debated and discussed.</p>
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The table below highlights areas identified as emerging challenges by the peer challenge team:

<p>Emerging challenges</p> <p>Need for clear political direction</p> <p>The pursuit of efficiency – how far and at what impact?</p> <p>Business focus relative to a social focus</p>	<p>Moving forward, there is a need for clear political direction to inform the future vision for the council and the emerging corporate plan. Strong political direction was provided by the previous Administration in recent years, as highlighted above, and it is important that the new Administration continues this. Certainly the early signs are very good, as reflected in the decision to introduce free short-term car parking across the district. It is important for equally clear leadership to be provided in relation to a number of issues, including the future direction of the shared arrangements with South Oxfordshire, the pursuit of further efficiencies and financial savings, the key areas of focus of the council and the role of councillors. All of these aspects are touched on below.</p> <p>A great deal has been achieved in relation to improved efficiency within the council, with much of this having been secured through the development of the shared arrangements. A key issue of political direction lies with determining how far the efficiency agenda should be pursued and at what impact? Virtually everybody we met from the council during the peer challenge process placed a major emphasis on efficiency, to the extent that it came across almost as <u>the</u> over-riding priority for the council. There was an anxiety on the part of some people that social issues, such as tackling social deprivation and rural exclusion, are less prominent in the council's thinking than efficiency is. However, as examples, the council's record on dealing with homelessness is very good and there is substantial grant support provided to voluntary sector organisations helping those who are socially</p>
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<p>What is the future direction for shared arrangements?</p>	<p>disadvantaged. The securing of efficiencies has been crucial in enabling the authority to deliver its social responsibilities and it is important that people connected with the council present a balanced picture of a council that successfully delivers in relation to both its 'business focus' and 'social focus'.</p> <p>There were mixed views amongst people we met within the council regarding the future direction for shared arrangements. For some, there is a desire to take stock and assess as extensively as possible the impact of what has been delivered to date – particularly issues of organisational capacity (which are outlined later). However, for others there is a strong desire to drive further ahead – a real hunger and desire to address the next challenge and excitement at what may lie ahead.</p>
<p>Communication and relationships at the senior political level</p>	<p>Opportunities exist to further develop communication and relationships at the senior political level across the Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire. This will be important in enabling both councils to achieve their political objectives that relate to 'managing the business effectively' and the delivery of financial savings through the shared arrangements. Following the change of Administration there is inevitably a period of 'settling down' taking place as politicians find their feet and start building links crucial to their roles. Some formal mechanisms that bring senior politicians from both councils together are already in place, including the Joint Cabinet Board, the Ridgeway Shared Services Partnership Board and the occasional joint meeting of committees when there are matters of shared interest. Some informal engagement is also taking place but we would urge senior politicians at Cabinet level to extend these further, both collectively and as individuals in terms of their roles as council leaders and holders of similar portfolios.</p>
<p>Maximising the benefits of sharing whilst</p>	<p>Both residents and elected members expressed anxieties that the identities of the Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire were starting to get a</p>

<p>Single site dominating thinking and consuming resources</p>	<p>councils (involving the co-location of office and other accommodation) is entirely logical both managerially and financially. Given the emphasis placed on efficiency and the focus people have on it in both councils, the way in which such a move is dominating thinking amongst staff is hardly surprising. However, it is important for them to remember that any such decision will be taken by politicians, and that they have a much wider set of considerations than simply what makes sense managerially and financially. Politicians aren't in a position to take a decision on this matter currently and that this is likely to remain the case for a period of time yet. However, we recognise that the decisions taken from time to time to co-locate teams, as seen with the current proposal for housing staff across the two councils to all move to the Vale of White Horse offices, means the issue of a single site regularly raises its head.</p>
<p>Local government organisation and structure – focus on what you can influence</p>	<p>In the same way that many people see the idea of a single site as helping to address the financial challenges of both councils and being the next logical step in relation to the shared arrangements, some people, especially amongst elected members, saw revisions to local government organisation and structure, in the form of establishing a unitary authority involving the two councils, as the ultimate 'answer'. Whether this is the right answer or not is irrelevant given that no means currently exist by which such a move can be brought about and therefore there is nothing to be gained from time and effort being dedicated to it. It is important, instead, for people across both councils to focus on what they can influence.</p>
<p>Importance of ensuring all elected members are supported and enabled to fulfil their roles</p> <p>Support to senior political leadership</p>	<p>In order to enable elected members to fulfil their roles, it is important that they all receive adequate support from the council. There needs to be close engagement between the senior political and managerial leadership as the authority seeks to set its direction for the coming years and reflect this in the new corporate plan. The new Administration require the full support of the corporate management team and others to translate their</p>

	<p>political objectives and key policies into a reality, even where this represents a significant financial or other challenge as was the case with the introduction of free car parking. As another example, there was quite a lot of anxiety amongst councillors regarding the 'Fit for the Future' programme and what it was leading to – with a view that it was stripping out resources in a way that might be generating risk. We are clear that this programme is aimed at improving processes in a way that frees up resources whilst at the same time improving the service to customers. Thus we see the need for elected members to be provided with an appropriate insight to the programme in order to give them the necessary reassurance that, through the careful planning and management of the changes, there will be all-round benefit delivered to the council and residents.</p>
<p>Induction of newly elected councillors</p>	<p>Looking more widely, there was a very strong feeling amongst elected members that the induction arrangements for them following their election to the council have been inadequate in the last couple of years. This has left many of those concerned with a limited understanding of such fundamental matters as how Full Council operates and how they can contribute to it appropriately, the way in which scrutiny operates and their responsibilities in relation to the Code of Conduct. By contrast, training for those new councillors appointed to quasi-judicial committees, including Planning and Licensing, has been effective and very much valued by participants. Similarly, people have been provided with a good sense of which services the council provides and who to contact in key services. Whilst newly elected members have been provided with a pack of information, which more than likely covers those areas highlighted above as gaps, it is clear that this hasn't met their needs and the council therefore needs to develop alternative means in order to help councillors to succeed. Similarly, with the council placing a heavy emphasis on IT, such as the intranet and e-mail, to give councillors access to information in the most efficient way, it is important to ensure any</p>
<p>Recognising people have different needs</p>	

<p>Training and development and briefings on key issues</p>	<p>elected members experiencing difficulty using such systems are effectively supported.</p> <p>There also appears to be little available for elected members generally in relation to training and development and provision of information and briefings on key issues. It was telling that some of the sessions we delivered with elected members ended with them thanking us for the way in which we had developed, albeit inadvertently, their understanding of such matters as localism and scrutiny. We were struck by the appetite that appeared to exist amongst councillors to learn more about key agendas facing local government generally, including localism, and the Vale of White Horse specifically, such as affordable housing. Elected members also indicated that there was an absence of systematic arrangements for informing them of key activities and issues in their wards, such as controversial planning and licensing applications and repairs and maintenance activity.</p>
<p>Cultural change affects councillors as well as staff</p>	<p>It is also important to bear in mind that cultural change affects councillors as well as staff, with some elected members having difficulty in moving from a situation in which officers were dedicated solely to the Vale of White Horse to one in which their responsibilities also now cover South Oxfordshire and a proportion of their time is spent working outside of the district. In reality, officers are still easily accessible by e-mail and phone but people need to be reassured around these changes and supported in making the transition.</p>
<p>The role of councillors</p> <p>Electoral reviews requested</p> <p>Enabling communities to help themselves and</p>	<p>Our discussions led us to conclude that there is a need for the council to discuss and explore the roles of councillors now and in the future. Given the formal decision of the council a few months ago to request an electoral review – with a stated wish to reduce the number of councillors – there are questions in the minds of some councillors, across the political divide, as to how this sits alongside the underlying philosophy of the Vale of White Horse relating to ‘enabling communities to help themselves and representing their interests’ and</p>

<p>representing their interests</p>	<p>the potential implications of the Localism Bill for ward councillors. The strong impression we were given was that there is felt to be a shortage of roles on the council through which elected members can contribute and be fulfilled and, in a context of efficiency as an over-riding theme, costs could be cut by having fewer councillors. This raises a question as to the role of the ward councillor relative to the other roles on the council and the value that is placed on the former.</p>
<p>Role of ward councillors relative to roles on the council</p>	<p>Linked with this, the potential of scrutiny is far from having been fully exploited by the council with the majority of its focus being placed on ‘looking backwards’ at performance issues or decisions already taken or about to be taken by Cabinet rather than this being balanced with contributions to policy development and in-depth analysis of key issues within the area through ‘task and finish’ groups which would require the involvement of more elected members.</p>
<p>Potential of scrutiny</p>	<p>Given how effectively the efficiency agenda has been pursued by the council, much of it through the shared arrangements with South Oxfordshire, it raises a question as to where the future big financial savings opportunities lie. This is an important question given that the council continues to face a major financial challenge and that many staff are assuming the move to a single site with South Oxfordshire both provides the answer and will happen. One of the avenues that we would encourage the council to consider is the opportunities that exist in relation to the use of property assets. A review of the council’s property portfolio is already under way and this is likely to provide options for the authority. Additionally, there would be benefit in considering how assets are used across public sector partners locally. A second avenue is the unfulfilled potential that many managers we spoke to feel exists around IT acting as an enabler of change and innovation. Currently, the scope of the IT function is constrained. We would encourage the council to explore the potential for innovation around IT in services to</p>
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<p>enabler of change</p> <p>Organisational capacity – how do you know how far you can push things?</p> <p>Election counts – learning from the independent review</p>	<p>deliver even further efficiencies, with appropriate opportunities perhaps being progressed on an ‘invest to save’ basis.</p> <p>Through the development of the shared arrangements with South Oxfordshire, there has been a significant reduction in the number of staff across both councils. As outlined earlier, this has served to increase the efficiency of both organisations and the effective way in which the changes have been handled has meant there has been no disruption in service provision. Given that the two councils have pushed the extent of shared arrangements further than most, if not all, councils in the same type of arrangement, and there appears to be a desire to progress it further, it raises a question as to how the managerial leadership of the councils knows how far capacity can be reduced before there is a detrimental impact.</p> <p>A lot of people we spoke to felt that the capacity was already at a minimum level – with it being sufficient to continue to operate effectively on a day to day basis but there being a lot of unknowns as to how much further things can be pushed. As examples:</p> <p>The council’s success in achieving sickness absence rates which are very low relative to wider local government and the public sector can’t afford to be negatively impacted as a consequence of reduced numbers of staff</p> <p>We noted that many elected members were attributing the problems that had been experienced at the election count to the capacity of the Returning Officer and the elections team being too stretched. The learning from the independent review suggests this wasn’t a factor but it serves to highlight the anxiety and unknowns that currently exist around capacity.</p> <p>The council needs to reassure itself it has the capacity to engage externally on key issues, such</p>
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<p>Strong corporate management team</p>	<p>as health and well being, and keep itself informed about emerging external drivers for change and key national policy developments.</p> <p>Thus we would encourage the council to make sure constantly that it is not pushing things too far too fast in terms of reducing capacity.</p> <p>The council has a strong corporate management team. It is important, however, that they maintain consistency between them in relation to the messages that they deliver. Some managers and staff that we spoke to indicated there are occasions on which different corporate directors provide them with different information or direction. Whilst this is normally quickly resolved it does cause confusion and uncertainty for people and absorbs time and effort. It also doesn't help in providing people with a sense of a fully integrated and joined-up corporate management team.</p>
<p>Managerial responsibilities aren't always clear to staff and partners</p>	<p>In talking with frontline staff and partner organisations, we identified that managerial responsibilities below the corporate management team level aren't always clear to them. We learned of instances of staff being unsure of who was responsible for issues they were dealing with and, as a consequence, sending e-mails to up to four managers in order to keep them all informed or secure a decision. Similarly, contractors found themselves being chased by four or more people on the same issue – reflecting a lack of clarity about who was responsible for what.</p>
<p>Importance of making sure staff feel valued and celebrating success</p>	<p>We noted that the staff survey results in recent years have been largely positive and this continues to be the case albeit with a few ups and downs which are inevitable at a time of great change. However, issues of managing and valuing staff need to be kept under close scrutiny. Staff have worked extremely hard and experienced some very difficult and challenging times in recent years. Having come through this, and in order to maintain their motivation for the future, it is important to make sure staff feel valued and are given the</p>

	opportunity to celebrate success. Everybody connected with the Vale of White Horse should feel proud of what the council has achieved in recent years and be enabled to enjoy this.
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We are conscious that there is a danger, based on a very simplistic analysis of what we have outlined above, that the many very positive aspects and achievements of the council may be seen to be greatly outweighed by the number of emerging challenges. This is most definitely not the case. We were very impressed by a lot of what we heard and saw in the Vale of White Horse and are clear that there is a story of good progress on many priority areas. The emerging challenges are areas that, in order to continue the success story and build on the progress made, the council is likely to want to pay some attention to – and is already doing so in some areas.

Thus the senior managerial and political leadership will undoubtedly now want to reflect on these findings before determining how the council wishes to take things forward. If you feel it would be helpful, we would be very happy to be involved in an improvement planning meeting to assist you in this process. Simply let me know if this is something you wish to consider. It can be delivered on a timescale of your choosing and would come at no cost to the authority.

The achievements in the Vale of White Horse to date are impressive and give you a lot to shout about. All of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish you every success going forward. Once again, thank you to you and your colleagues for inviting the peer challenge and to everyone involved for their participation.

Yours sincerely

Chris Bowron
Programme Manager – Peer Support
Local Government Group

David Buckle
Chief Executive
South Oxfordshire District Council
Benson Lane
Crowmarsh Gifford
Oxfordshire
OX10 8ED

22nd September 2011

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<p>Effective management of change</p> <p>Hard work and professionalism amongst staff during difficult times</p> <p>Pride and enthusiasm amongst managers and recognition by staff of the benefits that the changes have brought</p> <p>Strong political leadership</p> <p>Senior managerial leadership – many complimentary comments</p> <p>Range of achievements on issues that are local priorities</p>	<p>senior managers and politicians.</p> <p>There has been a significant amount of organisational change within South Oxfordshire in the last couple of years, related to the establishment of the shared arrangements with Vale of White Horse. This has involved a number of people leaving the organisation through one means or another. Whilst nobody is seeking to claim that this process has been easy for anybody, and we did not meet with anybody who has moved on from the council during that time, we were left with a very strong sense that the changes have been handled in an effective way. The number of compulsory redundancies has been kept to a minimum and there has been no disruption in service provision. We were impressed by the hard work and professionalism shown by staff during what must have been difficult and challenging times. In meeting with a range of staff, we saw a great deal of pride amongst managers about what has been achieved and enthusiasm about the future challenges, whilst many other staff could see the benefits that the changes have brought in terms of improved performance and reduced costs.</p> <p>Both the driving ahead of the shared arrangements and the performance improvement in relation to local priorities reflect strong political leadership within the council. We also heard many complimentary comments about the senior managerial leadership of the council, including staff valuing and respecting the way in which, during the change process, the chief executive had met regularly with them and had open and honest discussions about issues of concern to them.</p> <p>The strength of the political and managerial leadership is reflected in the range of achievements on issues that represent local priorities including Science Vale UK, the Enterprise Zone Bid, community safety, the growth agenda including Didcot and the LEADER project aimed at supporting rural communities in relation to such areas as enterprise and business innovation,</p>
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<p>Sound use of outsourcing and additional external capacity</p>	<p>improving tourism and addressing climate change.</p> <p>The council has a long track record of outsourcing services and functions and uses this to good effect, as has been seen with the waste management contract (the new joint contract is saving £1.2m per annum across the two councils) and leisure management contracts. It also draws in additional external capacity through framework agreements relating to specialist areas, such as contracts management and legal advice, in a way that minimises the council's overheads whilst also ensuring the necessary technical and professional expertise is available to it.</p>
<p>Good engagement by officers in external networks</p>	<p>Officers are engaging well in external networks, both within the county and nationally, in order to tap into resources, raise the profile of the council and develop themselves professionally. Examples include the procurement and legal services hubs within Oxfordshire, from which the council can secure services and support, and engagement in the District Councils Network. Members of the corporate management team have also expressed an interest in becoming local government peers and this is being followed up.</p>
<p>Good communications with residents</p>	<p>Residents that we met with indicated they felt there was generally good communication with them by the council, including through the likes of the 'Outlook' newsletter and information in the local media.</p>
<p>Relationships with partners</p>	<p>Partners generally saw themselves as having good relationships with the council and valued working with them. Integral to this was the good accessibility to senior council decision makers, both politically and managerially, that partners felt they had. The voluntary sector felt valued by the council but, helpfully, also felt they had more to contribute both in respect of information and knowledge about the communities the council serves and as service providers. Organisations and individuals involved with the Local Strategic Partnership are demonstrating a tremendous</p>

	amount of goodwill, effort and commitment although the role of this body going forward is unclear, which is a matter that needs to be debated and discussed.
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The table below highlights areas identified as emerging challenges by the peer challenge team:

<p>Emerging challenges</p> <p>Need to re-affirm the political direction</p> <p>The pursuit of efficiency – how far and at what impact?</p> <p>Business focus relative to a social focus</p>	<p>Moving forward, there is a need to re-affirm the political direction of the council in order to inform the future vision of the authority and the emerging corporate plan. As referred to earlier, strong political direction has been provided by the Administration in recent years but it is important that this continues to be demonstrated given the council is currently considering its priorities for the coming years. It is important for such direction to be provided in relation to a number of issues, including the future direction of the shared arrangements with Vale of White Horse, the pursuit of further efficiencies and financial savings and the delivery of the objectives in the medium term financial strategy, the key areas of focus of the council and the role of councillors. All of these aspects are touched on below.</p> <p>A great deal has been achieved in relation to improved efficiency within the council, with much of this having been secured through the development of the shared arrangements. A key issue of political direction lies with determining how far the efficiency agenda should be pursued and at what impact? Virtually everybody we met from the council during the peer challenge process placed a major emphasis on efficiency, to the extent that it came across almost as <u>the</u> priority for the council. There was an anxiety on the part of some people that social issues, such as addressing the pockets of deprivation within South Oxfordshire and tackling rural exclusion, are less prominent in the council's thinking than efficiency is. However, as examples, the council's record on dealing with homelessness is very good and there is substantial grant support</p>
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<p>What is the future direction for shared arrangements?</p> <p>Communication and relationships at the senior political level</p>	<p>provided to voluntary sector organisations helping those who are socially disadvantaged. The securing of efficiencies has been crucial in enabling the authority to deliver its social responsibilities and it is important that people connected with the council present a balanced picture of a council that successfully delivers in relation to both its ‘business focus’ and ‘social focus’.</p> <p>There were mixed views amongst people we met within the council regarding the future direction for shared arrangements. For some, there is a desire to take stock and assess as extensively as possible the impact of what has been delivered to date – particularly issues of organisational capacity (which are outlined later). However, for others there is a strong desire to drive further ahead – a real hunger and desire to address the next challenge and excitement at what may lie ahead.</p> <p>Opportunities exist to further develop communication and relationships at the senior political level across South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. This will be important in enabling both councils to achieve their political objectives that relate to ‘managing the business effectively’ and the delivery of financial savings through the shared arrangements. Following the change of Administration at Vale of White Horse at the recent elections, there is inevitably a period of ‘settling down’ taking place as politicians find their feet and start building links crucial to their roles. Some formal mechanisms that bring senior politicians from both councils together are already in place, including the Joint Cabinet Board, the Ridgeway Shared Services Partnership Board and the occasional joint meeting of committees when there are matters of shared interest. Some informal engagement is also taking place but we would urge senior politicians at Cabinet level to extend these further, both collectively and as individuals in terms of their roles as council leaders and holders of similar portfolios.</p> <p>Both residents and elected members expressed</p>
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<p>Single site dominating thinking and consuming resources</p>	<p>arrangements, the idea of one single site for both councils (involving the co-location of office and other accommodation) is entirely logical both managerially and financially. Given the emphasis placed on efficiency and the focus people have on it in both councils, the way in which such a move is dominating thinking amongst staff is hardly surprising. However, it is important for them to remember that any such decision will be taken by politicians and that they have a much wider set of considerations than simply what makes sense managerially and financially. Politicians aren't in a position to take a decision on this matter currently and this is likely to remain the case for a period of time yet. However, we recognise that the decisions taken from time to time to co-locate teams, as seen with the current proposal for housing staff across the two councils to all move to the Vale of White Horse offices, means the issue of a single site regularly raises its head.</p>
<p>Local government organisation and structure – focus on what you can influence</p>	<p>In the same way that many people see the idea of a single site as helping to address the financial challenges of both councils and being the next logical step in relation to the shared arrangements, some people, especially amongst elected members, saw revisions to local government organisation and structure, in the form of establishing a unitary authority involving the two councils, as the ultimate 'answer'. Whether this is the right answer or not is irrelevant given that no means currently exist by which such a move can be brought about and therefore there is nothing to be gained from time and effort being dedicated to it. It is important, instead, for people across both councils to focus on what they can influence.</p>
<p>Importance of ensuring all elected members are supported and enabled to fulfil their roles</p> <p>Support to senior</p>	<p>In order to enable elected members to fulfil their roles, it is important that they all receive adequate support from the council. There needs to be close engagement between the senior political and managerial leadership as the authority seeks to set its direction for the coming years and reflect this in the new corporate plan. There was a sense amongst elected members that councillors have felt</p>

<p>political leadership</p>	<p>somewhat remote from the senior managerial leadership, with one senior politician we spoke to questioning how important councillors were to the council's senior managers. As another example, there was quite a lot of anxiety amongst councillors regarding the 'Fit for the Future' programme and what it was leading to – with a view that it was stripping out resources in a way that might be generating risk. We are clear that this programme is aimed at improving processes in a way that frees up resources whilst at the same time improving the service to customers. Thus we see the need for elected members to be provided with an appropriate insight to the programme in order to give them the necessary reassurance that, through the careful planning and management of the changes, there will be all-round benefit delivered to the council and residents. A more positive example of engagement with councillors concerns members of the Opposition Forum indicating how pleased they are that the chief executive has now committed to attend their meetings on a regular basis.</p>
<p>Induction of newly elected councillors</p>	<p>Looking more widely, there was a very strong feeling amongst elected members that the induction arrangements for them following their election to the council have been inadequate in the last couple of years. This has left many of those concerned with a limited understanding of such fundamental matters as how Full Council operates and how they can contribute to it appropriately, the way in which scrutiny operates and their responsibilities in relation to the Code of Conduct. By contrast, training for those new councillors appointed to quasi-judicial committees, including Planning and Licensing, has been effective and very much valued by participants. Similarly, people have been provided with a good sense of which services the council provides and who to contact in key services. Whilst newly elected members have been provided with a pack of information, which more than likely covers those areas highlighted above as gaps, it is clear that this hasn't met their needs and the council therefore needs to develop</p>
<p>Recognising people have different needs</p>	<p></p>

<p>Training and development and briefings on key issues</p>	<p>alternative means in order to help councillors to succeed. Similarly, with the council placing a heavy emphasis on IT, such as the intranet and e-mail, to give councillors access to information in the most efficient way, it is important to ensure any elected members experiencing difficulty using such systems are effectively supported.</p> <p>There also appears to be little available for elected members generally in relation to training and development and provision of information and briefings on key issues. It was telling that some of the sessions we delivered with elected members ended with them thanking us for the way in which we had developed, albeit inadvertently, their understanding of such matters as localism and scrutiny. We were struck by the appetite that appeared to exist amongst councillors to learn more about key agendas facing local government generally, including localism, and South Oxfordshire specifically, such as affordable housing. Elected members also indicated that there was an absence of systematic arrangements for informing them of key activities and issues in their wards, such as controversial planning and licensing applications and repairs and maintenance activity.</p>
<p>Cultural change affects councillors as well as staff</p>	<p>It is also important to bear in mind that cultural change affects councillors as well as staff, with some elected members having difficulty in moving from a situation in which officers were dedicated solely to South Oxfordshire to one in which their responsibilities also now cover Vale of White Horse and a proportion of their time is spent working outside of the district. In reality, officers are still easily accessible by e-mail and phone but people need to be reassured around these changes and supported in making the transition.</p>
<p>The role of councillors</p>	<p>Our discussions led us to conclude that there is a need for the council to discuss and explore the roles of councillors now and in the future. Given the formal decision of the council a few months ago to request an electoral review – with a stated wish</p>

<p>Electoral reviews requested</p>	<p>to reduce the number of councillors – there are questions in the minds of some councillors, across the political divide, as to how this sits alongside the underlying philosophy of South Oxfordshire relating to ‘enabling communities to help themselves and representing their interests’ and the potential implications of the Localism Bill for ward councillors. The strong impression we were given was that there is felt to be a shortage of roles on the council through which elected members can contribute and be fulfilled and, in a context of efficiency as an over-riding theme, costs could be cut by having fewer councillors. This raises a question as to the role of the ward councillor relative to the other roles on the council and the value that is placed on the former.</p>
<p>Enabling communities to help themselves and representing their interests</p>	
<p>Role of ward councillors relative to roles on the council</p>	
<p>Potential of scrutiny</p>	<p>Linked with this, the potential of scrutiny is far from having been fully exploited by the council with the majority of its focus being placed on ‘looking backwards’ at performance issues or decisions already taken or about to be taken by Cabinet rather than this being balanced with contributions to policy development and in-depth analysis of key issues within the area through ‘task and finish’ groups which would require the involvement of more elected members.</p>
<p>Where do the future big financial savings opportunities lie?</p>	<p>Given how effectively the efficiency agenda has been pursued by the council, much of it through the shared arrangements with Vale of White Horse, it raises a question as to where the future big financial savings opportunities lie. This is an important question given that the council continues to subsidise its annual budget spend through the use of reserves and that many staff are assuming the move to a single site with Vale of White Horse both provides the answer and will happen. Two avenues that we would encourage the council to consider are the opportunities that exist in relation to the use of property assets across public sector partners and the unfulfilled potential that many managers we spoke to feel exists around IT acting as an enabler of change and innovation. Currently, the scope of the IT function is constrained. We</p>
<p>Assets – opportunities across public sector partners</p>	
<p>Importance of IT being able to act as an</p>	

<p>enabler of change</p> <p>Organisational capacity – how do you know how far you can push things?</p> <p>Election counts – learning from the independent review</p>	<p>would encourage the council to explore the potential for innovation around IT in services to deliver even further efficiencies, with appropriate opportunities perhaps being progressed on an ‘invest to save’ basis.</p> <p>Through the development of the shared arrangements with Vale of White Horse, there has been a significant reduction in the number of staff across both councils. As outlined earlier, this has served to increase the efficiency of both organisations and the effective way in which the changes have been handled has meant there has been no disruption in service provision. Given that the two councils have pushed the extent of shared arrangements further than most, if not all, councils in the same type of arrangement, and there appears to be a desire to progress it further, it raises a question as to how the managerial leadership of the councils knows how far capacity can be reduced before there is a detrimental impact.</p> <p>A lot of people we spoke to felt that the capacity was already at a minimum level – with it being sufficient to continue to operate effectively on a day to day basis but there being a lot of unknowns as to how much further things can be pushed. As examples:</p> <p>The council’s success in achieving sickness absence rates which are very low relative to wider local government and the public sector can’t afford to be negatively impacted as a consequence of reduced numbers of staff</p> <p>We noted that many elected members were attributing the problems that had been experienced at the election count to the capacity of the Returning Officer and the elections team being too stretched. The learning from the independent review suggests this wasn’t a factor but it serves to highlight the anxiety and unknowns that currently exist around capacity.</p>
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<p>Strong corporate management team</p>	<p>The council needs to reassure itself it has the capacity to engage externally on key issues, such as health and well being, and keep itself informed about emerging external drivers for change and key national policy developments.</p> <p>Thus we would encourage the council to make sure constantly that it is not pushing things too far too fast in terms of reducing capacity.</p> <p>The council has a strong corporate management team. It is important, however, that they maintain consistency between them in relation to the messages that they deliver. Some managers and staff that we spoke to indicated there are occasions on which different corporate directors provide them with different information or direction. Whilst this is normally quickly resolved it does cause confusion and uncertainty for people and absorbs time and effort. It also doesn't help in providing people with a sense of a fully integrated and joined-up corporate management team.</p>
<p>Managerial responsibilities aren't always clear to staff and partners</p>	<p>In talking with frontline staff and partner organisations, we identified that managerial responsibilities below the corporate management team level aren't always clear to them. We learned of instances of staff being unsure of who was responsible for issues they were dealing with and, as a consequence, sending e-mails to up to four managers in order to keep them all informed or secure a decision. Similarly, contractors found themselves being chased by four or more people on the same issue – reflecting a lack of clarity about who was responsible for what.</p>
<p>Importance of making sure staff feel valued and celebrating success</p>	<p>We noted that the staff survey results in recent years have been largely positive and this continues to be the case albeit with a few ups and downs which are inevitable at a time of great change. However, issues of managing and valuing staff need to be kept under close scrutiny. Staff have worked extremely hard and experienced some very difficult and challenging times in recent years. Having come through this, and in order to maintain</p>

	their motivation for the future, it is important to make sure staff feel valued and are given the opportunity to celebrate success. Everybody connected with South Oxfordshire should feel proud of what the council has achieved in recent years and be enabled to enjoy this.
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We are conscious that there is a danger, based on a very simplistic analysis of what we have outlined above, that the many very positive aspects and achievements of the council may be seen to be greatly outweighed by the number of emerging challenges. This is most definitely not the case. We were very impressed by a lot of what we heard and saw in South Oxfordshire and are clear that there is a story of good progress on many priority areas. The emerging challenges are areas that, in order to continue the success story and build on the progress made, the council is likely to want to pay some attention to – and is already doing so in some areas.

Thus the senior managerial and political leadership will undoubtedly now want to reflect on these findings before determining how the council wishes to take things forward. If you feel it would be helpful, we would be very happy to be involved in an improvement planning meeting to assist you in this process. Simply let me know if this is something you wish to consider. It can be delivered on a timescale of your choosing and would come at no cost to the authority.

The achievements in South Oxfordshire to date are impressive and give you a lot to shout about. All of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish you every success going forward. Once again, thank you to you and your colleagues for inviting the peer challenge and to everyone involved for their participation.

Yours sincerely

Chris Bowron
Programme Manager – Peer Support
Local Government Group