

Anthony Goodwin  
Chief Executive  
Tamworth Borough Council  
Marmion House  
Lichfield Street  
Tamworth  
B79 7BZ

December 2013

Dear Anthony,

### **Tamworth Borough Council - Corporate Peer Challenge 5-7 November 2013**

On behalf of the peer team, I would like to say what a pleasure it was to be invited into Tamworth Borough Council to deliver the recent corporate peer challenge as part of the Local Government Association (LGA) offer to support sector led improvement.

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

- Nicola Bulbeck (Chief Executive – Teignbridge District Council )
- Councillor Neil Clarke (Leader, Rushcliffe Borough Council)
- Jamie Carson (Corporate Director, Chorley Borough Council)
- Terry Collier (Corporate Director, Spelthorne Borough Council)
- Ernest Opuni (Peer Challenge Manager, LGA)

#### **Scope and focus of the peer challenge**

You asked the peer team to provide an external view on several specific areas and issues relating to the Council's ability to deliver its future plans and proposals. These were:

1. Community development, including:
  - How Tamworth Borough Council compares to good practice from other local authorities
  - Peer observations on the impacts and outcomes from their existing model of service delivery and
  - Input from the team in the authority considering opportunities to improve the service
2. Partnerships and commissioning:
  - A review of the council's corporate approach to commissioning, highlighting gaps, if any

- A review of the council's approach to voluntary and community sector engagement and commissioning

The peer team covered these by considering the core components looked at by all corporate peer challenges. These are:

1. Understanding of 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?

### **The peer challenge process**

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

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 3 days on-site at Tamworth during which they:

- Spoke to more than 70 people including a range of Council staff together with Councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 20 meetings along with additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 200 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 6 weeks in Tamworth Borough Council.

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 onsite visit (5-7 November 2013). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not as 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 messages**

Tamworth Borough Council has clear vision of place for the town and this is supported by a mutually beneficial relationship with Lichfield which has prospects for further collaboration into the future.

You have a sound understanding of the economic drivers impacting on the borough and have a reputation amongst your various partners for 'getting things done'. Partnerships are seen as core business and you have good relations with the media. However, we encourage you to develop a strategy to facilitate Tamworth identifying and fully utilising all available joint working opportunities.

There are good working relationships between the senior political and managerial leadership at Tamworth Borough Council. Both have a clear purpose in delivering the vision for the borough and are willing to stand by the tough decisions that have to be taken. In order to maintain this we feel that it is very important that, together, you continue to provide clear, consistent, stable and mutually inter-dependent leadership of the council.

Staff at Tamworth Borough Council have a clear passion and pride and a commitment to doing their best for the people of the town. They value the clear communication they have had with the Council's political and managerial leaders which has ensured that they recognise and understand well the nature of the financial challenges you face. An integral part of your plans for addressing the challenges is the current service review you are undertaking. However, in progressing this we encourage you to ensure you have appropriate synergy and clarity between your 'Sustainability Strategy' and the 'Corporate Change Programme'. There is a need to more clearly prioritise the objectives for each to ensure that both contribute effectively to your overall vision for an effective and sustainable organisation.

Your Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is based on prudent assumptions and your strategy is buying time for your delivery of efficiencies. We encourage you to assure yourselves that the measures you have in place will help you to 'avoid' rather than 'delay' the risk of falling over the 'financial cliff' you have clearly identified. In doing this we believe there is more to do in addressing your challenges in a fundamentally transformational fashion.

There is a need to articulate clearly which services are appropriate for the various service delivery vehicles you are considering. The clarity at the top of the Council about the Authority being a 'hybrid' is not yet matched across all of the organisation or with all of your partners.

We do not feel that Scrutiny at Tamworth Council is as effective as it could be or that it is adding as much value to Council business as it ought to be. In spite of the improvements that you have made, we do not feel that Scrutiny is strategic or providing the challenge which would enhance the Council's development of policy. We encourage you continue to re-focus Scrutiny on policy development and performance management and give consideration to provision of dedicated support to the function.

You are very aware that in the medium to longer term, you will have yet more difficult decisions to make. Whilst we recognise your track record of taking and standing by tough

decisions, the challenges which all Local Authorities face at the present time are unprecedented. There may be some value in you considering whether, in looking to a future where yet more difficult decisions are required, a review of your current election arrangements might positively enhance your ability to do this whilst also yielding financial savings.

You are viewed as a strong partner by the voluntary and community sectors through your Community Development Officers (CDOs) and other individuals who have a reputation for understanding the value of the Sector (as well as its needs). There is perceived to be strong support from political and managerial leaders for effective community engagement and locality working which involves utilising the CDOs effectively. However, there may be opportunities for partners' contributions which you are not yet fully utilising whilst you may be able to increase take up by partners if you clearly demonstrate how your contributions enhance the achievement of their desired impacts and outcomes.

The Commissioning framework for Tamworth is founded on sound principles of 'procuring outcomes linked to priorities'. It is also 'Compact proofed'. Your 'Commissioning Intentions' document is perceived by partners to be clear and transparent in articulating how you intend to proceed. In building upon this, we encourage you to commence a dialogue with the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and the County Council to establish appetite and scope for joint commissioning opportunities.

### **Summary of feedback:**

#### *Understanding of local context and priority setting*

You have a clear vision of place for Tamworth and this is focussed on the town centre. You recognise the reality of 'edge of town' retail at Ventura Park which is an integral part of your innovative zoning approach to create a twenty-first century Tamworth town centre. Your clear vision for place-making in Tamworth is enabling you to adopt a clear regeneration approach typified by the various zones (which includes retail and culture) complementing each other in devising a coherent future for the borough. You are engaging and involving partners and stakeholders in achieving your aspiration to make available to your communities private sector standards of provision (for example the Snow Dome) with public sector costs and outlay.

Your understanding of the economic drivers which impact on Tamworth is sound and is a key reason for your alignment with the Greater Birmingham Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). The decision to join that LEP is founded on the clear vision the Council's political leadership holds that this is the best way for Tamworth to benefit in the longer term. The impetus in Birmingham from businesses such as KPMG and Jaguar Land Rover is seen as a more sustainable driver for economic growth from which Tamworth and your strategic partner, Lichfield District Council, can benefit. Council staff are very supportive of this decision viewing it as the right thing to do in continuing to develop the mutually beneficial relationship with Lichfield. Whilst we recognise how much thought has gone into this decision, we would also encourage you to evaluate the potential value of being a part of both the Greater Birmingham and Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent LEPs. We recognise that this will require you to assess the balance between the rewards of being in both and the resources required to commit to being in two LEPs.

Tamworth's reputation among your partners and stakeholders across Staffordshire county is that you are a borough committed to 'getting things done'. There is a deep-rooted culture of partnership working in Tamworth and the Tamworth Strategic Partnership (TSP) was described to us as 'the most organised and dynamic of the 3 LSPs' in your part of the county. The fact that partnership working is viewed as core business for the authority is demonstrated at TSP meetings where you and your partners are effective in identifying ways in which you can overcome any obstacles to effective collaboration. The Public Sector Hub, Multi-Agency Communications Hub, Data sharing protocol and the Agile Working initiative are examples of this way of working. Nonetheless we would encourage you to continue to strengthen 'bottom-up' input which will make TSP even more effective and reduce any risk of the partnership becoming too strategic or remote from frontline delivery. One way in which you might achieve this is through re-focussed locality working.

You also have good relations with the local newspaper, the Tamworth Herald. This is due in no small part to the efforts of your communications team who have committed efforts to nurturing this. This is exemplified by the joint work with the paper on a 'Question Time' event where both the Council and the Herald shared the podium in engaging with members of the communities of Tamworth. These good relationships have also enabled you to influence the coverage of the Council in the local press in a positive way which is making communications about the Council more effective.

We would encourage you to review and refine the synergy between the Council's 'Sustainability Strategy' and your 'Corporate Change Programme'. This will require you to clearly define and refine both in order that you can better prioritise the workstreams within each of them. This will involve you clarifying governance arrangements for both programmes and identifying synergies which will enable you to streamline activity. Currently there appears to be a lack of clarity and confusion among staff as to precisely what each of the activities is seeking to achieve. In particular the number of workstreams and groups is impacting negatively on the clarity of the outcomes sought from the Strategy and the Programme whilst also stretching the capacity of staff involved to deliver effectively on either. We feel that you need to prioritise the workstreams and projects under each and communicate these to the wider organisation once you have done this.

We also feel it is key you maintain focus on achieving the 'sign off' for the borough's Local Plan. You have been asked to do further work on a 'Plan B' following the examination in July 2013. This work will need to be appropriately resourced in order that you maintain your close work with Lichfield and others on the 'Duty to Cooperate' in addressing any remaining challenges to the borough Local Plan being completed in a timely manner.

### *Financial planning and viability*

Both elected members and staff at Tamworth Borough Council are aware of the resource challenge you face. You have called this a 'financial cliff' and it is clear you have communicated this effectively to staff who have a good understanding of the timescales involved and an appreciation of the approach you are taking to address this. Cabinet members are aware of the need to take tough decisions and there is good joint working between senior officers and both the Leader and the Deputy Leader on financial matters. The Leader of the Council is leading from the front as demonstrated by his personal delivery of a presentation outlining the full picture to all Tamworth Borough councillors at an annual Budget workshop. Your Heads of Service and managers demonstrated a good

understanding of the need to implement efficiencies and seek out opportunities for additional income generation to address the financial challenge by taking a more entrepreneurial approach in how the Council conducts business.

Your Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is based on prudent assumptions and is buying you time for the delivery of efficiencies. It has been well thought through and your programme-managed forward strategy allows realistic timescales for delivery of the savings you need and the income initiatives you are exploring. Your business rates collection levels, and therefore the retained share of business rates, is holding up. The Change Board is charged with overseeing your programme of service reviews and other workstreams whilst, corporately, you have reviewed your financial modelling to take account of factors such as the summer spending announcements, pensions, business rates and deployment of new homes bonus. This has resulted in the funding gap, in the short term, being improved.

We feel, however, that a radical service reconfiguration is required if you are to completely avoid the 'financial cliff'. Whilst current workstreams will help in closing the budget gap and the council is better placed financially than many other authorities, the funding cuts will nonetheless require you to make hard decisions about service provision and staffing in the future. We encourage you to further evaluate the risk posed by your current plans as there is a significant reliance on 'back loading' and a heavy dependence on achieving financial wins downstream. Further exploration of the possibility of 'front loading' some of your work may help achieve the savings required earlier.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as configured under the new regime at the time of the peer challenge is self-sustaining and creates potential funding opportunities. The implementation of the HRA self-financing regime is beneficial for the council as interest paid on the £45 million debt is significantly less than the £3 million regional subsidy previously paid over to central government each year. The Council's long-term approach will generate funds through renovating and building new dwellings and there is an empty site in Tamworth which was about to be occupied when the peer team was onsite which has potential to further improve the Council's financial position. The impact of welfare reforms and your council tax collection rate is broadly in line with achieving your target of 97.9 per cent. You are protecting your council tax base with annual increases.

You are making good progress with your plans for shared services and collaborative working and this will continue to make a significant contribution to closing the deficit. There are five service collaboration areas you have identified with Lichfield and this includes the significant spend area on waste recycling and disposal. You have a willingness to take forward a number of other shared service areas. We feel, however, that there is a need to progress from being opportunistic in this area to taking a more strategic approach. The proposed Memorandum of Understanding with Lichfield will help progress this.

There are already some entrepreneurial initiatives and income generation ideas underway. You have given your staff the opportunity to suggest innovative ways of generating income. For example your communications team have developed their skills through their work on redesigning and marketing the Council's website in-house. They are currently identifying ways in which this service could be provided to other authorities as a means of generating income for the Council whilst you have engaged Deloitte's to work with you in identifying further income generation opportunities. You recognise the need for more creative thinking

in order to generate more income (for example the review of fees and charges and charging for pre-application advice). We encourage you to review your current subsidies which may help you in increasing income to fund reinvestment. We also feel that there may be some benefit in you considering the deployment of a percentage of your New Homes Bonus (NHB) in supporting economic growth and infrastructure to deliver strategic objectives and generate income streams for the Council.

There are challenges to your current income for example car parking and your low council tax base. In addition to this you have a relatively low council tax rate although it is not low enough to be in the bottom quartile which would allow you to take advantage of the £5 rule. These have, therefore, increased the likely impact on the Council of grant funding reductions.

There is work underway in Tamworth to explore possible options for service reductions (for example looking at statutory and discretionary services and rating them in terms of the likelihood of acceptance). We did not, however, pick up any explicit reference to transformation as part of the service reviews; the focus appears to be on existing service configuration and references to scale. We would encourage you to consider broadening the terms of reference for your service reviews to embrace opportunities for fundamental transformation of service delivery in order to further strengthen the work you are doing in this area.

In the past, Participatory Budgeting has proved to be a useful tool in you controlling limited locality funds for projects. Could this methodology be used more widely at a local level to help allocate other funds? We would encourage you to consider using Participatory Budgeting further as a tool to re-focus locality working.

### *Political and Managerial leadership*

Staff view the political and managerial leadership of Tamworth Borough Council as being visible and approachable. Both are respected. This engenders confidence and influence internally and externally and has been enhanced by appreciation that Cabinet and senior managers have communicated the Council's financial challenges in a transparent manner and work well together in respect of 'difficult issues'. A particular example related to the decision to sell a Council leisure centre which was unpopular at the time but is now regarded as having been a sound decision due the savings realised and a better offer to users. We think the strategic commitment to paying for 'outcomes rather than services' is regarded as a more forward looking, future-proofed view of delivery.

The Cabinet appears to be a cohesive and purposeful team who are prepared to make and stand by tough decisions as they set direction. The Leader and Cabinet recognise the scale of the challenging decisions to be made regarding future shrinking resources. They demonstrate the confidence to take risks after assessing potential rewards as evidenced by the decision to turn towards the Greater Birmingham LEP. This willingness to base decisions on balancing risk and reward also assists in effective financial planning.

There are positive working relationships between the Leader and the Chief Executive as well as between CMT and the Cabinet more widely. We were given a clear indication that when brought together as a collective the relationships are supportive ones. The relationship is characterised by each being prepared to challenge the other robustly but

then move forward in partnership once an agreement has been reached. There is a clear decision by the political leadership of the council to 'set the direction and let the professionals deliver'.

We saw an open and honest culture at Tamworth within which managers are empowered to develop initiatives. Both the CMT and Heads of Service are supportive of managers seeking to innovate which should allow the organisation the flexibility to respond positively to challenges as these arise in the future. The programme of Service Reviews has been positively received as the process is one with which they are positively engaged. Tamworth has embraced change to good ends basing decisions on three clear criteria relating to: delivering a positive customer experience, improving working environments and delivering in an efficient way.

We felt that the number of tiers within the Council's structure could be making Tamworth Borough somewhat 'top heavy' in management terms which will inevitably have an impact on your overall revenue costs. We believe you have an opportunity to identify and develop transferrable skills in order to maximise capacity and streamline your overall management structure. Aside from potentially reducing costs, this process would allow you to further develop and equip staff to deliver more effectively. We feel that your management structure would benefit from review of its numerous layers and the various spans of control to reduce or, in some cases, remove potential overlaps at Director and Head of Service levels.

We were told on numerous occasions that any review of services across the Council would be undertaken with each being subjected to the same rigorous tests to ensure that there is clarity in your decisions about which of these may be delivered or configured differently. This is a prudent approach in ensuring that there are minimal constraints on how future financial planning is undertaken by officers as this would ensure a shared view of the way forward in this work. This will benefit the assessment of which services may be appropriate for the various delivery options you are considering.

We encourage you to ensure you are clear on the different and respective roles of both members and officers throughout the organisation and that the distinction is defined, understood and maintained. There have been instances of Cabinet members engaging directly with officers at all levels and whilst this is reflective of your open culture, there is a risk that this could create issues where the difference between political and managerial responsibilities become less clear. We encourage you to recognise this as presenting a risk that needs to be managed. Given challenges faced by all Councils at the present time, we feel it is essential for you to assure yourselves that Tamworth has a clear, consistent, stable and mutually inter-dependent political and managerial leadership.

As regards the political vision for the future, there is a clear understanding at the most senior levels in the Council that your preferred delivery model is a hybrid of commissioned services and direct delivery. However there is more for you to do in clearly communicating the Council's chosen direction as this is not as fully understood across the organisation. The hybrid model has often been mentioned in Directors' and Heads of Services meetings and there may be some added value in a renewed focus on the clear articulation of the Council's chosen direction to ensure its approach is clear among all councillors, staff and partners. Clarity is required as to which services would be appropriate for the different delivery options so that this can be articulated and



communicated both internally and externally. We did not find a clear steer as to the different options which can be considered. It may be that some form of framework would help you in achieving this. This will help give further consideration to identifying and articulating the strategic context and rationale for the different delivery channels you choose to utilise (for example partnerships or shared services models that you apply to different services).

We were impressed by the positive direction in which you are moving with respect to developing in-house expertise in improving your website. It is clear that you are grasping the potential of using web and social media effectively as an integral part of your communication. There may be opportunities to utilise these media further in effectively communicating your hybrid model. There is another wider opportunity we see you having as you re-vamp this part of your communications portfolio. This relates to you how you celebrate successes, raise awareness on the availability of your services and generally seek to communicate your rationale for 'what', 'why' and 'when' you have done (or intend to do) regarding any part of the Authority's business.

This renewed focus will help to minimise the risk of messages from the Council being misinterpreted in any way. We were informed of an instance in which the Council's reaction to a national story about obesity levels in Tamworth was perceived by some external stakeholders as being overly defensive in the face of adverse reports. On closer examination there were factors which influenced your reaction which were not communicated as clearly as might have been the case and your side of the story was not put forward as clearly as you might have wished. We feel that the successful management of perception is often about proactive and effective communication and that renewed focus on this would benefit you in instances such as this.

We would also encourage you to use this clarity of communication to aid you in working jointly with Staffordshire County Council to establish greater clarity around commissioning between you and the county. There will no doubt be challenges that the County Council is addressing in determining how it will deliver with commissioned services. Might a clearer communication of Tamworth's chosen direction positively influence the way in which you interact with the County and other partners? This may also be a reason for closer engagement by Tamworth Borough Council with the Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent LEP.

### Governance and Decision making

Councillors and Directors meet regularly through scheduled meetings, briefings and away days. You have allocated Mondays for strategic issues which involve meetings of various bodies such as CMT, the Change Board or the Executive Management Team. You recognise the value this brings in ensuring that you maintain an effective, on-going focus on strategic issues. It was clear to us that these meetings are characterised by a good and mutually respectful interaction between members and officers.

We were informed that Tamworth's Councillors are considered effective on the ground. Also there appear to be very few concerns regarding councillor ethics as evidenced by the low numbers of complaints from the public and minimal numbers of standards issues.

There has been some improvement in the approach to Overview and Scrutiny. For example, there is more focus by Scrutiny Committees on the Cabinet Forward Plan, and the introduction of review templates to help the business and focus of the Committees. . However despite the improvements made, there is scope for Scrutiny to be more strategic and more effectively provide policy development challenge to the Cabinet. We were informed Scrutiny members seem to treat meetings as a means of information gathering rather than as a forum for challenging council strategy and policy. We encourage you continue to re-focus scrutiny on policy development and performance management and give consideration to provision of dedicated support to the function.

You may also wish to consider a different approach to training your Scrutiny Committees. There may be an opportunity to use the Scrutiny Member's Best Practice Charter as a means of demonstrating and giving members a greater appreciation of what can be achieved through effective scrutiny. There are other active learning approaches that could be considered such as the facilitated re-running of a meeting immediately after it happens in order to demonstrate how business might have been handled differently. There may also be opportunities for members to observe and question Scrutiny Committees from other authorities about how they do business.

We wonder whether the role of your Scrutiny Committees would benefit from a re-definition of the function to provide an enhanced development opportunity for Councillors. Whilst we are mindful that care must be exercised in avoiding the dilution of functions, you may wish to consider whether the Audit and Scrutiny Committees could be combined to provide more substance and responsibility for members. This could also be a way of reducing officer workload in the number of meetings which need to be supported whilst improving the overall effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny. We also feel there is an opportunity for you to review the current chairing arrangements as Scrutiny might focus more effectively on Cabinet business, and more strategic matters generally, if chaired by opposition councillors.

We feel that overall member training would benefit from a shift in its current passive delivery to a more proactive approach with clear rules on compliance and sanctions (for example Members not being allowed to join Committees such as Licensing and Planning unless they have completed the training relevant to these functions).

Whilst we feel that your Cabinet is committed to taking and standing by difficult decisions in order to achieve the outcomes the Council seeks, the challenges which all Local Authorities face at present are unprecedented. A number of Councils around the country are giving serious consideration as to whether an 'all out' electoral model may allow them to focus on taking tougher decisions which could yield benefits to their local areas and their organisations in the longer term. Some Councils have considered whether the frequency of annual elections 'by thirds' can hinder them in making the transformational change which all Councils have to consider. As you look to a future in which you recognise that further difficult decisions must be taken, we encourage you to assure yourselves that your current arrangements allow you to the maintain longer-term strategic focus that this will require. You may wish to consider moving away from elections by thirds to an all-out electoral model based on the possible benefits for positively enhancing decision-making on the Council's future direction as well as the potential financial savings that you could make.

## Organisational Capacity

The Council is taking a strategic view to service reviews and any re-structures which might result are based on assessment of the outcomes sought and structuring the Council accordingly to deliver these. The approach to service reviews is perceived by staff to be structured, transparent, consistent and equitable across all service delivery areas. This sophisticated assessment of service delivery and working environment improvements is playing a part in these considerations whilst enabling you to avoid a less strategic 'salami-slicing' approach to this. You are responding to the Council shrinking in resource terms by seeking efficiencies through retaining services whilst shedding direct delivery where appropriate. Your considerations are underpinned by an approach of looking at a range of options which will help to generate efficiencies in order to close the budget gap.

Whilst the strategic approach you are taking in service reviews is clear, we would encourage you to assure yourselves that any risk of siloed service reviews which could cause you to miss transformational opportunities managed effectively. The process will require all staff to think about the council as a whole as opposed to focusing on their own departments in isolation. We would also advocate you integrating an early management structure review within this work focussing on spans of control, layers of management, transferrable skills and joint management posts. You may also wish to review the size of some teams which may be over-stretched due to a lack of capacity and identify whether staff in other parts of the council might be deployed into these functions.

There is open access for staff to communicate with senior managers which is enabling ideas to be brought forward. This is also leading to staff being afforded increased discretion and flexibility to seek innovative solutions. Overall we found staff to be strongly committed to the organisation and the communities you serve which provides a strong platform for future positive development.

Your relationship with Lichfield provides a good foundation for the future. There are numerous examples of shared services which are either already in place or are being considered. Your joint working with Lichfield is supported by a proposed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and there are good relationships between the political and managerial leadership of both organisations which provides added stability to these arrangements moving forward.

We feel that you would benefit from identifying and providing training for staff which supports their continued development of commercial acumen along with project management skills. This would strengthen their ability to assess the viability of entrepreneurial ideas and manage risk effectively. This would allow for the development of concepts, costing of ideas and then identifying ways of taking these to market. You have already developed internal skills and expertise through your work on the Council website which could be sold at competitive rates to other councils. You may also wish to explore training opportunities for key staff to improve their skills in bid writing as this could to maximise commissioning opportunities open to Tamworth Borough Council.

We would also encourage you to seek ways of further embedding effective project management across the organisation in order to maximise existing investment whilst keeping a strong hold on managing capacity and risk. We were advised of a view in the Council that project management is not yet fully embedded across the organisation

which may be a result of difficulties in staff finding capacity to set aside the 'day job' and deliver discrete projects.

We would encourage you to assure yourselves that you are taking a consistent approach to ICT with a clear understanding of the improvements that this can deliver. There are challenges caused by the impacts of the Public Services Network and Code of Connection which has caused difficulties for staff wanting to use their own electronic devices. There have been some delays to the roll-out of technology resulting in this taking longer than had been expected. There is more for you to do in rectifying some difficulties which have presented in relation to off- site and mobile working and these must be addressed if your aspirations for 'agile working' are to be fully realised.

A common barrier to shared working between Local Authorities is the fact that Councils often have different IT platforms. We would encourage you to ensure that you assure yourselves of compatibility as an integral part of any future plans moving forward.

### Additional areas of focus

In addition to the five core areas of the peer challenge you asked the peer team to consider and comment on your Community Development work and approach to Commissioning.

#### (i) Community Development

You are viewed as a strong partner by the voluntary and community sectors through your Community Development Officers (CDOs) and other individuals who have a reputation for understanding the value of the Sector (as well as its needs). There is perceived to be strong support from political and managerial leaders for effective community engagement and locality working which involves utilising the CDOs effectively. Partly due to good individual relationships the voluntary sector has enjoyed a positive relationship with the Council because you 'strive to get things right' in your community engagement and development work. We would encourage you, however, to make sure your commitment to 'getting things right' is not undermined by the departure of individuals from the organisation and losing their knowledge and understanding of the sector.

Ward members are actively involved with CDOs in working in communities which is further evidence of an organisational commitment to this work. This is providing a valuable advocacy role in communities with the CDOs described to us as effective 'honest brokers' on behalf of communities. You have also used participatory budgeting well in the past. As an organisation partners consider Tamworth Borough Council to be a reliable 'first port of call'. You are described as a catalyst and facilitator (though linking partners effectively with both communities and each other) who delivers quickly, flexibly and visibly. We do feel however that more could be done to ensure communities are fully aware of what is available and you may wish to do this by communicating yours, and your partners', achievements and successes more proactively.

There is a corporate desire at Tamworth Borough Council to 'support communities to run communities'. You recognise the value of community development in providing a route for service providers to work directly with communities and your community hubs are an integral part of you delivering this. Because you see partnership working as core business

you seek to draw in other partners to increase their access to communities. This is evidenced in your work with the police and Homestart and as an organisation you are keen to learn from practice elsewhere; you were described to us as a 'listening' organisation.

We were informed that the opening times of hubs could be more customer friendly – we would encourage you to consider how hours of access can better match the requirements of those who will use the services in the hubs.

We found that managers of other services in the Council are not engaging fully with your community development delivery. This is due to a lack of understanding about what is available and how the CDOs might contribute to the achievement of objectives of other Council service areas. Some managers seemed unsure as to how they should engage with CDOs which means a key resource in you working effectively at a locality level is not being fully utilised. We found some of your locality working to be ad hoc on occasion and therefore there is a risk that full benefit and potential for working this way may not be realised.

Not all Council staff involved in Community Development work are able to focus on outcomes for people because some of the process and practice in this area does not allow this. To ensure you are getting the most out of this work, we believe a better focus on 'why' rather than 'what' is needed as you consider this function as part of the service review. In austere times we would encourage you to provide even greater focus for community development work by identifying key initiatives and projects which are founded upon clearly identified outcomes which are aligned to corporate objectives and undertaken with a clear evidence base underpinning any work you do.

The work you are doing in relation to community development is valued by partners but you are not yet benefiting from funding contributions from partners. In some other instances it has proved a challenge for Community Development to achieve engagement from other services and partners. We would encourage you to consider whether you could link your community development work more integrally into locality working with partners (for example community safety, health, education, employment and environment). There may be opportunities for partners' contributions which you are not yet fully utilising whilst you may be able to increase take up by partners if you clearly demonstrate how your contributions enhance the achievement of their desired impacts and outcomes. We would also encourage you to work towards improving communications across your partners in relation to proactively raising the profile of your work. The new website may be a catalyst for this.

Through your Position Statement, the issue of lone working was raised as a potential concern with regard to your Community Development team. We were informed that in relation to the work of the CDOs, there are systems in place to manage this. There was however a concern expressed to us about customers displaying challenging behaviours at your contact centre and a perception that this might be an increasing trend. You may wish to re-visit current the policies for managing conflict, aggression and supporting lone working in order to assure yourselves that these remain fit for purpose.

## (ii) Commissioning

Good work has been done already with first phase of commissioning. An example is the Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands (IEWM) funded project looking at commissioning around Healthy Tamworth. Also you have undertaken joint commissioning with the County in relation to healthy eating and physical activity. This provides opportunity for learning and evaluation of approaches which could be further replicated in other areas of future work.

The Delayed Discharge project utilised partnership money put into a single pot for joint working. This saved costs for each partner (by reducing the length of the patient stay) and enhanced the customer experience (on the back of partners working together to improve home conditions to which patients were returning).

The Commissioning framework for Tamworth is founded on sound principles of 'procuring outcomes linked to priorities'. It is also 'Compact proofed'. Your 'Commissioning Intentions' document is perceived by partners to be clear and transparent in articulating how you intend to proceed. We questioned whether partners need to reciprocate in order to enable a fuller, borough-wide picture of what will be commissioned. This in turn will in all likelihood highlight opportunities for joint work into the future. A borough-wide commissioning approach has the potential to provide longevity and resilience for any commissioning whilst address the threat and risk of the Council and partners retrenching to core business in austere times.

With this in mind, we encourage you to commence a dialogue with the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and the County Council to establish appetite and scope for joint commissioning. Intrinsic to this conversation is consideration of what the right level and scale at which to commission is – would this be at a County level or would this best be done on a locality basis? We also believe that it will be important to identify what is to be commissioned. Until this is clear the full potential of a collaborative and sustainable approach to commissioning will not be realised. It will be important as well for you to increase the organisational capacity through training for staff to support commissioning. This will enable them to produce better bids and specifications to maximise funding opportunities

### **Moving forward - suggestions for consideration**

Based on what we saw, heard and read we suggest you consider the following actions to build on the Council's undoubted successes. These are things we think will help you improve and develop the effectiveness and capacity to deliver your future ambitions and plans. These are linked to areas you asked us to focus on:

1. Consider opportunities for building further clarity on joint working with Staffordshire County Council in order generate more mutual benefits. This includes a focus on locality working and commissioning.
2. Consider how best to embed locality working within the Council and TSP. For example, an annual plan of priorities (for example improved Streetscene, health literacy and positive diversionary activities for young people in locality X) for each of the 4 locality areas would provide direction for the Community. Align

mainstream resources to locality working and lever in funding and resources from partners and the HRA account.

3. Communicate and explain the Sustainability Strategy for the council with staff more widely. It was not clear to the team that all staff are as aware of this work as you would wish.
4. Consider developing a higher profile for the Council's political leadership in strategic business planning and decisions. The input from political leaders in raising awareness of future financial challenges for the Council has been effective and you may wish to replicate this more widely in relation to other areas, for example, locality working.
5. Seek to improve the ways in which the positive work you are doing with partner organisations is communicated. There appear to be benefits of more closely interlinked communications across different organisations which are not yet being utilised (e.g. links on each other's websites). Internally consider developing an internal "Who's Who" (in conjunction with the intranet) to help inform users as to who is responsible for what. Review your current approach to learning from (and communication of) complaints, comments and compliments.
6. Develop a more proactive approach to member training with clear rules on compliance and sanctions. With particular regard to scrutiny, consider a structured development programme for the Council's Scrutiny Committees utilising experience from other Authorities. This might include visits to other Councils and targeted support such as:
  - mentoring for the committees as a whole (including observation of meetings with feedback)
  - targeted one to one mentoring for the Tamworth Chairs from counterparts in other Authorities and
  - assigning Policy 'tasks/projects' for Overview and Scrutiny to consider (e.g. tasking Overview and Scrutiny to come up with recommendations on how you embed locality working).
  - Consider introducing a convention that the Chairman and Vice-chairman of Scrutiny Committees are each appointed from opposing political groups.

We have made available to you a set of slides that summarise the above feedback. The slides are the ones used by the peer team to present its feedback at the end of the onsite visit.

### **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 Howard Davis who, as you know, is our Principal Adviser (West Midlands). Howard can be contacted via email at [howard.davis@local.gov.uk](mailto:howard.davis@local.gov.uk) (or tel. 07920 061197). He 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.

Yours sincerely

Ernest Opuni – LGA Peer Challenge Manager

On behalf of the peer challenge team:

- Nicola Bulbeck (Chief Executive – Teignbridge District Council Council)
- Councillor Neil Clarke (Leader, Rushcliffe Borough Council)
- Jamie Carson (Corporate Director, Chorley Council)
- Terry Collier (Corporate Director, Spelthorne Council)
- Ernest Opuni – LGA Peer Challenge Manager