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Chief Executive
Bury Metropolitan Borough Council
Knowsley Street
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Dear Mike

Bury Metropolitan Borough Council – Corporate Peer Challenge

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

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

- Jan Britton – Chief Executive, Sandwell MBC
- Cllr Mahroof Hussain (Labour) – Cabinet Member for Communities and Cohesion, Rotherham MBC
- Jonathan Bunt – Chief Finance Officer, London Borough of Barking & Dagenham
- Ann Woodward - Head of Performance & Strategic Partnerships, East Riding of Yorkshire Council
- Peter Rentell – Programme Manager, LGA

Scope and focus of the peer challenge

You asked the peer team to give external consideration to financial planning and viability within the context of a sustainable plan; prioritisation from a political perspective and your available capacity and resources to deliver your future ambitions.

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

- Understanding of the local context and priority setting
- Financial planning and viability
- Political and managerial leadership

- Governance and decision-making
- Organisational capacity to deliver your priorities

The peer challenge process

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

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

This letter provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (12th to 15th November 2013). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

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

Summary of feedback: overall observations and messages

The Review Team found Bury to be a good council which is held in high regard by its peers, partners and residents. As a relatively small metropolitan borough the council has above average performance in many areas and delivers these at a low cost and is seen to be punching above its weight.

The council benefits from strong and effective leadership from a chief executive and leader who work together well as a partnership, and from an amazing level of commitment from employees, which Bury should celebrate as being well-above the norm in most local authorities and engage more in its planning for the future.

Clear leadership is also provided by executive cabinet members, directors and leaders at all levels within the organisation. The Team were convinced that the council's devolved management structure and the 'dual mandate' under which directors have both departmental and corporate roles is a real strength and well-suited to the council's circumstances, in a way that it might not be elsewhere. This is one example of a palpable sense of there being a 'Bury way'.

Bury is an outwardly aware council and has strong working relations through Team Bury with its public sector partners in the borough, particularly but not solely those in the National Health Service. The Health and Well-being Board has made a strong start since the inception of its statutory role and appears to be a forum of equals, which bodes well for the future. Bury's long term commitment to education and effective working relations with schools and colleges appears to be a particular strength and a point of pride for many councillors and employees.

Bury is also engaged with partners outside the Borough, in the Greater Manchester area, through the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and various bi- and tri-lateral working arrangements with neighbouring councils. However, some partners commented on the occasional limitation placed on Bury Council's engagement in activities generally described as strategic forward planning, options appraisal and joint working by the council's restricted capacity at middle management/senior technical levels. This became a theme that emerged in a number of areas through the peer challenge.

Bury is clear about its priorities as a council and these are embedded in the organisation and well-known by employees, who are able to offer explanations of how their individual roles contribute to the overall strategic aims of the authority.

The Council recognises the huge scale of the political and financial challenge that faces most local authorities over the next five years. To meet this challenge the council will need to become as strong at setting non-priorities as it is setting priorities. The council will need to ensure that priorities are delivered in the most efficient manner and that non-priorities are progressively reduced to statutory minimums or stopped entirely.

The grey area around the definition of statutory and non-statutory services should not prevent the council from determining its own priorities. The majority of statutory requirements leave considerable scope for local decisions on the scale and means by which the statutory duty is discharged, and this in turn should allow the council to determine its own priorities first rather than feeling bound to continue with current services in their current form because of statutes.

Bury has a number of well-developed tools to help address the political and financial challenges of the future, including the 'star chamber' which provides a vehicle for the chief executive, leader and cabinet members to challenge services; the involvement of frontline councillors in cabinet portfolio and budget setting processes; and the emerging system for priority-based budgeting rather than simply allocating budget reductions by percentage.

However, it is evident that frontline councillors are struggling to convert their broad awareness of the scale of the imminent financial challenge into an understanding of the practical and political decisions that may need to be taken over the next two or three years. This statement should not be taken as a criticism as it reflects the fact that councillors are at least aware of the challenge and are working to come to terms with it, rather than attempting to maintain a sense of denial.

It might help elected councillors, employees and partners for the council to stimulate a broader debate about 'what the council of 2016 looks like' as a means for putting the decisions that are coming into context. Indeed, by coincidence, the leader and chief executive continued with a well-developed process that could be described in these terms with presentations to employees and residents while the team were in the Borough.

Bury is a council that is starting from a healthy financial position with balances and reserves. This measure of financial health provides the Council with the time and funding to explore 'invest to save' and other opportunities that could go some way to cushioning the immediate impact of budget reductions on residents if it continues to take decisive action now to reinvent itself. There is no sense of an imminent financial crisis at Bury.

In conclusion, the first key message from the challenge team was of the strength of the council and its political and professional leadership. Other comments and recommendations should be viewed through this lens.

We found the council's financial planning to be sound, in a traditional manner, but that future financial viability depends upon being able to identify priority and non-priority services, and to translate these priorities into effective budget decisions.

The council should also consider the theme around its lack of or limited capacity for strategic forward planning, options appraisal and joint working at middle management/senior technical levels, which emerged in a number of areas through the peer challenge; although the team are keen to ensure that this comment is taken to suggest a small number of appropriately qualified and experienced people with the time and resources to help the council plan for the future, not a vast investment in tiers of managers or teams of strategic planners.

Understandably, there is some variability in management practices and forward planning between the different directorates at Bury Council. The range is by no means excessive but the team detected a noticeable difference between those directorates that are actively planning to shape the future and those who feel themselves to be in the process of being shaped by forces largely beyond their control. The senior leadership of the council may wish to consider whether there is a risk that this variability might become more acute in the future if not addressed under the pressure of the inevitable budget reductions. The proposed organisational restructuring offers an opportunity to address these variations.

Summary of feedback: core corporate elements

1. Leadership and Governance

The council benefits well from a Chief Executive and Leader who work effectively together and are visible at all levels within the organisation including with partners and residents. There is a strong partnership ethos which unites managerial and political

leadership, an honest and transparent approach to communicating future challenges and good officer/member relationships at all levels. This is underpinned by the council mantra “*nothing about you, without you*” which is clearly appreciated by staff. The team observed a Township forum attended by the Leader and a senior officer to describe the Plan for Change 3 and this demonstrated the approach with a very honest assessment confirming that the council were being forced to go deeper into the organisation to find savings in a way that was not envisaged when their first Plan for Change was launched in 2011. In addition, local media relationships appeared positive.

There is a clear recognition of the sheer scale of the future challenges with a £16m cut required from budgets for 2015/16. The council are not underestimating the size and scale of this challenge and are starting to look at options around service changes, alternative service delivery methods, reduced quality of service and organisational restructuring. The council are looking to move to a smaller organisation from four to three directorates. Interestingly, the peer team were unsure of the council’s devolved management structure and the ‘dual mandate’ under which directors have both departmental and corporate roles, however, through the duration of the peer challenge we discovered it was a real strength and well-suited to the council’s circumstances, in a way that it might not be at another local authority.

The Council recognises the huge scale of the political and financial challenge that it faces over the next three to five years. To meet this challenge the council will need to become as strong at setting non-priorities as it is at setting priorities. We saw evidence of members having taken brave decisions in some areas. The political leadership will need to ensure that priorities are delivered in the most efficient manner and critically consider how non-priorities are progressively reduced to statutory minimums or stopped entirely. To assist in this process the Scrutiny function could offer even greater value to hold council decisions to account by cabinet pro-actively referring work streams for detailed scrutiny without adding delay to timelines. There is a sense that scrutiny needs more “teeth” and should be more involved in Plan for Change 3, budget savings for 2015/16 and have a better linkage with health scrutiny which is currently separate.

Members are actively engaged in budget setting. They understand the financial challenges the council is facing, demonstrating a commitment to supporting budgetary decisions in their local communities. They accept new service delivery models will need to be considered and have a desire to better understand new delivery models and how they could meet their social values. In order to meet the budgetary pressures, members need to be strong at setting non-priorities and driving these through to budget decisions.

The council are well aware that their future is inextricably linked with the Greater Manchester City Region (AGMA) and are fully engaged in various working arrangements with neighbouring councils. The Greater Manchester strategy is focusing largely on improving the economic strength of the area and whilst Bury is well placed to benefit from this it will also bring challenges such as need to identify suitable land for housing and employment purposes which may have an impact on the green belt.

We found a strong tradition and legacy of partnership working across Bury with good working relationships developed with Police, Fire Service, Health and Housing. The successful transition of Public Health (PH) into the council from April 2013 was a direct result of close working relationships built with health colleagues over a number of years and PH has made a good start with joint teams working towards the integrated health and social care agenda. Indeed, we found that the Health and Wellbeing Board had made a strong start and was seen as a forum of equals. From other strategic partners Fire and Rescue Service noted a reduction in ASBO's working closely with Police and fire incidents generally falling assisted by their "Be Safe, Be Cool" initiative visiting every secondary school in the Borough. One partner stated "*There is a tenacity and resilience in the Bury wider leadership group*".

There was a real sense from partners that they wanted to work with Bury Council on managing budget cuts. Partners talked about sharing data more effectively to improve needs assessments, working with the council to rationalise customer contact points (sharing access points across the partnership). What might support this is a wider multi-agency transformation group, not specifically addressing Public Sector Reform (PSR) but the practicalities of service provision, shared training, premises, shared intelligence, back office and more efficient commissioning approaches. The wider leadership board 'Team Bury' can establish and drive this approach with a clear focus on the better use of their collective resources.

Despite the strong tradition around partnership working some of the strategic partners we spoke to consider they can be held to account more effectively on a number of governance boards, for example the Local Safeguarding Children's Board, and they need to better understand how to navigate through council governance rules, for example understanding what the Health and Wellbeing Board (HWB) can decide and approve. In essence, partners want to be at the inception of projects and discussions around all borough wide issues so that they can help shape future service delivery, offer practical and creative solutions and help to build overall capacity. We suggest earlier engagement of Team Bury in strategic options appraisal through Plan for Change will benefit the authority.

Bury had a unique arrangement regarding the Director of Public Health (DPH) and it needs to build on this if it is to fulfil its desire to be a 'public health' council. There are some examples of how services are commissioned to promote well-being e.g. the 'exercise on referral' BEATS scheme and the Council should consider how the wider council services can support public health needs to be developed further. The new skills Public Health bring into the council should be exploited especially around evaluation to provide better evidence based interventions and inform the council where current interventions are not adding value. There is also an opportunity to bring together commissioning of wellbeing services into one directorate, Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) partners commented on the complexity of grants and Service Level Agreements across a range of service areas and felt there was value in bringing them together to promote efficiency and ensure the council is not 'double funding'.

Whilst Community consultation is strong it does appear that on occasion it is holding back change. Members are there to provide community leadership and sometimes this requires difficult decisions to be made and driven through. This means that whilst residents views are important and need to be taken into account in decision making, there is a wider strategic context which residents are not party to or accountable for. Ultimately Members have been elected to provide this leadership role however difficult those decisions are and thereafter stand by their decisions. Building on the trust and engagement the council has with their community there are opportunities to involve local communities in co-producing change, this would take Bury further up the ladder on engagement (see below) and involve residents in shaping change.



The importance of a feedback loop to residents is greater when the council makes difficult decisions so equal energy needs to go into this as it does into listening to the community, including feeding back consistently why difficult decisions are made. With a well engaged community like Bury there are opportunities to manage expectations through engaging local people in the development of service delivery solutions which reduce cost and indeed standards as appropriate. Budget simulation events, where residents are engaged in looking at the choices the council has in front of it, are helpful and stimulate discussion on what can be done with a reduction in budget.

To define what the council post 2016 will look like requires the story to be told about what the council and its partners face. Issues like future seven day working requirements, workforce challenges, greater co-production with the community and further sharing of assets and resources begins to build a picture of future public services in Bury. Indeed it is not just what the council will look like but the wider picture including health, policing, schooling and justice. Bury are well placed to develop this future council vision as they are fully engaged with work led by AGMA on public sector reform (community budgets).

A review of the Partnership structures and agreement of accountabilities is essential. There was some confusion from partners on the current accountabilities and there was no recent accountability diagram to illustrate this was evident. The development of a shared outcomes framework will support this with clarity about which multi-agency body is taking the lead in driving specific outcomes. A review of the community plan would assist this with an agreed blue print for Bury based on the collective focus of prevention. The outcomes framework can then be the focus for delivering this plan and in turn it can

inform and link theme based multi-agency strategic plans, for example Health and Social Care Plan and Children's Plan. There is currently no sense of a golden thread linking these drivers and accountabilities together.

Whilst the priorities are very clear and established, if a little broad, there was no sense about what the non-priority or lower priority services were. As a result, staff at all levels could not give any direction about which areas did not matter as much to the council and/or residents. The Adults department is clearly gearing itself up in both structure and attitude to the future challenges facing the Council. This is not as clear in the areas which appear to still be more traditional in. There may be some transferable learning between Directorates and cross-cutting issues to consider.

Public Health appears to be in a slight bubble within Adult Services at the moment which maybe a consequence of the transition and interim arrangements from which the service is emerging. Consideration should be given to developing stronger relationships between public health and other services particularly where closer joint working will achieve wider public health objectives and/or help prevent or reduce future demand on Council services in the future. This is clearly evidenced in Adults and Public Health but is less clearly prevalent in the other services.

2. Priority Setting

Bury are clear about key priorities arising from public consultation and priorities are widely known amongst frontline staff and partners assisted by strategic planning events. The council have been successful in protecting frontline services from budget reductions to date. This is clearly documented in the plan for change documents and budget reports. It also came through strongly in the staff and resident sessions. However, the team did question whether there was a corporate view about public health priorities and how engaged members were in Public Sector Reform.

Despite changes in political control over recent years there has still been a consensus around key priorities for the Borough which has enabled major long term projects such as The Rock, Pimhole renewal area and the decent homes programme to be completed as planned. In addition, the borough is well cared for and staff, partners and residents alike stated they were all very proud of their area and Bury was acknowledged regionally as being a nice place to visit, do business and live.

The three priorities have been incorporated along with Member priority and other factors to produce a more informed mechanism for allocating the savings targets for future years. It was still a work in progress during the peer challenge week so it is not possible to ascertain how successful it will ultimately be but it clearly demonstrates that a far more considered view is being developed.

Bury is developing a number of tools to help address the political and financial challenges of the future, including the 'star chamber' which provides a vehicle for the chief executive, leader and cabinet members to challenge services; the involvement of frontline councillors in cabinet portfolio and budget setting processes; and the emerging

system for priority-based budgeting rather than simply allocating budget reductions by percentage.

The medium term planning agenda in one department appeared impressive from which there is a shared learning opportunity. It was encouraging to note that the council are reviewing the performance management process to inform better priority outcomes and give greater local granularity to create a richer local picture. Equally, investment in a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and recent cabinet approval to establishment of a Child Sexual Exploitation Team within children's services will deliver important benefits. However, better linkages are required between departments and safeguarding children practice, though improving, is still a concern corporately.

The council's long term commitment to education and effective working relations with schools and colleges appears to be a particular strength and a point of pride for many councillors and employees.

The council need to be as strong about setting non-priorities as it is about setting priorities. This is as much about taking the gold plating off services as it is about stopping services, or it can be about introducing /increasing charges for non-core services, or delivering services via community resources. Examples include frequency of grounds maintenance (which has been done to some extent); charging for some community based cultural activities, review of thresholds and community management building on the successful self-management of sports pitches. Members in particular often do not see these options as non-priority approaches, although there was an isolated mention to the removal of Gold Standards. Our observation is that without being clear about what the non-priority or lower priority areas are, all services will end up being reduced in a broadly equal way. If non-priority or lower priority areas cannot be identified, everything ends up as equally important and therefore nothing is protected or promoted.

Whilst the level and depth of consultation is very impressive, it appears to have become the main part of the council's decision making process rather than being an element which informs that decision making. There is a danger that the consultation becomes the decision rather than the process to inform the decision and the council will need to guard against this.

There is a need for development of a set of 'shared outcome' measures across partners to determine how well prevention and early intervention is making a difference. The wider integration of Public Health can help to support this development.

Although the Member focus group showed that they knew the council had to make large savings in future years, there appeared to be a limited level of understanding as to what that actually meant in reality, i.e. how that translated in to lower levels of service, fewer offices, services ceased. This was partly a product of the success of Bury in recent years in protecting front line services through driving down costs and continuously seeking efficiencies.

Although the rhetoric of “*everything is on the table*” came through, when challenged about some specific, though broad options, i.e. outsourcing, it became clear that for some elected members red lines do exist. Others were more practical and stated that all options would have to be considered against their values. Until the post 2015 Council is defined, it is very difficult to generate a plan to achieve that goal and match resources accordingly. We recommend the council determine what the operating model will look like for the council of 2015 and beyond to reflect the type of organisation the council wants to be.

3. Financial Planning and Viability

Financial Health

Bury is a council that is starting from a healthy position and will enable it to take some managed risk in the next couple of years without overdue concern of intervention. The current general balance is above that recommended by the 151 Officers, but is still not excessive, and is supplemented by reserves. The Council’s other potential liabilities, for example insurance claims, are also well provided for. Despite the significant savings taken in recent years, the last three years has seen underspends against budget and an increase in earmarked reserves.

The devolved financial model is very well suited to Bury. It probably wouldn’t work everywhere but there is a real sense of an alignment between finance and services and that enables managers to make detailed and informed decisions on new initiatives. It also encourages managed risk which will be important in considering a new operating model for the organisation. The peer team concluded the authority was not risk averse and that staff are actively encouraged to take calculated risks to achieve improvement.

To temper any major risk taking by the departments, the most senior members and managers are involved in the financial management of the council via the ‘star chamber’ process. It acts as a clearing house for some of the new initiatives and provides a forum to discuss new ideas.

Financial Planning - Technical

There is a description of a three year rolling plan, whereas in reality it is a two year rolling budget reflecting the timeframe of Government settlements. Achieving a two year rolling budget should not be seen as a criticism, however, as it is not achieved by all authorities.

The ‘golden rules’ are clear and known by the managers and Members and put an emphasis on financial prudence and stewardship. Overall, they provide a rigorous framework for setting a sound and deliverable budget, as evidenced via the three plans for change with their cautious tone. The question is whether they are too cautious given the scale of challenge in the future and do the capital strategy elements as written prevent investment in opportunities which give significant or uncertain financial benefits, for example growth projects. The council is clear that this element of the rules relates

only to setting the capital programme and we did find clear evidence of innovative investment projects such as Townside Fields.

Without knowledge and/or capacity in the corporate finance team, much of the analysis of initiatives occurs in the services and has to be built in to the budget plans with only reduced central challenge when compared to other arrangements. This is the one downside of the devolved financial model which otherwise works very well for Bury, although the gap is being offset by accessing wider professional networks and the use of external expertise..

The council is exploring new opportunities to develop priority based budget setting. It is only a work in progress and is a very mechanistic accountant style approach to prioritisation. It still creates a savings target for every service area across the Council at quite a detailed level. Whilst this is a moderated target based on the prioritisation scoring matrix, it does not yet appear to achieve *“this is high priority so there will be no saving and this is low priority so I want to take a large saving or stop the service entirely”*.

Services are expected to, and historically have successfully absorbed demographic pressures but it means that such pressures are not quantified in budget reports although Members’ attention is drawn clearly to the existence of such pressures within the MTFs and budget reports. Given the scale of the demographic pressures on social care, particularly Children’s Services and support for the over 80’s, it is questionable whether it is realistic to assume demographic pressures can be absorbed.

Financial Viability

The council has balances and reserves and its finances are in good order. This would allow, if the council so chooses, some ‘smoothing’ of the budget situation whilst major changes are implemented over the next 12-24 months.

The emphasis of the ‘golden rules’ was reinforced in discussions but not necessarily evidenced in the budget decisions. The protection of the strategic planning budgets and preventative monies will help the longer term position of the council by managing demand and formulating the future direction of the authority. It is certainly clear that the strategic capacity of the council has been cut in recent years and that it is starting to have an impact.

Financial Planning and viability - Suggestions

The council must identify priorities:

- priority services but delivered in most efficient model
 - identify continuously referenced principles, e.g. digital only access, market test/alternative service models

- non-priorities progressively reduced and/or stopped; statutory services reduced to absolute minimum
- Grey area around statutory/non-statutory services distracts from decision making on priorities
- Enable plan and identification of programme(s) to achieve Council priorities and deliver the 2015/16 and/or 2016/17 budget.

For all points above this is central to the council's ability to become sustainable in the medium term. At the moment almost everything could hang off the priorities in one way or another resulting in resources being fairly evenly spread across the Council. The need is to be clearer on what are the priority services and consciously shift resources to those, or in reality in this climate not cut them or not use them to the same degree.

That is not to say those services should not be reviewed to ensure they are being delivered in the most efficient model (in house, partnership, outsource, mixed economy) and the council should identify the key criteria and values against which to assess the most cost effective model for it. The real key is to ensure that the non-priority or lower priority services are identified and it is from those that the cuts are made not the priorities.

There was a real impression through all discussions that the statutory duties of the council are getting in the way of discussions about priorities. Essentially statutory duties are being considered first. It is suggested that Bury allocates all of its money in line with priorities and then looks to see which statutory responsibilities they are not being fulfilled. If there are any, build those back in to deliver the absolute minimum level and cut the lowest priority services further to ensure a balanced budget.

The capital strategy rules as written require reductions in council budgets. Whilst prudent this appears to place a tight control over the council's approach to investment appraisal, including the use of capital receipts, and there is some concern that such rules could stifle innovation. However as, in reality the rules relate to budgeting rather than investment decisions, there is some evidence of more flexibility in the rules than the initial impression we were given and the existence of other policies such as the Prudential Borrowing policy help to clarify the situation.

The council is encouraged to continue to use capital receipts, reserves and balances, and prudential borrowing to ensure that schemes which benefit the wider community and which deliver longer-term outcomes are pump-primed and delivered whilst retaining the benefits from prudent policies such as the Golden Rules. It is also suggested that the council makes clear to officers at all levels exactly what the rules are intended to deliver and that there is sufficient flexibility to allow schemes to be brought forward which provide wider opportunities to the council.

There was a general acceptance across the council that those posts that look more medium term or provide corporate capacity, i.e. senior technical, policy and programme

management roles, have been deleted. The impact of that is now being felt and reserves can be used to find/fund that capacity in the immediate term. This could be fixed term contracts or short term consultancy pieces but, crucially, monies exist and it is recommended that the council take advantage of its financial health to provide capacity.

The funding cuts are likely to hit hard in 2015/16 and there will be a need to identify savings to start in April 2015. Where there are good schemes but the lead in time is such that the savings will not begin until later in the financial year, and there are no other options to bridge the gap, reserves could be used to smooth until the full year effect occurs. This is not, however, a recommendation to use reserves and balances to maintain services.

4. Capacity and Resources

Despite the significant changes in the council over the past three years the commitment and loyalty of council staff was amazing. Staff we met are realistic, honest and have a 'can do' attitude. Frontline staff offered a number of creative solutions to us in discussion that the council would do well to harness in a formal mechanism.

Team Bury represent a strong willingness to continue working together to build capacity and offer innovative solutions provided they are at the inception of discussions and new projects. We noted some good examples of innovative use of community assets in parts of the council, for example parks and day-centre provision.

Although the results were not seen, mapping all property across the public services provides a platform to make savings by maximising available accommodation, offering single access points across the locality and promoting co-location for partner organisations.

We noted an innovative pilot scheme in Radcliffe with primary care to improve intelligence on client need to inform deployment of resources/commissioning. We suggest the council can build on this pilot to better understand future healthcare needs and develop a shared intelligence hub. Demand management will be key in the future around the prevention/intervention agenda, particularly with an ageing population across the Borough, and improved intelligence around need will facilitate and underpin joint commissioning strategies through a more robust Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA).

There is no visible resource outside of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) that is thinking three years forward with resource shrinking through the proposal to reduce an Executive Director post. The peer team believe there is a gap or limitation at levels described by others as strategic forward planning, options appraisal and joint working. The council has a restricted capacity at middle management and senior technical levels in favour of protecting frontline services and the requirement for this type of expertise will need to be addressed in conjunction with the future operating model.

Positive steps are being taken on all fronts but there was no evidence of a single vision driving all elements to a single goal. The risk is instead of converging to achieve better services and savings, they run parallel or even diverge resulting in additional costs or missed opportunities.

At the opening meeting the peer team were asked to additionally give a view on the council website. Whilst it is 'a good Council website', in its current guise it does not offer an easy, intuitive or complete enough experience to suggest that it will take a large volume of transactions away from the OSS or contact centre. It does not, for example, offer the "My Account" type of portal where a resident could pay their Council Tax, view their rent account, report a missed bin collection and book a squash court from a single sign on. One partner told us they struggled to find anything on community safety. The team would suggest looking at council sites commended by SOCITIM (Society of Information Technology Management) as best practice, including other global organisations such as Amazon.

Staff we spoke to did not appear convinced about the 'One Stop Shop' civic quarter. The concept almost seems to have been coined to explain the location of the different offices rather than have been the intended vision. It is evident and strong within some departments, but less apparent in others.

Although Members expressed a willingness to consider alternative delivery options, there was a mixed level of understanding of those choices, for example the terms outsourcing and privatisation were used interchangeably by some. Where Members were clear was on the values they and the community considered important. It is essential that future options are viewed and expressed in light of those values but these may well have to be tempered by what can be afforded.

Operating with such a small corporate, technical resource does leave the Council exposed in times of change. Whilst accepting that it is unlikely to be acceptable to boost the capacity of a support service in the current climate, such resources are rarely required full time and therefore there should be scope to look into sharing or pooling this sort of capacity with other authorities.

Whereas the devolved financial arrangements clearly work very well, this appears less cohesive in the operation of the council's assets and facilities. As a result there appears to be a risk of missed savings from a joined up approach to facilities, maintenance and asset planning. The level of savings required from asset management over the Plan for Change period is just £470k from a budget of £17m (£14m in the AMP) which is considered very low. The creation of a corporate landlord with a single lead on all asset issues should enable greater savings to be achieved and the potential identification of surplus assets to generate capital receipts.

Although all the projects reviewed made sense in the climate Bury is currently operating in and are likely to deliver benefit to the council and residents, it was not clear how the schemes were selected. As resources become scarcer and the emphasis on invest to

save increases, there will be a need to evidence which projects deliver the greatest financial benefit and prioritise accordingly.

The key issue for the council is around driving transformation to sweat more efficiency savings out of operational processes. To do this the council should consider a strategic work programme supported by short term invest to save resources possibly over two to three years. This strategic programme should prioritise transformation work to tackle first those areas where there is the greatest potential for saving through business process streamlining and new technology. Some application of lean analysis and process mapping should enable the council to identify these areas effectively and the invest to save investment should be repaid and, thereafter, recycled through the efficiency gain. However, the council will need to be assured it has the right skills to undertake this. Commissioning skills are needed to spread best practice across other areas of the organisation. When the future operating model for the council is agreed there will need to be a 'skill gap' analysis undertaken to identify relevant gaps which will almost certainly be in areas such as contract management, demand forecasting and general commercial acumen.

The governance and project management of any transformation programme will need to be clear and robust. The Council will need to ensure the arrangements are put into place to enable the linkages, sequencing and inter-dependencies between the various projects and activity to be clear. Robust monitoring and accountability will need to be a key feature of your programme governance to ensure the contribution to the budget strategy. Such an approach will be required for the linkage of asset rationalisation, agile working, digital inclusion and customer access.

Directorates should consider how best to harness the innovative thinking of staff to drive efficiencies and service quality. The council may wish to link this into the prioritised transformation work, for example if a specific service is targeted then establishing a staff innovation board or specific development events then services could utilise an 'open space' approach to capture staff input to redesign. In other council's services have engaged staff in a 'Dragon's Den' type approach where staff 'pitched' their ideas to a panel of senior managers.

There was variability around succession planning, personal development, recognition and communication. This has to be driven from SLT with Directors ensuring there is a strong culture of workforce planning and development. We did not see a workforce development strategy and this would support a top down culture which provides greater consistency. This will help to strengthen future organisational resilience which is currently fragile.

Suggestions for consideration

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

1. Address variability in management practices and forward planning between council Directorates
2. Consider ways to expand forward planning capacity in key strategic services
3. Determine whether devolved Asset Management is as effective as devolved financial management, and whether there is scope for more ambitious savings from a Corporate Landlord approach
4. Better prioritisation of transformation projects on those areas likely to deliver largest financial return
5. Consider commissioning an LGA Safeguarding Practice Diagnostic for children's social care to assess frontline practice
6. Develop a customer contact strategy that sets out principles behind 'channel shift' and a robust plan to drive digital solutions forward

Next steps

The Council 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. There is an opportunity, if required, to discuss in greater detail how this might be utilised please contact me to arrange the detail of such activity.

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with you and colleagues through the peer challenge to date. Gill Taylor, Principal Adviser (North West) is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Gill can be contacted via email at gill.taylor@local.gov.uk (or Telephone 07789 512173) and can provide access to our 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. In particular, please pass on our thanks to Harry Downie and Sarah Marshall for their sterling support and assistance in organising the challenge and the onsite visit.

Yours sincerely



Peter Rentell
Programme Manager
Local Government Support Team
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On behalf of the peer challenge team