

# Corporate Peer Challenge **Bury Council**

12<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> November 2018

Feedback Report

# 1. Executive Summary

Bury is a council and place with genuine ambition to grow its economy and serve its community well. This ambition is relevant to the opportunities presented by its geographical location being within a short, easy commute of Manchester city centre and key employment sites in the region. Bury is well regarded by colleagues within the Greater Manchester (GM) Combined Authority and is considered as *“punching above its weight”* on the sub regional agenda. Whilst Bury’s ambition have successfully translated into one of the highest new business start-ups rates nationally, the appetite for growth is now, quite rightly, becoming more focussed on inclusive growth for all..

The political leadership of the council has prioritised and is driving inclusive growth and increased social mobility. This is evident in the launching of a life chances commission and re-drafting of the economic growth strategy that is based on a clear understanding of local need in Bury. The commitment to inclusive growth and improving life chances for everyone is particularly important given the higher average incomes of those who travel out of the borough for work compared to those who remain. Although Bury overall is an area with higher than average income levels, this is not the case in all areas of Bury or for all its residents.

The scale of Bury’s ambition is a strength, although this also presents a challenge.

Delivering on this scale of ambition will require the use of evidence based priorities which are used by senior officers to manage the capacity and resources of the organisation effectively. It is the view of the peer team that this does not appear to have always been the case in recent years. This is most seen in the shortage of capacity to deliver sustainable change.

In managing a budget reduction in the region of £65m since 2010, a *“path of least resistance”* appears to have been taken in some areas. This has led to a shrinking of some services, in particular corporate support services and staff leaving the organisation without their skills and experience always being appropriately replaced. This has led to officers often taking responsibility for functions outside of their experience range. In some cases this has stretched heads of service and front line staff beyond what has typically been seen elsewhere in the sector by the peer team. This has diluted some of the core processes required of the council and left a *“feeling of disconnect”* amongst officers in different service areas and within the organisational hierarchy. Crucially, this appears to have limited the transformational capacity of the organisation.

The approach taken by the recently appointed CEX to meet and engage with councillors, staff and partners has been well received by all. Continued engagement will help to rebuild some of the disconnections that have emerged between officers. Staff are consistent in the sentiment that they now wish to see these early steps to engage become ‘business as usual’. They also want to be engaged and involved more regularly on the practical progress the council is making beyond their own service areas. Demonstrating evidence of change will help to maintain the pragmatic response shown by officers.

Building on the strong political direction present in Bury, the priorities put forward by the CEX in his engagement with staff are recognised and supported. These priorities include

managing the budget position, inclusive growth, the effective integration of health and social care and public service reform. These priorities cannot however be delivered under the current ways of working and will require change. Staff at all levels again recognise and broadly welcome this. Staff are clear that they want to be part of the solution and are very committed to Bury as a place.

Change within the council has been typically service rather than corporately led in recent times and the council has not effectively used a corporate planning process to channel the resources of the council behind a clear set of priorities. Such is the scale of transformation required and the pace at which this needs to happen in some areas, this is now vital. The council should – as a collective – develop a new Corporate Plan and use this to direct the capacity of the organisation with clear milestones and measures put in place. A Corporate Performance Framework should be developed and implemented across all levels of management which goes beyond the outcome level of detail currently seen and into service impact. Corporate performance information should be reported on a frequent basis throughout the council and on at least a quarterly basis to the cabinet. This will help ensure an appropriate pace of delivery. Constructive challenge internally within the organisation will be essential to ensuring that progress is being made in achieving the council's priorities. Councillors and officers should be consistently supported by high quality service specific information that shows impact and the progress being made. Success should be embraced as well as poor performance challenged.

To help facilitate this change and more effectively direct the capacity of the organisation behind the corporate priorities, the council should look to establish, as a priority, a 'Corporate Core' of enabling and support services. This will help ensure support functions in key service areas like children's social care are made more resilient and are not as reliant on a small number of individuals. This will also enable greater consistency and prioritisation of resources across the organisation. Examples of service areas to consider for inclusion in this Corporate Core include financial management, communications, HR, ICT/digital, performance and risk, policy, business planning, procurement, project management and democratic services.

Investment in materials and infrastructure will also be required to maximise organisational capacity and release potential savings. This includes investment in ICT/digital, accommodation, equipment, organisational and workforce development – in short the tools to do the job. It is recognised that the council's current financial position may make this investment challenging. This is important however for delivering sustainable solutions rather than the type of temporary fixes which have been observed in recent years. The council have already recognised the need for change and have put in place a re-energised approach to budget management in recent months. This is leading to increased financial grip or *"...challenge like we've never seen before"* and has included the direct involvement of the new CEX. This grip on financial management needs to be continued and provide the foundation for a new Medium Term Financial Strategy.

In addition to re-aligning the council's internal capacity, there is also potential to review how the council works with partners and the voluntary, community and faith sector. There is willing capacity here that the council can work with in a collaborative way, focussed on delivery.

In the last few months the council, along with its partners, has demonstrated a purposeful focus on accelerating health and social care integration. This has led to an increase in the pace of integration that has been recognised locally and regionally. This is an appropriate step, given the funding this can release in Bury to allow further transformation to happen. How the council will use this funding to support health and social care transformation should be made clear to all members, officers and partners so that there is a consistency of understanding locally. It will however add to the amount of transformation the council is required to manage. As part of a portfolio of transformation work, through ongoing engagement and an effective Corporate Plan, officers need to be provided with a clear sense of:

- What to expect – what are the key priorities for the council during this period?
- When steps will be taken – by showing clear milestones that reflect the progress needed; and
- As part of one team, what is your role? – this should be translated throughout delivery plans and service plans. This will help bring the ownership and accountability required to increase the pace and sustainability of delivery.

The energy, enthusiasm and commitment of staff is one of the council's biggest assets. Focusing it, empowering it, developing it and connecting it together as one team will help the council significantly on its transformation journey.

## 2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

- 1) **Develop a new Corporate Plan which states the priorities for the council over the next three years.** This should include regular milestones which are clearly owned across the organisation – featuring in service plans and annual staff appraisals. This should also include progression, proxy and output measures to demonstrate and track progress towards longer term outcomes.
- 2) **Strengthen financial management and discipline, building on the action plan recently drafted.** This requires a more strategic and collectively owned, priority based approach to budget setting which is aligned to the priorities in the Corporate Plan and is consistent with a new medium term financial strategy. This must be underpinned by clear business cases followed by detailed delivery plans which can be effectively and proactively monitored and challenged.

- 3) **Co-produce, then consistently live a new workforce culture. This should reflect the cultural requirements of a new 'integrated' organisation and empower all to meet the level of sustainable corporate transformation required.** This must be developed with members and staff locally but may include how staff are brought together as one team, how engagement happens, empowerment, accountability, challenge and recognition of success.
- 4) **Centralise relevant support and enabling services into a strong 'Corporate Core'.** This will help direct the capacity of the organisation behind the key corporate priorities and bring more consistency, discipline, rigour, challenge and resilience. Examples of this may include financial management, communications, HR, ICT/digital, performance and risk, policy, business planning, procurement, project management and democratic services.
- 5) **Develop and deliver a single, comprehensive corporate Performance Management Framework.** This will help ensure appropriate accountability and enable all services to demonstrate and be challenged on their impact. Performance against the key priorities should be reported at least quarterly in a relevant scorecard to the cabinet and senior leadership team. Scrutiny should also then be supported to challenge with a similar level of detail on specific areas.
- 6) **Councillors and officers to co-design a considered, deliverable commercialisation strategy.** This should communicate the parameters within which the council is willing to become commercial. This will then help the council become more systematic in identifying the right commercial opportunities and avoid losing valuable capacity exploring commercial opportunities that are not appropriate.
- 7) **a) Invest in the ICT infrastructure in its entirety (hardware, software, connectivity and training) based on clear business cases.** Technology must be robust and fit for purpose for the council to deliver effectively and discharge its functions. Investment will be quickly needed to replace end-of-life infrastructure. This investment will also underpin digitisation and further transformation (for example 'channel shift').  
**b) Define the council's digital journey and the steps that will need to be taken to deliver it.** A strategy is required which sets out the council's digital ambitions for the borough more widely. Whilst the council's own ICT strategy is an important initial building block, the digital strategy should also articulate, how further digital inclusion will be supported, how business will be supported and enabled to function in a digital age, and how channel shift will be progressed. A clear, costed implementation plan should underpin this to assist members and officers in communicating the council's digital journey.
- 8) **Refresh the approach to community engagement and look at how the resourcing of the voluntary, community and faith (VCF) sector could have a greater impact on local priorities.** There is willing capacity in the community and the VCF sector available to the council. This is as much about how resource is targeted as it is about how – and how early in the process - communities and the VCF sector are involved in co-designing local solutions.

- 9) **Review organisational and workforce development.** This will enable the organisation to be strategic in how it supports staff with the right development opportunities which are clearly linked to the needs of the council on its transformation journey.
- 10) **Review the role of the strategic 'Team Bury' partnership, the outcomes it can deliver for Bury and the governance arrangements required to do this.** This will require an agreed set of priorities with partners locally and delivery plans which detail roles and responsibilities. This should also outline the mechanisms through which partners can hold each other to account for delivery. There may be wider opportunities to bring more partners together under the 'Team Bury' approach to co-design new creative solutions and benefit from each other's roles, reach, capability and capacity.

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## Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

### The peer team

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:

- **David Parr** (Chief Executive – Halton Borough Council)
- **Cllr Doug Taylor** (Enfield Council)
- **Cllr Alan Jarrett** (Leader – Medway Council)
- **Sophie Ellis** (Assistant Director of Customers, Policy & Improvement - London Borough of Merton)
- **Jacqui Blesic** (City Human Resources Manager - Hull City Council)
- **Nigel Broadbent** (Head of Finance (Section 151 officer) - Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council)
- LGA peer challenge manager: **Dan Archer** (LGA Programme Manager)

### Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions, these form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges. These are the areas we believe are critical to councils' performance and improvement:

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of Place: Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?
4. 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?
5. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to provide feedback on the plans for the future.

## **The peer challenge process**

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge every 4 to 5 years. Bury Council had a Corporate Peer Challenge in November 2013. Where relevant to do so, findings from that previous peer challenge have been referenced in this report.

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 4 days onsite at Bury, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 120 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 260 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 7 weeks in Bury.

This report 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 (16<sup>th</sup> November 2018). 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.

### **3. Feedback**

#### **3.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting**

Bury is a post-industrial borough in Greater Manchester which is home to around 189,600 residents spread largely across six townships (Bury, Ramsbottom, Tottington, Radcliffe, Whitefield and Prestwich). Whilst average income levels across the borough are above the North West average, this is not true for all areas of the borough. Neighbourhoods in Radcliffe, Moorside and Bury East are home to around 11,000 residents and feature in the 10% most deprived areas in the country.

Knowledge of this distinctive local profile has been used effectively to target 'trailblazer' hubs, which cluster together the 'people' based services from different organisations into one accessible community based location. These have been put in place in Radcliffe and Bury East. Anecdotal evidence at present has shown these have had a positive impact. Steps have not yet been taken to quantifiably monitor or evaluate their impact on reducing demand for more intense and costly local services, which must become a natural progression.

In 2016, the leader of the council also took the step to commission an independent report into life chances in Bury. The report gave 25 recommendations including the establishment of a 'Standing Commission in Life Chances'. These steps have signalled an ongoing commitment to delivering on social mobility and inclusive growth; which is a message that resonates with councillors, officers and partners.

As a council, Bury appears to benefit from a particularly local and longstanding workforce. A large number of staff – particularly in front line and middle management roles carry an understanding of place into their services which often comes from being a resident of the area also. There is a need to build on this with effective recruitment to senior posts and organisational and workforce development to encourage change agility, bringing new ways of working, ideas and a diversity of experience. This would help ensure staff are ready to embrace the transformational agenda.

Whilst examples have demonstrated the council's ability to translate intelligence into priorities, there is inconsistency in how often this is seen and the process for how this happens. Crucially, the council does not actively use a Corporate Plan to direct capacity and the use of resources at the council. This has contributed to an approach within the current Medium Term Financial Strategy which places spending ceilings on each service area, without a detailed understanding of the underlying service pressures, how they are changing and how they contribute to the overall corporate financial position. The council does not have a centralised function for developing, analysing and disseminating corporate intelligence and performance that would support the development of either a Corporate Plan or shared overarching local strategy between partners. It was also unclear where within the organisation this type of intelligence could be produced to support cross-cutting themes (one example being for an extra-care housing strategy).

### 3.2 Leadership of Place

The council is embracing the opportunities presented by being part of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). The leader, cabinet members and the CEX are in prominent positions within the combined authority and it is clear that this is now seen as *“part of, not an addition to the day job”*. The council may wish to consider how all engagement, at all levels with GM is managed to help achieve “two-way” feedback systematically within the council. This will enable more of those involved in these discussions to meaningfully influence in a consistent way, ensuring the Bury message is heard even clearer still in GM. It will also further support the leader, cabinet members and CEX in their key roles in the decision making cycles.

In the last few months in particular an increase in the pace of health and social care integration in Bury has been seen with the CEX of the council now also the accountable officer for the CCG. This presents a significant opportunity to bring about public service reform and improve outcomes locally. With this comes additional capacity and funding. The council should continue to consider carefully and in detail alongside health colleagues how this will be used to most effect so that it can lay the groundwork for lasting change and demand reduction in Bury. Integration of the CCG and council will not just happen by aligning key roles. Whilst this is important, it is equally important that the complexities of integration are carefully addressed – including cultures, values, policies, terms and conditions (where relevant) and the future role for elected members.

The strategic partnership for the area – ‘Team Bury’ - carries enthusiasm from partners but does not appear to have in place an effective overarching strategy for the area which partners can work collaboratively on to deliver. Whilst there is inherent benefit in bringing people from different organisations together, networking opportunities deliver more impact for the borough when there is focused, concerted effort around clear deliverables. There is merit in considering a “refresh” of this strategic partnership. To do this meaningfully requires the time to co-produce this properly, based on a shared hard and soft intelligence base. A strategy like this would help articulate each partners role in ‘Team Bury’ based on their reach, capability and capacity. To help ensure ‘Team Bury’ delivers on this strategy, a proportionate, delivery-focused governance approach should also be in place around it.

The council has taken the positive step recently of establishing the Voluntary, Community and Faith (VCF) Alliance as a way of re-engaging with the sector, which has been welcomed. Given the 1,200 VCF organisations active in Bury, there is significant capacity locally with which the council could continue to develop its relationship in order to benefit from their distinct and shared capacity. The council may also wish to consider how its approach to community engagement and the use of social capital funds, participatory budgets and other resources could be more closely aligned to the local priorities.

### 3.3 Organisational leadership and governance

The council benefits from strong political leadership both from the cabinet and leader. Steps have been taken recently to more closely connect the work of the senior officer leadership team with the work of the cabinet, including the establishment of regular joint cabinet and SLT meetings. An immediate benefit of this arrangement has been to improve the financial understanding each portfolio holder has of the budget in their area.

In the most recent staff survey, communication from senior management to officers was seen to have deteriorated in recent years. The new CEX has been in post for the last four months and has made a conscious effort to engage with councillors, officers and partners. This open and engaging approach has been well received and should continue to be an important feature of the way officers are brought together as one team moving forward. Officers reported wanting to see this type of engagement become routine so that they can communicate the experience in service areas and receive from the senior leadership team updates on the activity and progress of the council more broadly. This is one key action - a clear 'quick win', which would help bridge the "disconnection" observed between departments and within the hierarchy of the organisation.

A further step that could help bridge the disconnection between what is happening corporately and what is happening in services is to develop a robust Corporate Plan and use it to direct the work of all council services. Once this new Corporate Plan is developed the clear milestones, measures and actions within it should translate into more detailed business plans. This includes service plans and staff performance appraisals; with regular performance reports being produced, closely monitored and used to drive forward agreed priorities. This will allow for critical challenge to happen, helping the organisation stay on track. It will also ensure that when necessary, remedial measures can be identified and action taken more quickly.

In recent years there has been a period of instability in the senior management of the council including the resignation of a previous Chief Executive and Executive Director for Children, Young People and Culture. A number of senior posts have also been back-filled on a fixed term or interim basis. Since the recent appointment of a new, permanent Chief Executive, steps have been taken to establish a new senior management structure which should be used to bring more clarity of responsibilities and stability. This has involved new posts being advertised that reflect the need for transformation and allow a sharper focus on the key local priorities. For the benefits above to be achieved it is important that the council continues to look to sustainable recruitment, minimising the use of fixed term, interim and consultant work wherever possible.

Given the significant portfolio of transformation work required the council may also wish to consider reviewing its current scrutiny arrangements to ensure that they are able to achieve the right objectives for the council on the journey ahead. This should include the alignment of scrutiny to the corporate priorities and partnership arrangements as well as the type of member support this requires. This review

may wish to check whether an appropriate level of challenge is currently in place and if this is fit for the journey ahead. At present, scrutiny is provided with a more limited set of outcome level information rather than the type of detailed service performance information recommended here. As the corporate Performance Management Framework is developed, how this feeds into scrutiny to support effective and transparent challenge should also be considered. Scrutiny should be provided with the appropriate performance information and officer capacity to provide effective challenge and assist with policy development. As a result of this review, the council should also be able to more clearly map out internal governance arrangements and where assurance and monitoring happens. This will be an important step in the council achieving its priorities.

As the council progresses on its transformation journey, strong relationships between senior officers and members will be crucial, as will relations with the Trade Unions. The leader and recently appointed CEX are clearly developing a strong and appropriate working relationship and the lines of communication are open with the Trade Unions who understand the need for change. Maintaining and developing these relationships will be critical to the success of the council's transformation journey, especially as on occasions there may be a difference of view on the way forward.

### **3.4 Financial planning and viability**

Since 2010 the council has been required to make cuts to the revenue budget of £65m with £32m required between 2017 and 2020. This as is the case for a number of councils, is a demanding position to be in. The council is now particularly struggling with its financial challenges with the majority of service areas currently reporting an overspend which is in part offset by central savings and efficiencies.

The continued use of reserves in recent years as a temporary solution has left the level of reserves now moving close to the minimum level of balance recommended by the statutory chief finance officer. Continuing to use reserves in this way is unsustainable. Whilst £32m of savings are identified for the 2017-2020 period, 58% of these savings are now delayed. The council has chosen to operate a corporate leadership approach to budget setting in recent years. This has however been disconnected from service level financial expertise and has resulted in spending ceilings being set for service areas without a full and proper understanding of demand pressures. This has also meant that savings and efficiencies have often been arrived at through disconnected 'salami slicing' and opportunistic actions rather than through more evidence based, transformative and sustainable approaches. Over time, this may have contributed to less ownership in recent years of the saving and efficiency targets which has contributed to the level of slippage now being seen.

The council have recognised the need for increased financial grip and have taken steps to align financial roles in the directorates with the chief finance officer. A 'Senior Management Budget Recovery Group' has also been put in place which is chaired by the CEX. This is having a positive impact - *"it's challenge like we've never seen before"*. Members are now also more engaged on the budget position with fortnightly

meetings between the cabinet and senior leadership team now in place. Following an external financial review in September, the council have accepted all of the recommendations made and have begun acting on them.

Work is underway to develop a new Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) that will take effect from 2020. This is an important step and should be done collectively with the involvement of members and relevant officers to ensure the proposals are fair, achievable and owned. This work should continue and then be reviewed and updated each year. Key to this new MTFS is the potential for demand reduction, transformation and commercialisation. Each of these will require a realistic assessment of the time delay often associated with new savings, income and efficiencies. Where investment is needed, it is important that this is carefully and prudently planned.

Ahead of this new MTFS there is a need to fully understand the financial position leading up to 2020 and ensure the council is able to arrive at 2020 with the current financial pressures managed via sustainable means (i.e. without reliance upon one off reserves). Without this, the new MTFS will start from a deficit position and will not accurately reflect the scale of further savings required. This MTFS should be aligned carefully to the priorities overall for Bury to avoid misaligning the capacity of the organisation with its key priorities.

Both in the new MTFS and in the crucial period before then, all savings proposals should have a clear business case and be supported by a delivery plan to bring about ownership, grip and discipline in delivery. These should be clear on risks, policy implications and performance consequences. All decisions should then be reflected in service plans with necessary actions and their impact monitored.

The need for clear business cases (supported by delivery plans) and the need to be clear on the consequences of decisions is also true of 'invest to save' decisions which the council may wish to look at in more detail. Business cases must give sufficient detail around benefits and the timescales for their realisation as well as clarity around the expected return on investment. A robust project management methodology should be deployed, including appropriate governance arrangements, to monitor and assure the delivery of these projects.

The council should give more consideration to the way in which it uses capital, as well as the way in which capital receipts can be used to fund transformation. The council should also refresh the Asset Management Strategy which has not been reviewed since 2012. This will help identify ways in which the public estate could either become more efficient, effective or even generate a return.

### **3.5 Capacity to deliver**

There is an obvious sense of ambition in Bury to improve outcomes for local residents. To continue to do this in a sustainable way and within the existing budget constraints will require change and transformation at pace. This is

recognised by councillors, officers and partners in Bury who are ready to respond and have demonstrated a positive response to the “*call to action*”.

There is a lot to do and the council can't do everything, prioritisation will be crucial. Key to this transformation is a need to align the capacity of the organisation behind the council's core priorities, which should be formalised into a new Corporate Plan and communicated effectively across the organisation. This should have a close connection to the MTFs – to ensure the way in which the budget is prioritised over this time frame relates to the priorities of the council. The Corporate Plan should then be underpinned by a clear delivery plan as detailed elsewhere in this report and be reflected in relevant service plans and individual staff objectives.

This will allow the organisation to more effectively performance manage the delivery of the key priorities of the council. All service plans should also feature a consistent level of service performance measures. These measures should be able to demonstrate how much each service does, how well the service does it and how much impact this has on outcomes – progression, proxy and output metrics will be essential to track progress against longer term outcomes. Targets should be used where relevant, which are challenged to ensure appropriate levels of stretch are in place where needed. This will allow the council to have better sight of service impact on the Single Outcomes Framework and allow for accountability, learning and remedial action to be taken as necessary.

Centralising support and enabling services into a strong ‘Corporate Core’ will bring:

- More consistency – in the advice and support given (for example HR).
- More resilience to the support given – by sharing knowledge of a particular service area with those with similar skills, reducing the reliance on one or two individuals for key support functions.
- More discipline and challenge – by establishing and maintaining clear corporate standards.
- More capacity targeted at the key corporate priorities. This would include both horizon scanning and the development of intelligence to support decision making which cuts across departmental silos. Examples of this may include an extra care housing needs assessment and support for Bury's role in GM.

Looking at practice from elsewhere, services that are often included in a ‘Corporate Core’ include financial management, communications, HR, ICT/digital, performance and risk, policy, business planning, procurement, project management and democratic services.

The need for internal change and transformation does not however stop there and completing the review of the senior management structure with sustainable, rather than interim solutions is an important step. When specific expertise is brought in on a temporary or permanent basis it is important that all are cited on their responsibilities, the role they will play and the outcomes they will help the council achieve.

All of this should be approached by looking at the workforce through a lens of 'what the culture of Bury council needs to be' to meet the challenges and capitalise on the opportunities being presented. There is an eagerness to break down a feeling of disconnection between services and within the organisational hierarchy; this should be used to help define the culture through shared local input.

Some of the decisions made in recent times have led to short term fixes such as temporary appointments to key roles and the loss of specific skills and expertise that were not replaced. It was made clear to the team there is a need to fill gaps and bridge these divides, bringing the workforce together as one team behind a clear set of corporate priorities. Engagement with staff, building on the start made by the CEX is important here. The CEX has already indicated he is keen for this to happen and articulated a desire to do this at the start of the peer challenge process.

An area which has been underfunded in recent years compared to elsewhere in the sector is infrastructure, equipment, accommodation and materials. This includes in particular ICT. A number of business systems and some of the technical infrastructure at the council are either at, or approaching, end of life. This will impede efficiencies and the capacity to transform if left unaddressed. The council has immediate and significant budget pressures to deal with which makes investment in new infrastructure and equipment more difficult. This is however key to the foundations upon which a modern efficient, effective organisations are built and there is potential to increase the capacity to deliver by making such an investment. There are opportunities to fund this in different ways which the council may wish to consider whilst dealing with the immediate pressures on the revenue budget.

Like the rest of the sector, digitisation has a particularly key role to play in the future of service delivery. This includes the extent to which residents and businesses in Bury are able to exploit digital opportunities in order to thrive and the role the council plays in that. This also includes the way in which interactions between the council and service users are shifted online. The council clearly wishes to pick up the pace of digitisation with an honest assessment being that there is ground to make up here compared to what is typical elsewhere. Having the right infrastructure is an essential building block for this and is an important first step for Bury. The options moving forward are many and varied, requiring an effective, locally tuned strategy to set the council's digital course and direct this work. This will include the collective effort of training, communications, partnerships and culture to reap the real rewards available and is not just the responsibility of the ICT department.

The energy, enthusiasm, loyalty and commitment of the vast majority of officers in Bury is a real asset. The gaps left in capacity due to austerity and the way in which this has been managed have meant that an increasing number of staff have had to pick up new functions and responsibilities as well as continue to perform previous roles. This has left a number of heads of service and front line staff feeling particularly stretched and vulnerable. The council may wish to review its workforce

profile for the future and look at how organisational and workforce development can be used with more effect. There is a view that the way some policies are currently implemented is impeding the pace of change, particularly when working with close partners. There needs to be a robust dialogue with staff and Trade Unions about barriers to change and their impact on the council's ability to develop new ways of working. This will support its workforce in delivering the scale of transformation required whilst improving outcomes for Bury residents. The council has a number of successes, it is important that these individuals, teams and services continue to be recognised and celebrated on the journey ahead.

## **4. Next steps**

### **Immediate next steps**

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Claire Hogan, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are: Email [claire.hogan@local.gov.uk](mailto:claire.hogan@local.gov.uk)

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

### **Follow up visit**

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the Council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the Council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 2 years.

### **Next Corporate Peer Challenge**

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the Council will commission their next Peer Challenge before November 2023.