

Corporate Peer Challenge **Oxfordshire County Council**

19th – 22nd March 2019

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) is pursuing an ambitious agenda for change and improvement across its communities and in the way it operates. It has staff and councillors committed to the communities they serve and motivational leadership.

The Council is in a good financial starting position. There are some financial challenges in Children Services but overall management of finances and budgets is sound and levels of reserves are adequate. The Council is continuing a Transformation programme which aims to make savings of at least £50m by 2022/23. This level of savings should be achievable. Most planning is required for demand management savings which require more attention. In general the council's approach to finance is rather traditional and risk averse. The Council needs to have a bolder attitude and should agree ambitious strategies and plans for investment, asset management, commercialisation and income generation.

The County's Growth Agenda is ambitious with local and national significance for the south east and the Oxford - Cambridge arc development. The Council with its partners have secured £500m of inward investment for housing and infrastructure. The bids contained plans for accelerating the construction of 100,000 new homes alongside investment in infrastructure and productivity. Now that the project is moving into the delivery phase, a narrative around the agenda needs to be co-developed with partners and the community and communicated to both staff and residents. The narrative needs to explore the potential benefits for existing communities including economic growth that reaches everyone along with wider access to high productivity, satisfying and more secure jobs for local people. Whole council engagement is also needed on the impact of growth on the council itself. Services such as Adults, Children and Libraries are all likely to be affected by increased demand but can also benefit from capital investment and the development of more sustainable communities.

Alongside Cherwell District Council, the County Council is part of an exciting and unique new model of partnership working in local government. The two tier model sees officers working across both the county and a district and has real potential to offer a new model of non-structural reform both locally and nationally. The Chief Executive and several other senior managers are currently working across both organisations under section 113 arrangements (where an officer may be temporarily placed at the disposal of another authority) This arrangement is under planned review and it is important for the organisation to get beyond this stage in order that it can continue developing the partnership and working on other key agendas.

OCC's relationships with most of its partners including the voluntary and community sector are stronger now than they were, with partners feeling that they are able to engage with the council as equals. Relationships with the district councils are also far better than in the recent past when unitary proposals were being pursued. In Oxfordshire's circumstances, reorganisation should remain off the table. The narrative around the long term goal for the Cherwell partnership also needs to be clearer or potential partners amongst the other district councils may be put off. This unique model has the real potential to deliver a County Council that is resident focussed, agile and with more responsive decision making. The mix of staff will "bring the best of both" together in an exemplar model.

There is more work to do on developing a collective vision for the county of Oxfordshire for residents, the wider community, businesses, partners and staff. Corporate language can be passive rather than being clear about how the Council will drive or initiate change. This collective narrative needs to be developed with partners and the community and communicated widely.

The council should be developing its own corporate narrative with collective political ownership and understanding of the vision for the council. The Corporate Plan 2019-2022 needs to be more contextualised around the growth agenda and OCC needs to be clearer about what its role and priorities are.

OCC is associated with the national and international brand that is “Oxford”. It should be making far more of the brand as an asset for engaging with businesses, promoting the local economy and the growth agenda. The council has a world class brand and its communications also need to be world class. Both its’ internal and external communications need to be improved. External communications need to be more strategic and focussed on corporate priorities. A greater breadth of internal communication is needed so that staff can fully understand the impact of the growth agenda and the culture change that Transformation will deliver.

The Cabinet should be given more political space to talk about corporate objectives such as the growth agenda and transformation. They have indicated that want to be able to support difficult decisions in the future but need more information and understanding about the issues. There should also be wider engagement of non-executive Councillors. They are a valuable resource for the council and could be more influential in locality and community working.

The Leader and new Chief Executive are providing the organisation with motivational leadership. Staff are passionate about providing services to residents. However old ways of silo working still need to be addressed. Staff want more opportunities to work with colleagues across the council. Culture change is happening and the Transformation programme will continue the process. Staff are conscious that there has been a pause in the culture change journey in the past year or two and they now want to see progress. Whilst transformation has already begun in some teams, empowerment needs to be real and understood by all. Peers heard that staff think of the Council as a “big” organisation. This perception may be hampering the ability of the organisation to be agile, identifying and responding quickly to new priorities and new ways of working.

OCC is operating in a very tight employment market. It is competing for skills and resources with other public sector employers and the private sector. This has created risks around its capacity to deliver both growth and transformation. The Council’s Human Resources and Organisational Development (HR/OD) functions needs investment in both staff and systems to be able to respond to these challenges.

OCC’s locality working has some strengths but it needs to be re-visited. Both Members and officers think that the Locality Meetings could be improved. There may be a role for district councils in OCC’s locality working perhaps by being included in the Locality Meeting or holding joint parish forums and/or co-funding initiatives. This might also involve reviewing the best geography for boards and other area working approaches. Locality working has the potential to become a key enabler as communities grow and new communities are established.

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. Co-develop the vision for Oxfordshire.** There is no collectively owned overall single vision for the county amongst staff, partners, residents and the wider community. OCC should work with its partners to co-develop the vision for the future of the county in the light of the growth agenda. This will help both new and settled residents understand the plans and potential opportunities and impact.
- 2. Improve engagement with existing and new communities.** OCC is still seen as rather distant from communities. Some residents feel that the council lacks transparency and that engagement around issues like the Growth Agenda is not as good as it could be. The council has to be better at delivering the message that growth is about creating sustainable and healthy communities including for existing communities, and not just houses and infrastructure.
- 3. Address and understand the impact of the Growth Agenda on the whole organisation.** There are plans for acceleration of 100,000 additional houses which is a 30% population increase for the county. The impact of this additional population has not yet been fully grasped across the organisation. Services such as Adults, Children and Libraries are going to face significant additional demands on what are already stretched services. Teams need to start some initial planning to consider what the extra demand might be and how it will be met
- 4. Establish and communicate the corporate narrative.** There is confusion and a lack of understanding about the corporate narrative. Although the Thriving Communities term is well known by staff they know little about what is supporting it. Cabinet Members need to start working outside of their portfolios to establish and own collective responsibility for the corporate narrative.
- 5. Address resource and skills capacity issues.** The council is operating in a tight labour market. It has ongoing recruitment and retention issues across the organisation. The Growth and Transformation agendas will stretch its resource and skills capacity further. Non-delivery of the Growth agenda and the transformation programme due to lack of capacity is a significant risk. Early investment in both HR and OD is needed so that these issues can start to be addressed.
- 6. Establish effective external and internal communications.** The council needs to improve its communications so that messages are more strategically focussed on corporate priorities and better use is made of social media. Internal communications need ways of being delivered so that all staff can hear the messages from the top of the organisation and feed their views back up.
- 7. Establish a stable management team (Settle the s113 issue).** There is a degree of uncertainty amongst staff about the senior management team. A number of senior managers have left the council recently and some staff view the Chief Executive's and

some other senior appointments as being interim or probationary. This situation needs to be resolved as quickly as possible so that a stable senior team can be put in place. The s113 appointments are due for review after which the rest of the senior team should be appointed or confirmed.

8. **Grow and embed the organisational culture.** Staff are passionate about providing good services. They want to feel empowered to take initiatives and many are frustrated about the way the organisation has been “on pause” in recent years. The Transformation programme is part of continuing the change of culture that is already underway. It needs to be delivered at pace to capitalise on staff enthusiasm for progress.
9. **Agree the Investment Strategy and maximise assets and business relationships.** The council has a draft investment strategy. This needs to be agreed so that the organisation can start to make the best use of its property and other assets as well as its business relationships. The strategy needs to be less risk averse about investment and opportunities for income generation.
10. **Continue to develop the innovative model between the County and district authorities.** The Cherwell Partnership model is itself still developing. There are opportunities in the future to scale it up with other districts. OCC should keep engaging with the district councils on partnership working. It needs to ensure that the door is always open for other districts to come on board when the time is right for them.
11. **Develop new approaches to locality boards.** Locality Meetings are generally seen as not being as effective as they could be. They are not well supported by Members and partner organisations and agendas are often set indiscriminately by officers. New localised approaches need to be considered. District councils could be included in the Locality Boards. The Boards could also have budgets and decision making devolved to them and could play an important role in the successful delivery of the planned growth.

3. 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 Oxfordshire County Council were:

- Trevor Holden – Managing Director Broadland District and South Norfolk Councils
- Jon McGinty – Managing Director Gloucester City Council / Commissioning Director Gloucestershire County Council
- Paula Hewitt – Lead Director Economic and Community Infrastructure – Somerset CC
- Jason Vaughan – Strategic Director Dorset Councils Partnership
- Cllr William Nunn – Leader Breckland District Council (Con)
- Cllr Sarah Osborne – Group Leader Lewes DC and County Cllr East Sussex County Council (Lib Dem)
- Cllr Alan Rhodes – Group Leader Nottinghamshire CC (Labour)
- Sophie Poole – Programme Manager LGA
- Gill Elliott - Review Manager LGA

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges cover. 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 consider/review/provide feedback on:

- Growth Agenda
- Partnership Working

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 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 Oxfordshire CC (OCC), during which they:

- Spoke to more than 200 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 60 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.

- Collectively spent more than 280 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 7 weeks in OCC

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 (19th – 22nd March 2019). 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.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

The Corporate Plan 2019-2022 “Thriving Communities for Everyone in Oxfordshire” articulates the council’s ambitions and outcomes but it is not sufficiently contextualised around the growth agenda which is a national level growth project and the biggest in the country. OCC needs to be clearer about what its priorities and leadership role are, and how its leadership role is complemented by the leadership role of others.

OCC understands its local context well and has used that knowledge to form the basis of several successful bids which have secured £500m of funding for growth in a single agenda. OCC is also a significant player in the Arc project to develop better links across an arc of the country between Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire.

OCC is generally seen as having good relationships with its partners and treating them as equals. It has increased collaboration and understanding of the Health agenda and relationships with social care partners and the community and voluntary sector are good. The Growth Board is a model of good practice. There are opportunities for better working with partners. Some partners think that it is a case of “you only know what’s going on if you are in the inner circle” and that few people actually have the whole picture. It is important to have multi-channel messages and good communication routes with partners.

The council is listening and acting on the priorities of young people. We saw an excellent example in VOXY (Voice of Oxfordshire Youth) and the Care Council where young people feel that they have influence over OCC policies and that the council is genuinely interested in what they have to say. They would like the council to advertise VOXY more widely.

The corporate narrative should focus on developing new communities and supporting growing ones. The impact of growth on existing communities needs to be better understood and articulated. It is important that the growth agenda is not seen as being just about infrastructure. It is also about building sustainable and cohesive communities. There will be a 30% increase in the number of houses in the County and that impact has to be considered by OCC with its partners and communicated to existing residents.

The impact of the growth agenda is not yet fully understood at a corporate level. The huge number of new homes and increased population will have a significant impact on other service areas such as Children’s services, schools and the health agenda. There need to be multi-channel messages for staff to know and understand these issues better. Communications and engagement within the council need to be improved to deliver these messages.

There is no localities communication strategy or co-ordinated plan for engaging residents in decision making at the local level. In the light of the significant changes that are planned the council needs to undertake some two-way engagement with residents. Consultation documents are too lengthy and are putting off residents from fully participating in them. OCC also has to listen and act on the Residents’ Survey. Insights and intelligence about views of customers and residents’ needs to be shared across all departments so that there is not just a singular view of citizens. Corporate performance data needs to be

delivered, reviewed and acted on before it is out of date. OCC needs an updated system to draw out “live data” which is genuinely useful.

Co-production of policies and services needs to be done more widely across the organisation. There were some really good examples of the resident voice in decision making in adult services e.g. the Co – Production Board; Champions Network.

4.2 Leadership of Place

OCC has access to the national and internationally known brand of “Oxford”. For marketing and economic purposes this is a far stronger brand than that of Oxfordshire, which is essentially an administrative entity. At the moment the council is not fully exploiting the potential of its brand. Whilst the University and the City Council may also claim “Oxford” as their brand, OCC can still use it as a “hook” for engaging with business, partners and having conversations with its’ growing communities particularly around the themes of economy and investment.

OCC’s relationships with the District Councils has moved on from the unitary debates of the past few years. Relationships with most of the district councils are very positive and there is now a need for greater boldness in developing these further. The partnership with Cherwell District Council is seen both locally and nationally as a possible new model for two tier working. The Districts are all watching to see where the Cherwell model is going. OCC needs to be very positive about the new partnership model, realising that there is room for a different narrative, one that will give opportunities for all the Districts including Oxford City Council to participate. The “scalability” of the model needs to be considered as different Districts could have different levels of involvement. The peer team appreciate that the Cherwell relationship is at an early stage and also that there are capacity issues within OCC at present that would prevent it moving at a faster pace on this.

Partners describe OCC as good leader and partner working with them as equal partners. The Leader and Chief Executive show personal commitment to building relationships. The Leader was commended for being able to seek consensus with partners, for example around the Housing Growth Deal. The Care Quality Commission (CQC) commented that there had been ‘significant improvements in partnership working across the health system in last twelve months’ and highlighted the need for OCC to rapidly address key appointments such as the Director of Public Health and the Director of Adult Social Care. The collective narrative for the county needs to be co-owned and co-produced by all the key agencies. At present there is no single high impact forum that brings together key partners across the range of the place leadership agenda.

OCC’s partnerships with business around innovation and robotics are a really good example of place leadership. The Council has been instrumental in securing external funding which has enabled the universities, and entrepreneurs to collaborate and bring solutions from research to implementation more quickly than ever before. The Innovation Hub has transferred the learning to other council departments such as Adult Social Care to maximise efficiency and improve services and they are working towards the deployment of other projects in departments such as Children Services. The excellent leadership OCC has shown in supporting innovation could be developed further with engagement with more local authorities and through clear and consistent corporate backing for the Innovation and Research area. A tight labour market and current lack of suitable

workspace are felt to be risks to growth in this area. OCC is working with business to develop an apprenticeship training scheme to be part of the future workforce in these industries.

There is no real collective overall single vision for the county amongst staff, partners, residents and the wider community. Corporate language is passive e.g. “Thriving Communities” rather than being clear about what the council will do to create these thriving communities. The Growth narrative and the vision for the future of the county is not clearly understood by residents. Better communication and engagement is needed to enable settled communities to understand the plans and the potential impact for them as well as the opportunities growth will bring. Place is spoken of in terms of infrastructure, not communities and neighbourhoods. Going forward greater knowledge of diverse and growing communities of interest in the county will be needed to accommodate and respond to the needs of a huge population influx.

Locality working across the county needs improvement. There should be more opportunities generally for OCC to work at a local level. Locality Meetings were described to the peer team as being “hit and miss”. They are not well supported by Members with agendas generally being centrally set by officers. District councils could play a part in OCC’s locality working perhaps by being included in the Locality Meetings or holding joint parish forums, or potentially pooling funding for projects. The geographies of the boards need to be considered, in collaboration with districts if they are to co-own them. Locality Boards have the potential to become key enablers as communities grow and new communities are established.

4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

The Leader and new Chief Executive are providing the organisation with really motivational leadership. Within the organisation there is a genuine appetite for change. The new Chief Executive is viewed as a positive agent for change, but what is now needed is some significant pace and delivery on issues like Transformation and new ways of working. There was a feeling in some parts that the current drive for change will pass and then OCC will settle back into its traditional ways of working. Whilst support for the Chief Executive’s approach was voiced in our meetings, the approach needs wider and clearer enforcement to become embedded.

The organisation has some strength in its senior management team, but there has been some recent turnover of senior managers. The Chief Executive now needs to be allowed to move beyond the s113 and establish her future senior management structure. This will provide some stability and more agents of change to help deliver new ways of working and culture change. If short term appointments do have to be made they should be for at least twelve months and not badged as interim. At the moment there is a single point of failure at the level of the Chief Executive which is a risk for the organisation.

The Leader and Chief Executive are showing bold leadership. An example of this is the Cherwell Partnership. The relationship is unique in local government. Members of the extended leadership team (ELT) were very enthusiastic about the partnership. Although communications and relationships still need to be improved around the partnership there is still a real appetite for it.

There are good officer and Member relationships within the council. Senior Members want more information and briefings on issues like Transformation to help them understand and support what might be difficult decisions in the future. Portfolio members want to be part of the new corporate drive. They need to be given the space to discuss and own the changes. They are keen to be more engaged on corporate issues rather than just concentrating on the detail of their own portfolios.

There is confusion and a lack of understanding of the corporate narrative. Whilst the Thriving Communities term is well known, what else is supporting it? There needs to be greater collective cabinet responsibility for a truly corporate narrative. Backbenchers could have a greater role as community leaders who can drive locality working. Local member knowledge and intelligence about their communities is generally not used enough.

The scrutiny function is relatively strong and it is valued in the organisation. The Joint Health and Overview Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) is also respected and valued by partners. The scrutiny model is a good one but it could go even further in terms of both policy and process. There are too few boards to handle the work programme and little time for “deep dives” on issues. It should also be utilised more by backbenchers and opposition members.

OCC is viewed by partners, residents and even its own staff as being traditional, slow and risk averse - an organisation that kicks decisions down the road. It is still very much an organisation of silos where “directorates are king”. There is a recognition that this is shifting but it is part of a long standing culture. Whilst Transformation is very much about changing that culture, staff are still unclear about what it means for them and are hesitant to just “get on and do” Relationships of trust between the Chief Executive’s Direct Reports, the Extended Leadership Team (ELT) and the next tier of managers are still forming. ELT is relatively new and the new senior managers’ forum has only met twice. People are being empowered but still lack confidence that they will be supported to take decisions.

Individual performance management needs to balance appropriate levels of empowerment with accountability. The introduction of a new approach to performance management (12-3-2) has not been universally well-adopted and there is clearly inconsistency in the extent and quality of 1:1 meetings between staff and managers.

Corporate and service performance monitoring is starting to give more emphasis to outcomes linked to the corporate plan. At the moment performance reports go to Scrutiny on a quarterly basis, but this is moving to monthly to make data and reporting more current and up to date. The Council will need to ensure that this does not lead to micromanagement and ‘over-steering’.

The corporate risk register is under review. At the moment it does not reflect the context or priorities facing the Council. An example of this is the risk that there will be a lack of capacity to deliver the growth agenda.

4.4 Financial planning and viability

OCC has some financial challenges but overall it is in a good place. Demand pressures and overspending in Children Services are an issue, but overall the council’s management of its

finances and budgets is sound and levels of reserves are adequate. The Leader and portfolio Member for Finance have a good understanding of the council's finances and all-member finance briefings are well attended.

OCC has a good track record of balancing its budget. It has taken some tough decisions on cuts early on and this has put it in a good position. The external auditors had no adverse opinion about the council's finances and the conclusion about its value for money was positive. Internal audit is effective and peers heard of good joint work by the audit working group and the Audit and Governance committee on Children's Safeguarding report and Mental Health partner delivery. Generally there was a tendency in the organisation to view the solving of finance problems as the finance team's job rather than it being corporately owned.

OCC is clearly very effective at attracting public and private inward investment as evidenced by the growth funds and housing infrastructure funds of over £500m. However the potential lack of resources and capacity to deliver the growth agenda is a major reputational and financial risk that is not captured in the corporate risk register.

In general the council's approach to finance is rather traditional and risk averse. It needs to have a bolder attitude and more informed discussion around investment, commercialisation, asset management and property. The debate about high versus low investment risk is still ongoing, but there is a lack of understanding around investment and income generation. There is a draft investment strategy but it has not yet been finalised. The transformation of the Finance function could be a good opportunity to change the culture of the way the organisation deals with these issues.

Savings from the Transformation programme should be achievable as there are plenty of obvious areas for greater efficiency. The prevention/demand management strand of Transformation needs the greatest attention and ownership. There is some doubt as to whether the organisation will deliver the planned savings in this area and it was not clear what plan B might look like.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

The council has a capable and dedicated workforce who have a willingness and desire for change. This is a key strength for the organisation. Staff welcome the opportunity to talk about what the council delivers with residents being at the heart of the discussion. The Transformation programme is adapting and building on the existing culture. The partnership with Cherwell is bringing new insights and opportunities as well as broadening the talent pool which is to be welcomed.

The relationship between management and the Trades Unions relationships are good which will be an asset when there are discussions about restructuring or new ways of working. Meetings between managers and the unions happen regularly and unions have met with senior managers to discuss Transformation. They also meet with the ruling group and opposition members. The Trades Union are pragmatic about change but reflected that their members feel that they are constantly being re-structured and consequently just want to get on with their jobs.

Resourcing the Growth Agenda adequately is going to be a big challenge for the council. It is still dealing with the legacy of the Carillion collapse and many of its property and estates staff are already at full capacity. There is likely to be a shortage of Planners, Designers, Modellers

and Engineers amongst other skills. Transformation is also going to require additional internal resource even with the input from PWC and other external consultants.

Business intelligence is fragmented across the council. The council should consider how it can bring it together in a central hub so that it is accessible to all departments and services. Data currently focusses on needs and weaknesses rather than considering the assets and strengths in the community. Intelligence is generally “backward looking” It needs to be more dynamic with better use made of predictive analytics. HR and Finance need to be seen as intelligence assets and not simply transactional services, with the organisation set up to benefit from the insight the functions can bring.

Communications within the council both internally and externally need to be improved. Communication should be owned at the top by the Leader and politicians and used to drive the corporate agenda. The Communication function itself should be given greater clarity on the strategic intent, and then empowered to design and innovate how the communications are delivered, through which channels to which audiences. Communications can be reactive and aimed at meeting the needs of services rather than the priorities of the council. The media view the council’s communications team is that it is just a press office defending the council’s reputation with the media as the enemy. The council’s digital output is insufficient and lacks ambition. Internally, a wider range of internal communication would see more people receiving the messages. A cascade briefing system with key issues from the top of the organisation would be helpful.

Enabling services including HR, IT and Communications are all critical to Transformation and could be supporting it better. The HR/OD function needs further investment and support. A new Head of HR has recently been appointed but is yet to take up her post. The council is operating in an extremely tight labour market and it needs to position itself as an employer of choice compared to other public sector and private organisations. There are ongoing recruitment and retention issues across the council including social workers and IT staff, meaning officer capacity is already stretched. IT systems in the council are generally seen as slow and in need of modernisation to enable services and to deliver corporate priorities.

The council need to get better at quicker decision-making throughout the organisation. Internal processes are heavy and bureaucratic making decision making slow. There needs to be a clear and simple governance structure put in place. The corporate centre requires review in terms of its structure. A review and refocus of its systems would re-position the roles as enablers of policies and priorities rather than just being seen as a support function.

4.6 The Growth Agenda

The Growth Agenda is a significant opportunity for OCC and its partners to deliver much needed housing and infrastructure development in the county of Oxfordshire. £500m of inward investment has been secured to accelerate the building of 100,000 homes.

There are clearly a lot of positives around the joint working on the growth agenda. All the local authorities are signed up and working together on the growth deal. The County has successfully shared leadership roles with others, leading or supporting depending on the most likely approach to delivering the desired outcomes.

Partners said that they find OCC easy to work with. A Growth Board has been established. There are good relationships with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). The Council is seen by business partners as being far more engaged with them than before. Joint Spatial Planning

is being done for the whole county by OCC and the district councils and there is a focus on Healthy Place-Shaping.

A collective vision about the Growth Agenda needs to be produced and a clearer narrative developed. This should be co-authored with partners and the community. There is a lot of positive talk about growth but not amongst residents. Their concerns are around a lack of transparency which they feel has left them “in the dark”, housing development making traffic worse particularly along the A40, high house prices, too many houses, losing rural areas because of overdevelopment and the likely impact of a huge influx of newcomers. Others referred to the stop start development around the city e.g. the Frideswide development as an example of poor delivery. OCC and its partners need to be selling the positive aspects of the growth agenda including messaging focussed on the ambition of building healthy and sustainable communities.

OCC staff need to have a greater understanding of the wider impact of the Growth agenda on other services within the council. There is likely to be an increase in the demand for services like Children, Adults and Libraries. Equally, there are significant opportunities for new ways of working and for community and service sustainability and for addressing long-standing community concerns. The council needs to be considering the full cost and opportunity model of the Growth agenda.

The Growth agenda is moving into its delivery phase. At the moment this is a potential risk. Full delivery plans are in development but there is a known requirement for more skilled professionals and other resources. There are already shortages of infrastructure planners, engineers and modellers. Estates staff are still dealing with the legacy of the collapse of Carillion. All the local authorities in the Oxford –Cambridge ARC area are competing for the same resources. Delivery will need a mixed economy as partners cannot afford to rely on a single contractor. Lack of capacity may lead to delays which will mean that costs will go up. There is also a reputational risk to the council if delivery is severely delayed.

4.7 Partnership Working

Partnership working is becoming a real strength of the organisation. Engagement with town and parish councils has continued to improve. Collaboration with the VCS is much stronger now despite the need for funding cuts. There are pockets of co-production with the VCS, and opportunities to learn from the good practice in the Adult Social Care Department. VCS organisations would like to have better representation on some of the partnership boards such as the Health and Wellbeing Boards or sub boards. There has been some good working with Health partners. The county is putting a significant amount of funding into Mental Health and prevention strategies. There are pooled budgets with districts for Homelessness and Domestic abuse. OCC is well regarded by partners for its emergency planning. It has also worked well with partners on infrastructure delivery and housing investment fund bids. Relationships with Business and the University are good.

Relationships with the District Councils are also good and much better than they were. Partnership working with the Districts improved significantly once the unitary issue was not pursued and this should remain off the table. The housing growth deal has since helped to cement the relationships. This is an area that will always need to be given attention to prevent relationships regressing to the way they have been in recent years.

The partnership with Cherwell District Council is a new way of thinking and a chance to prove the concept of a type of two tier working that does not involve a unitary council. There is a parity of esteem between the two Leaders which is hugely helpful to the model. There has been joint appointment made for the Head of HR and Monitoring Officer posts as well as a joint post in adult social care and housing based at Cherwell. Joint appointments have also been made for the management of Regulatory Services. In time the Cherwell model could have wider application with other Districts. However, the narrative around the long term goal needs to be clearer or potential partners may be put off. There is still some suspicion that it is a first step towards “unitarisation”.

The council’s relationship with Oxford City Council is still a little difficult. OCC should be cultivating the symbiotic relationship with the City. As the urban centre of the county of Oxfordshire it is really important to the rural hinterland. Each entity needs the other for services such as transport. For example, at the moment, OCC allocates the same £/mile in its highways budget for each road in each district in order to demonstrate parity of treatment. Yet with a third of the total employment in the county, the majority of journeys involve Oxford City and this disparity could be recognised in budgetary terms. Similarly, whilst rail travel through flow across the county needs developing, it is acknowledged that there is a particular bottleneck at Oxford Station. So there is a case for treating different areas of the county differently rather than equally, including through expanded locality working.

A greater degree of corporate engagement with partners is needed. The tendency for working in internal silos is affecting cross departmental engagement. At the moment corporate engagement feels a little piecemeal and not holistic. It is good in Health, Social Care and Spatial Planning but partners in other areas like Education and Skills described the county council as “paternalistic”. Other partners wanted greater openness and transparency from the council. Relationships with the media need to be built on.

5. 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. Will Brooks, Principal Adviser, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). His contact details are: e-mail william.brooks@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 2024.

Example of good practice

Partnerships around Innovation

The Council is pooling its' innovation funding with business to create a centre of excellence for autonomous vehicles. As a result of the collaboration, driverless vehicles are starting to be rolled out in Oxford. Joint work on robotics is also pushing Oxford to be the home of robotics in the country. OCC is working with business to develop an apprenticeship training scheme to be part of the future workforce in these industries. The Council has been instrumental in the development of a "living laboratory" approach to enable the universities, entrepreneurs and users to collaborate and bring solutions from research to implementation more quickly than ever before. It has also been a key player in securing external funding for projects for the county and Oxfordshire is now establishing itself as a centre of excellence for autonomous vehicles. Joint work on robotics is also pushing the County to be the home of robotics in the country.