

Corporate Peer Challenge **Blackburn with Darwen Council**

3rd to 6th December 2018

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Blackburn with Darwen Council benefits from widely respected political and managerial leadership. Partners have a real confidence in the Council, which enables them to undertake new initiatives and new ways of working in the Borough. This confidence is in part inspired by Blackburn with Darwen's track record in stepping up to its responsibilities in partnerships across Lancashire and by its ability to deliver. Political and managerial leaders are experienced and, along with the wider membership of the Council and staff, are passionate and committed to the area. This gives the Council a clear understanding of the place and its communities. Blackburn with Darwen is grappling with some significant challenges. Internally, to transform the organisation to enable new ways of working, service improvement, delivering sustainable savings and to strengthen its financial reserves. Externally it is working with partners and the community to tackle what remain some very poor health indicators, low incomes and other social challenges. The Council has helped to bring about some significant improvements in infrastructure and the public realm and in attracting inward investments. It now needs to shift emphasis further towards the people agenda, to complement what it has achieved for the place, to ensure that more local people can benefit from the economic activity generated and enjoy better health and social outcomes.

2018 has been an important year for Blackburn with Darwen. It has been celebrating 20 years since its creation as a unitary authority and its achievements for the community over that period, being marked by the award of Municipal Journal Local Authority of the Year 2018. The 'Your Call' programme continues to generate significant numbers of volunteers to undertake activities on behalf of the wider community. It has completed implementation of a major review of Councillor numbers, ward boundaries and associated governance changes. All-out elections in May 2018 introduced a new, smaller and more diverse Council with 51 members. The current Chief Executive announced his retirement in late 2018, and will be replaced by the current Deputy Chief Executive in May 2019 as ratified at Policy Council in December. The Council recognises the need to clarify its vision, strategic direction and priorities and it has begun a refresh of its Corporate Plan for 2019 onwards.

Taken together, these developments represent a significant opportunity to build on its achievements to date and ensure that the Council is fit for the future. To take advantage of these opportunities, the Council needs to clearly set out the strategic direction for the authority and the Borough and pursue these with vigour. Enabling a council-wide approach to improvement, change and transformation will be important to this – including embedding the digital agenda in that transformation. Blackburn with Darwen needs to develop a compelling and well communicated vision of the future council, with a transformation plan to deliver for residents and the authority. It needs to ensure that resources clearly follow priorities, taking a strategic view of the resources available across the organisation so that key priorities are addressed. It should continue to closely monitor spend against budget and introduce more focused and robust performance management arrangements to ensure key outcomes are achieved. The Council needs to strengthen its capacity to deliver change and the culture to embrace this through effective organisational development and workforce planning, to build on the progress it has already made in developing its talent. It should also ensure that it has sufficient strategic capacity to think for the long term.

Blackburn with Darwen needs to continue and strengthen its focus on delivering better outcomes for people across the Borough, working with partners and the community to tackle the deep rooted health and social challenges they experience. It should consider how to build on successful partnership working arrangements already in place, such as the Heath & Social Care Networks. This could include deepening place based working with a wider range of partners, for example in respect of community safety, including consideration of pooling of resources with partners in local areas. Such collective action could achieve greater impact on the underlying issues and would afford the Council influence over a wider range of resources. Consideration be given to how to empower ward members to act on behalf of local residents through funding for local initiatives and arrangements to strengthen democratic oversight of local public service delivery.

2. Key recommendations

- a) Engage members, staff, partners and residents in developing a compelling vision for the Borough's future
- b) Develop an agreed set of outcomes for people, place and the Council and reflect these in the refreshed Corporate Plan and with partners in the LSP 2030 vision
- c) Establish a dashboard of a limited number of key performance indicators (KPIs) to demonstrate progress towards outcomes and more effectively communicate performance to members, partners and residents.
- d) Strengthen the marketing and promotion of Blackburn with Darwen to potential visitors and investors, emphasising the opportunities presented by the Borough's young and diverse communities
- e) Take a whole council approach to the budget process across different service and portfolio areas to ensure resources align to key priorities and desired outcomes
- f) Consider how to create more strategic capacity at an appropriate level and place in the organisation through the proposed senior management review
- g) Ensure a whole council approach to transformation and public service reform, integrated with the digital agenda, with a clear road map for delivery and pursue this at pace
- h) Develop an organisational development (OD) and workforce development strategy to ensure that the Council can meet the challenges of the future
- i) Consider area based budgeting with partners to deepen community engagement and influence wider spending
- j) Consider ways of empowering ward members, including through allocation of funding for local initiatives
- k) Identify gaps in community volunteer arrangements and develop a plan to address these and continue to support community volunteers

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 Blackburn with Darwen were:

- Diana Terris - Chief Executive, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
- Iain Malcolm - Leader, South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council
- Gordon Elliott - Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement, Durham County Council
- Penelope Mell - Head of Business Improvement, Dorset Councils Partnership
- Chris Lewis - Head of Transformation Programme Management Office, Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council
- Rebecca Smith - Civil Service secondee to LGA Workforce Team
- David Armin - LGA peer challenge manager

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which 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 you asked the peer team to provide observations and feedback on:

Community engagement – how effectively the council engages with the community and benefits from the capacity of local communities; and

Digital direction – to give an external perspective on the digital direction the council is taking and its strategy for doing so.

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement-focused and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. 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 four days onsite at Blackburn with Darwen, during which they:

- Spoke to nearly 100 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from some 30 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent some 280 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending eight weeks in Blackburn with Darwen.

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 (3rd to 6th December 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.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

The Council demonstrates a deep understanding of its local place and the challenges and opportunities these present for communities across Blackburn with Darwen. This comes in part from the experience and stability of both the political and managerial leadership, who enjoy great respect across the Council and partner agencies. This understanding of place is also shared by staff across the authority, who are clearly committed to the communities they serve and work in a customer-focused way. Staff have a good awareness of the Council's current priorities for Blackburn with Darwen (in particular the emphasis on securing more jobs, houses and supporting vulnerable adults and children). This understanding of local communities is supplemented by further evidence to inform decisions around priorities, drawn from sources such as the independent State of the Borough assessment; Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and residents surveys.

The Council has begun a refresh of its Corporate Plan and priorities to 2023 which is due to be finalised by end of March 2019. This provides the opportunity to revisit and reshape priorities for the future. The Council should take advantage of this process to redefine its priorities more clearly and clarify the desired outcomes that are to be achieved. In parallel, the Council should focus its resources on those priorities which will make the greatest difference to the lives of residents across the Borough. The Council is aware that Blackburn with Darwen continues to suffer poor health, employment and income measures compared to many other areas. It should question whether this is being translated into effective whole council action to improve outcomes for people and across the place. The new Corporate Plan presents an ideal opportunity to increase focus on these challenges and develop actions across portfolios and services to address these. The improvements in the public realm and infrastructure already achieved are impressive, along with promoting Blackburn with Darwen as a place to invest, but the Council should now give more attention to how it can help local people to access more and better jobs through the development of a more inclusive approach to growth.

Blackburn with Darwen has an unusually high proportion of young people in its population (23% of the population are aged 15 or younger). Retaining their talent will be integral to the future of the Borough. Currently many leave the area to pursue higher education and do not then return. The Council has established good working relationships with Blackburn College to develop educational opportunities within the Borough, and has a strategic alliance with the college and Lancaster University. Its efforts to support the creation of high technology jobs should make the area more attractive to young people.

4.2 Leadership of Place

The peer team found that partners have real confidence in Blackburn with Darwen Council, both locally and across the region. This means that they are prepared to develop new initiatives and take risks they would not be prepared to attempt elsewhere. The Council is seen as an effective partner across the region, able to step up when partners have had to address other issues. It has played a key role across Lancashire in sustaining the Lancashire Public Services Board and Lancashire Property Board and in Pennine Lancashire through its chairmanship of the Leaders Board and active engagement with the Pennine Health Partnership.

The Council has worked well with partners across the economic growth agenda and in developing physical infrastructure. The Lancashire Local Economic Partnership (LEP) regards Blackburn with Darwen as a good source of 'oven ready' projects which has enabled it to secure a significant share of the investment funding made available via the LEP. It has maintained its Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) to bring together the public, private and voluntary sectors across the Borough, with the recent LSP visioning day being viewed as a particular success.

The Council is now moving on from a paternalistic approach (where it did things for and to the community) to one more based on co-production and getting communities to be more self-sufficient. One aspect of this has been the council's facilitation of the 'Your Call' initiative which has seen hundreds of people volunteer to undertake a range of activities across environmental and community services. In so doing, people are recognising that the Council no longer has the resources to do all that it once did (this is discussed further under Community Engagement later in this report). Notwithstanding the success of such volunteering programmes, the Council should ensure that it engages effectively with the wider voluntary and community sectors and that best use is made of resources available through the Blackburn with Darwen CVS and the Health and Wellbeing Consortium. There is scope to facilitate better joint working across the community and voluntary sectors.

These strong foundations of partnership working have contributed much to what the Council has achieved to date. There is scope to take this further. Partners expressed an appetite to build on the success of the local primary care networks to further empower local communities. They are willing to explore further neighbourhood place based working and the scope for alignment / pooling of budgets. This should enable all partners to more effectively tackle the underlying issues; develop bespoke solutions for different areas and offer the Council further potential to influence the use of a wider range of resources which are not under its direct control.

To make the Council's and partners contributions more effective, Blackburn with Darwen would benefit from developing a compelling vision and narrative that is clear about the transformation needed across both the people and place agendas – and of the future council to enable delivery of that vision. Whilst many people had a sense of the Council's vision, this was not widely and consistently understood. The vision should provide a framework to focus attention on the

'wicked issues' such as poor health outcomes; substance abuse and fear of crime which require multi-agency responses and a well engaged community to tackle. Having made significant progress on that place agenda (public realm and infrastructure etc.), greater focus is now needed on the people agenda. One of the Council's strategic themes is that of the image and marketing of the Borough. This too now needs to focus more on people, both to attract and retain talent and to promote the opportunities provided by the Borough's diverse and youthful population. The Council should consider how it can build on these opportunities in its marketing and promotion of the Borough as a place to visit, invest and live.

The Council should work with partners across the LSP so that the partnership is best placed to drive the next stage of transformation of the Borough, including wider public service reform, and to be accountable for delivery. Partners expressed the view that sometimes the LSP feels like a 'talking shop' which does not always translate discussion into delivery. The Council should harness the energy produced by the recent LSP visioning session and put in place a planned programme to further develop and deliver that vision, including engagement with partners and communities. The Council should ensure that its own vision and strategy aligns with the long-term aspirations of the developing LSP 2030 plan. The Council's current Corporate and financial plans (such as the MTF5) cover a three year period. Notwithstanding the difficulties presented by uncertainty over national policy direction, the Council should extend its own planning horizons to give a clearer statement of the longer term direction.

4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

The Council's successful implementation of a Boundary Review in 2017 is noteworthy. This saw a reduction in the number of members on the Council from 64 to 51 (and from 23 to 17 wards), and associated changes in its governance arrangements. This led to a reduction in costs and a greater diversity in the membership of the Council following a one-off all-out election in May 2018. Blackburn with Darwen sees this as an important opportunity to launch a 'new council' to take forward the successes it has achieved over its first 20 years as a unitary authority.

This increase in the diversity of the membership of the Council from May 2018 is positive. With appropriate development, support and experience these new members should be able to undertake a leading role in the life of the Council. A range of mandatory and optional training and development courses have been provided to members of the new council. This member training offer is valued and take-up is good. The Council may wish to consider how it can further strengthen its development support for both new and experienced councillors. The published research about the changing role of members 'The 21st Century Councillor' (produced by the University of Birmingham with support from the North West Employers Organisation) identifies the skills required to be effective. The Council may wish to draw on the experience of organisations such as the LGA (which can offer a range of development tools and training which can be tailored to the needs of individual councils and their members) in reviewing its member development programme.

Officers and partners have confidence in the Council's stable political leadership and its ability to drive through change and new policies once these have been agreed. There are professional and mature relationships across the different political groups, demonstrated by the well established practice of the Leader of the Opposition having a seat on Executive Board and of officer briefings being extended to include shadow portfolio holders. In general, the political leadership and senior officers are seen as approachable by staff. Good relationships have been maintained with Trades Union partners through difficult times, when the Council has had to make significant reductions in staff numbers as a result of financial constraints.

At the time of the peer challenge, the Council's well respected Chief Executive had just announced his retirement. A report considered and approved by Policy Council on 6th December recommended that the current Deputy Chief Executive be appointed as the substantive Chief Executive from 1st May 2019. The Council believe that such continuity of leadership is important at this time.

As part of the governance review, the number of scrutiny committees was reduced to three – considering People, Place and Policy & Corporate Resources. Executive members and Directors engage with scrutiny to develop work programmes to help align these with Council priorities. Members from all parties feel able to challenge the executive through scrutiny, without a detrimental impact on relationships. Use of call-in appears appropriate. However, like many places, the resources to support scrutiny activity have been reduced (there is one full time officer to support the scrutiny committees) and the peer team found few examples of where scrutiny had a clear impact. The Council should ensure that best use is made of these limited resources, in particular through more effective pre-decision and policy development work clearly linked to Council priorities. Task and finish groups may well be an effective approach for aspects of such scrutiny.

The Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive form the Executive Management Team, meeting weekly (with other Directors as relevant). This is one of the main mechanisms for corporate management co-ordination. There is a perception that the Council is a hierarchical organisation. This appears to stem in part from the practice of developing and managing budgets, and determining how to deliver agreed priorities and manage performance, through portfolios and service departments. Also, there is an impression that communications and development of business plans go up and down departmental silos, rather than across service areas or through a whole Council approach. This may have the benefit of strengthening relationships between portfolio holders and the eight service Directors (who with the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive comprise the Corporate Management Board which meets fortnightly) and making portfolio holders clearly accountable for delivering priorities. However, this may be at the expense of a more corporate approach.

The Council should now consider how to strengthen its ability to tackle cross-cutting issues. This could be achieved through a range of actions. For example, renewed organisational structures to deliver enhanced strategic capacity,

introduction of dedicated change management capability and new ways of working. The report to Policy Council on 6th December regarding the appointment of a new Chief Executive also recommended the deletion of the Deputy Chief Executive post and asks the Chief Executive designate to undertake a review of the senior management structure. This provides an opportunity to strengthen corporate working and strategic capacity.

Many people understand the need for further change in how the Council works, in order for it to be sustainable in the face of further financial constraints and to continue to deliver better outcomes for the Borough. However, there is uncertainty as to what the future council may look like. There is a need for a clearer vision, narrative and plan around the next stages of whole council transformation. This will give a stronger sense of direction, helping people to better understand their role in bringing about that transformation.

In support of that transformation, there needs to be more investment in staff and leadership development and opportunities for more cross service working and development, to engage a wider range of staff and managers in the future direction of the Council. For example, regular meetings of a cohort of middle managers with a clear remit and purpose to deliver defined outputs. There have been major reductions in training budgets, which has reduced the ability to undertake in particular external training and development. Development opportunities through working to shape the new Council and inform priorities would clearly be beneficial, as would a bespoke leadership programme.

4.4 Financial planning and viability

There is a good understanding of the financial challenges that the Council is facing. Along with reductions in central government funding, Blackburn with Darwen is facing growing demands for adult and children's social care and reductions in anticipated income from waste and recycling. In previous years reserves have been used to balance the budget, but the Council recognises that this is not sustainable. Currently reserves represent about 4.5% of the Council's net spend of £131m. This is relatively low and the authority needs to strengthen its reserves position. A detailed savings programme has therefore been developed with the close involvement of portfolio holders through Portfolio Development Sessions with chief officers. These include workforce reviews (the number of staff having been reduced by a third since 2010), alternative service delivery models and income generation. The digital strategy is also intended to deliver savings. The Council should continue to closely monitor the delivery of the savings to ensure that they are realised.

The Council has successfully implemented a new real time financial information system – Civica Financials – which was well supported by appropriate training in its use. This has given a wide range of managers access to up to date financial information, which should assist budget management. Financial Business Partners are integrated into services which gives the central finance function appropriate assurance and encourages an honest dialogue around budget management.

Blackburn with Darwen has continued to make capital investment in regeneration and housing schemes, which should contribute to its and the Borough's financial resilience in the longer term. This has been aided by the Council's strong record in securing external funding.

The Council acknowledges that its approach to savings in the past has largely been achieved through 'salami slicing', identifying a percentage reduction to be achieved across portfolios and the constituent service areas based on member agreed priorities and recognises that a more transformational approach is now needed. This should be strategic and corporate, cutting across departmental silos to ensure that savings are sustainable in the medium to longer term.

Notwithstanding the real need to make savings now, the Council should guard against a short term approach which could put at risk preventative activities which may yield greater savings in the long term. It should look carefully to ensure that resources are clearly aligned to its priorities, undertaking a base budget review where necessary.

The search for sustainable savings needs to be underpinned by long term and clear plans for whole council transformation, including the digital strategy, to deliver service improvement alongside savings. The current Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) covers just three years to 2020/21 due to uncertainty around central government decisions regarding the framework for local government funding. However, the Council should not allow this to inhibit its longer term planning regarding the things it can control. It should endeavour to produce a financial strategy aligned to its transformation plans with quantified savings, underpinned by reasonable assumptions about the national position.

Financial reports monitoring spend against budget are presented quarterly to the Executive. In addition to these published reports, it is evident that there are regular briefings to portfolio holders and the wider ruling Labour Group which update members on the financial position. However, the Council should consider if more regular financial reporting to all members would increase their engagement with the budget challenges the authority is facing. Members need to maintain their focus on those challenges, in the context of Council priorities to ensure that resources are being best used to deliver their key priorities. Similarly, the Council should ensure that a wide range of managers and staff are also able to contribute to the identification and delivery of savings and the development of budget proposals.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

Blackburn with Darwen benefits from many committed, motivated and passionate staff. Their efforts are leading to innovation within service areas. The Council's workforce is ageing (over 50% are aged 45 or older) and it recognises the need to grow its own talent. The Council is making good use of the apprenticeship levy. It has 51 apprentices and is also using the levy to help with the development of more experienced staff (other training budgets having shrunk). Staff are supported to gain social work degrees to enable them to join this key service which is

experiencing recruitment challenges nationally. On-line tools have been introduced to support wider training and development at lower cost.

The Council increases its capacity through effective partnership working with other agencies and the wider community, including the facilitation of volunteering. Commercial approaches are being used in some services to generate additional revenue, for example in selling HR support services to other agencies and in leisure services.

There is a regular, biannual staff survey with generally favourable results. In response to the 2017 survey, the Council made three pledges to its staff – to boost employee morale; improve communications and involvement and improve access to relevant technology. A short, focused survey has just been completed to help assess progress in delivering these pledges.

Resources have been reduced and it appears that the workforce is feeling the strain. There is a widespread feeling that the Council has too many priorities and key performance indicators (KPIs) – of which there are over 120. These need to be rationalised to create the capacity to deliver change, sustain improvement and ensure that the Council's real priorities are delivered. The Council has recognised the need to do this and the current refresh of the Corporate Plan presents an ideal opportunity for this.

Currently the principal corporate performance management activity is a six monthly report to Executive Board of KPIs across the different portfolios, with exception reports explaining action being taken for KPIs which are below target. This is supplemented by performance challenge sessions involving the Deputy Chief Executive and relevant Directors. This performance management needs to be more frequent and focused around a corporate dashboard of a limited number of KPIs. This will direct attention to key priorities, be sustainable and give greater scope to address underperformance in a timely fashion.

Greater co-ordination and visibility of a whole council transformation plan would give staff confidence that it is joined-up and can be delivered, and reduce the impression that people are simply fire-fighting to meet immediate pressures for savings. This will enable best use of the Council's capacity for change. A more comprehensive approach to organisational development including culture change and workforce engagement should be aligned to that transformation plan. Further consideration could be given to staff engagement. This could include a rewards and recognition scheme for staff - perhaps on a quarterly basis - which can then feed into an annual awards night.

The Council has correctly identified the need to develop a workforce fit for the future and is taking action to bring this about. But this needs to be shaped by a clearer understanding of what the future council will look like. The workforce strategy should then identify the knowledge, skills and experience needed to manage and deliver that change and introduce new ways of working, including preparing staff for the digital environment of the future.

4.6 Community engagement

The Council has taken an evolutionary approach to neighbourhood working, rooted in strong partnerships with other agencies and local communities. Co-location has been an important feature of this – for example of police and Council Neighbourhood Teams. The Council works closely with health partners through the recently established framework of Local Health & Social Care Networks. The Transforming Lives Programme (Blackburn with Darwen's way of delivering the national 'Troubled Families' programme) is integrated with Neighbourhood Services and aims to both improve outcomes and reduce demand through more effective prevention. The Council is working to strengthen relations between different communities across the Borough and is one of five pilot areas for the Government's Integration Area programme.

The Borough's Youth MP was voted in by several thousand young people and participates in discussion at the Council's Executive. Blackburn with Darwen has an unusually high proportion of young people in its population. The Council should do more to emphasise this as a strength and opportunity for the area. This could be linked to other initiatives, for example a 'Festival of Youth' to mirror the successful 'Festival of Making' or a young volunteers taskforce – and to the wider promotion and marketing of the Borough.

The Council launched the Your Call campaign in 2011. This was in recognition that the Council would no longer have the resources to do all it had previously done and it was seeking to galvanise communities into taking more action and responsibility for themselves. Your Call has been remarkably successful in encouraging people to volunteer on behalf of their local communities and in developing an ethos of self-help. In 2017-18, there were 783 events attended by 6332 residents – and the indications are that these numbers will be greater in 2018-19. Residents have participated in a wide range of activities – litter picking and other environmental projects; befriending vulnerable people; community and road safety initiatives. Both members and staff at the Council are supportive of these volunteering initiatives.

Securing such high levels volunteering has been aided by Blackburn with Darwen participating in the Lancashire Volunteering Partnership which provides a county-wide resource to recruit, promote and manage volunteers, including through the Partnership's website. But volunteering in the community has also gained a momentum of its own – not least through community-led Facebook pages which have encouraged wider participation in litter picking activities. Not all this activity may currently feature in recorded volunteer hours.

The Council has also undertaken asset transfers – for example seven community centres are now run by volunteers and similarly all but the two main libraries (in Blackburn and Darwen town centres) are staffed by volunteers. There have also been transfers of some leisure facilities and bowling greens. The Council has provided on-going support to these asset transfers to ensure sustainability. But it may now wish to reflect on the extent of that support and consider putting in place

a programme to give local groups the confidence to take on greater responsibility for repairs and maintenance and insurance etc. This would enable such transfers to make a further contribution towards the Council's own financial sustainability.

The success of Your Call to date gives the Council some great strengths on which to build. The success in recruiting volunteers has not been consistent, either by geographical area or by theme. For example, many more are involved in litter picking than in some of the more challenging areas (such as befriending vulnerable people, tackling social isolation or working with children and young people). More can still be done to encourage further volunteers (in particular in areas where there are currently fewer volunteers) and to sustain the number of people already participating in such activities, the risk of volunteer 'burn-out' being recognised. This could include providing a mechanism to regularly meet with a selection of volunteers from across the full spectrum of the volunteering areas. This would demonstrate that the Council is willing to listen and act on the suggestions of volunteers and provide further guidance and support where necessary.

The Council should itself be prepared to make more use of social media and to further support community use of the same. It could also consider a formal staff volunteering scheme – not least because 70% of staff reside in the Borough. For example, Barnsley MBC allows three working days per year for volunteering in the Borough. This often allows teams to work together on a project outside their normal work environment which can be a valuable team building / development opportunity.

The Council has noted an increase in people not following guidance around which items to recycle. This is leading to contaminated waste streams which is contributing towards a drop in income from waste management. As a result of budget reductions, the posts of recycling education officers were cut. Members of the team have agreed to share their experience of encouraging such re-cycling rates with Blackburn with Darwen, in particular the approach being adopted by Durham County Council.

The Council currently has no arrangements for devolving financial resources to a neighbourhood level, or in providing funding for use at the discretion of local members. The main mechanism for engagement at ward level are the Ward Solutions meetings. However, following the withdrawal of officer support as a result of funding constraints, these are inconsistently applied across the Borough and are difficult to distinguish from ward surgeries. There is a feeling that this approach has run its course. As partnerships mature and drawing on the confidence in the Council felt by many agencies, there is an opportunity to devolve more resources and decision-making responsibility to ward level and build on the Health & Social Care Partnerships. The peer team believe this would be supported by both elected members and partners and offer greater responsiveness to local communities.

4.7 Digital direction

The Council has recently appointed a new Director of Digital and Business Change. This should provide valuable additional capacity at a senior level to drive forward the digital agenda. A new departmental structure is being put in place to support the Director, with associated governance arrangements which should offer all services the potential to be involved. Importantly, Blackburn with Darwen has recognised the importance of being a 'digital borough' if the Council's own digitisation agenda is to be successful. This should help it understand the support that communities will need for the wider use of digital and social media to be embedded, and for this to become the normal way for citizens to interact with the Council.

There is an appetite across the organisation to digitalise both internally and externally at the customer interface. This is backed up by several examples of where technology-related change has been introduced successfully. These include in the new customer services centre; HR and Finance systems and in the refurbishment of the Duke Street offices and associated new ways of working. To help demonstrate how new ways of working can be introduced to the Town Hall, an office (Room Q4) has been equipped to demonstrate what the future office will look like - to help people visualise this and how they can work in this environment. The Council is confident that its new website is progressing well and on-track to be delivered to schedule.

It is important to recognise that digital is one aspect of the transformation agenda and needs to be seen as part of a single, council-wide transformation strategy. The accommodation strategy should also be included as part of that wider strategy, as could workforce development, service transformation etc. Bringing these together in one place will help the leadership team develop a narrative and clearly communicate this to all. This should be reflected in the refreshed Corporate Plan and show how the vision of the future council will be delivered.

To give clarity and confidence in delivery, an IT strategy and roadmap for delivery is required to give visibility to the key priorities. A 'Plan on a Page' would be helpful in communicating these. More work is required to identify realistic and cashable savings, so there is greater understanding of the contribution that the digital agenda can make to the savings required to balance the budget over the coming years (and the capital investment and revenue funding required to realise these). There will be a need to manage expectations around timescales and achievable savings.

For technology enabled change to be successful, it needs to be supported by workforce development and a recognition that IT and digitalisation is everybody's business. The digital direction of the authority needs to be integrated into the organisational development strategy and workforce planning. In rolling-out the digital agenda, the Council should consider if there are further opportunities to work with partners – including sharing and analysing data to drive out greater insight into how to tackle the challenges facing the Borough and its communities.

5. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate you will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions with your senior managerial and political leadership in order to determine how the Council 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 with you. Claire Hogan, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are: Tel 07766 250347 or Email claire.hogan@local.gov.uk .

In the meantime, we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with you and colleagues through the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide additional information and signposting about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform your ongoing consideration.

Follow up visit

The LGA 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 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 12-24 months.