

# Corporate Peer Challenge **Central Bedfordshire Council**

*15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> May 2017*

Feedback Report

## 1. Executive Summary

Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC) is an impressive council with a number of areas of strong practice, including work around extra care homes, attracting inward investment, and tackling child sexual exploitation. The peer team was struck by an overwhelming sense of Central Bedfordshire Council being an optimistic and positive place that has a great appetite for change. Resident satisfaction results are positive at 70%, having doubled since the council was created in 2009.

Senior members and officers are well-respected and provide visible leadership. Cabinet members are on top of their portfolios, and members across the council are well thought of. The Council employs good people that enjoy working for CBC, and there is a high level of staff morale. Staff satisfaction is similarly high according to recent staff survey results.

CBC is secure financially, having built a strong financial platform with robust financial management arrangements. Staff understand the budget setting and financial monitoring process. There are opportunities for the council to determine its appetite for commercialisation, income generation and asset management to support the next phase of responding to its financial challenges.

Central Bedfordshire is a place that is keen to take and shape opportunities. Senior members and officers are keen to work with and influence partners both across Central Bedfordshire and beyond the council boundary. The council is involved in a number of different strands of activity operating on different geographies (for example quadrants, Central Bedfordshire, pan-Bedfordshire, STP area, SEMLEP economic area). The council is nimble and able to seize opportunities as they arise, for example the ongoing work around the Oxford to Cambridge corridor.

The peer team saw examples of good strategic partnership working (for example business partnerships, the work on the STP) and also examples of good operational partnerships (for example work to tackle Child Sexual Exploitation, and support for vulnerable adults) that are now working well, with willing – if sometimes inconsistent – engagement by partners. Where partnership working was mixed, there were a variety of reasons including lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, purpose of the partnership, or turnover of staff within partner organisations.

There are opportunities to strengthen partnership working, and the peer team suggests that central to this work is partners coming together to develop a clear strategic shared purpose which can then guide future partnership activity. This work could also support the council to bring greater clarity to the conversion and lines of accountability from high level aspirations and vision for Central Bedfordshire through to delivery on the ground. The peer team recommends that this be set out in clear published strategic documents, and that these be supported by delivery plans in order to ensure that activity is trackable and accountable.

The council is on the cusp of moving to a model of working that will see services recalibrated around a strategic framework of four quadrants across the council area,

drawing together and integrating council and partner services. For example, children's services are moving to locality-based working as part of their transformation plans whilst the council is pursuing a network of integrated health and social care hubs as part of its strategy for closer integration with Health. This is an exciting and ambitious programme. This model provides a perfect opportunity to engage partners early on and strengthen partnership working across the whole council, and the council would do well to maximise this opportunity.

The council's transformation programme is working to develop a 'One Council' approach and culture. It would be helpful to clarify this as part of the recommended work to establish CBC's strategic priorities to ensure that all activity underpinning this work is focussed and brought together in a clear delivery plan.

There is no doubt that Central Bedfordshire Council has been on a significant improvement journey since being created in 2009 and in that time the council has addressed a number of the issues it inherited. It was clear to the peer team that there is an awareness that this is a key point in time for the council and its partners as the Council sets out the next phase of improvement focus. Central Bedfordshire Council has many of the essential building blocks in place to support this work, and the recommendations set out in this report aim to bolster these foundations to accelerate the next stage in the council's 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) **In collaboration with your partners, develop a longer-term shared strategic vision with a narrower set of priorities for Central Bedfordshire.** Use this as an opportunity to extend the existing vision with partners within the context of the next wave of growth coming to Central Bedfordshire. This will help to confirm shared ambitions and commitments to guide partnership working work over the medium to long term.
- 2) **As a council, be clearer about your priorities.** Ensure that priorities are narrow and focussed, and back priorities up with SMART delivery plans and appropriate governance and accountability.
- 3) **Invest in quadrant work as means to develop your plans for your communities and your residents, delivering outcomes through effective integrated partnership.** As the 'big ticket' programme that will guide transformation across the whole organisation, ensure that it is supported by effective corporate services, and secure buy in from partners through early engagement and opportunities to co-design approaches.

- 4) **Determine your appetite for commercialisation, income generation and use of assets.** Ensure that there is political and managerial clarity about the council's appetite, and identify skills needed and any gaps to be filled to deliver against this ambition.
- 5) **Ensure that your vision for the transformation programme and the move to a 'One Council' culture is permeated throughout the organisation.** Ensure that all activity underpinning this work is focussed and brought together in a clear delivery plan.

### 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 Central Bedfordshire Council were:

- Andy Couldrick, Chief Executive, Wokingham Borough Council
- Cllr David Renard, Leader, Swindon Borough Council
- Lorraine O'Donnell, Director of Transformation and Partnerships, Durham County Council
- David Palmer, former Detective Superintendent, Metropolitan Police
- James Kingston, Local Authority Chief Executives Relationships lead, DCLG
- Kate Herbert, Programme Manager, Local Government Association

#### 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 to these questions, you asked the peer team to provide feedback on the following questions:

- How does Central Bedfordshire Council work with partners and what are partners' views on the council as a partner?
- What might the council need to consider changing to get the best out of their partnership working?
- How can the council increase its influence with partners (locally, regionally and nationally)?
- How does 'systems leadership' work across Central Bedfordshire as a place?

### **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 Central Bedfordshire Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 70 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders
- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings, visits to key sites and additional research and reading
- Collectively spent more than 225 hours to determine our findings – the equivalent of one person spending nearly 6½ weeks in Central Bedfordshire

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 (15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> May 2017). 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

In terms of priority-setting, Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC) has developed a 5-year plan setting out the high level vision for the area, founded on their assessment of the way in which the area will change over the 2015-20 period. This is a helpful document, however the peer team found that there was a lack of clarity about how the high level vision has been translated into specific priorities. As such, the council should consider how it can translate the high level aspirations expressed in the 5-year plan to a single set of narrower priorities that stretch into the long term (eg to 2032), which would then be reflected in all of CBC's strategic activity and plans. This would then create a strong 'golden thread' connecting strategic aspirations to the operational delivery that is happening on the ground.

There appears to be a reluctance to codify the council's plans on key workstreams. The peer team saw evidence of a huge amount of innovative change activity taking place that will drive improvement and integration. However, it is not easy to track and understand because it is not written down in plans. In addition to creating challenges for council staff to appreciate how each of these workstreams underpin the high level vision and priorities, this also has an impact on partner organisations' ability to understand and engage with the council on this work. Furthermore, in situations where key contacts within partner organisations change often – which appears to be the experience in Central Bedfordshire – if new colleagues join a project after the start it can mean that they miss vital information. This can result in a delay in the whole partnership's ability to get the traction to make the progress needed at the pace that is required. Having strategic documents and business cases that clearly set out the direction of travel, the desired outcome and impact, and each partner's contribution to the project from the start would enable clarity of mission for big ticket projects and greater surety that it will be delivered at the agreed pace, with in built protection in the event of change of individuals around the table.

The peer team recommend that CBC consider how it can develop work plans that knit together the 5-year plan, the emerging work to deliver services and outcomes through the quadrant model, and the transformation work that is happening corporately, in children's services, and housing and adult social care. These could be brought together in such a way that makes it easier for CBC as an organisation to understand both the golden thread linking high level vision to operational delivery, and the read across the different work streams.

In addition to providing greater clarity to direct and shape the work of the council and make the organisation's activity more effective, establishing a clear strategic framework could help to guide partnership working and increase partners' ability to engage with the council as they will have a better understanding of what the council is working to achieve. It would also allow partners to align their strategic plans over the longer term to new opportunities as CBC's model develops on the ground. Early engagement of partners in this is essential if these are to be maximised.

The peer team was very interested in the emerging quadrant approach to reconfiguring

services and delivering improved outcomes for communities, and considered this to be a very sensible development that would provide an opportunity to identify clear priorities and desired outcomes that are tailored to localities, and establish locality-focussed services with potential for a differentiation of approach between and within quadrants. The quadrant approach would also serve as a significant 'hook' for greater partnership working, providing an opportunity to engage partners in an understanding of Central Bedfordshire as a whole and on a locality basis. Indeed, in order to maximise the potential offered by the quadrant approach it will need the whole system – including different council departments, elected members, and statutory and non-statutory partners – to be integral actors in the process.

Senior officers and members have a strong understanding of the economics of the Central Bedfordshire area and the opportunities available as a result. It was clear to the Peer Team that CBC is already exploiting some of these opportunities. The peer team would urge the council to continue in this vein.

CBC has a strong sense of spatial planning and when the peer team visited Central Bedfordshire the council was about to take a significant step in the development of the Local Plan. This is coupled with a growing understanding of the communities across Central Bedfordshire, which is being used to drive the work to challenge traditional service models by focussing on outcomes that will ensure sustainable communities in the area, including the reorienting of services around localities.

The peer team picked up on particular challenges around Central Bedfordshire's school system structure. It would appear that there is a strong sense that difficulties around KS2 attainment are linked to the three tier school structure in the area. Although acknowledging that there are political concerns about this, there is a need for the council to demonstrate leadership and engage in a discussion on this topic.

## **Recommendations**

- Refine your priorities, perhaps through the quadrant work, to identify a narrower set of priorities earmarked over the short, medium and long term (eg 5/ 10/ 15 year periods)
- Ensure work around children's transformation, health and social care integration and quadrant focus working is joined up to ensure it is properly connected
- Consider whether members need to adopt a position on the future of the three tier school system in Central Bedfordshire.

## **4.2 Leadership of Place**

Senior members and officers have a strong desire for the council to be proactive in demonstrating leadership on behalf of Central Bedfordshire and shaping the future of the place. The peer team saw evidence that members are prepared to take bold decisions on place, for example in some planning decisions, if these will help deliver the larger scale plans for the area. The council has an impressive record with its approach to housing and extra care services – both in terms of vision and the scale of delivery – and is bringing partners and council teams together to look at how to address challenges with a 'how are we going to fix this' attitude.

The council's ambition to build on existing devolved service delivery arrangements with town and parish councils to ensure that services reflect local need is commendable, and the peer team heard about early work to explore changes to local community board structures to shape local services, with the intention of this sitting within the quadrant approach to locality working. The peer team would stress the need to ensure that this work is fully embedded in the quadrant approach, with a clear sense of purpose and clarity about what it is intended to achieve. This will avoid it being disjointed and being seen from the outside looking in as another layer of activity without a clear link into other structures.

The council has undertaken a thorough economic insight assessment and clearly has ambitious, well-thought out and innovative plans to grow the local economy. However, as yet there is no written economic development strategy setting out the council's plans on this agenda. The view of the peer team is that the next step would be to set out the actions the council intends to take in response, supported by SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) targets to provide clarity for all those involved in delivering these ambitions, including potential investors. The peer team heard from a number of sources that this thinking has taken place and action is happening as a result. Indeed, the team was impressed by the ambition and approach the council is taking, and the way in which it is working with business on this agenda. However, echoing the points above about the importance of codifying plans to support transparency and accountability, the team would encourage the council to draw this together into an economic development strategy that it can draft and share with all the stakeholders involved in this work.

Senior members and officers are keen to work with and influence partners across Central Bedfordshire and beyond the council boundary, to make the most of opportunities for the area. The peer team heard about CBC taking key leadership roles in partnership activity or supporting others to step into similar positions, for example the roles the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive have taken in the South East Midlands Enterprise Partnership, and the role of CBC (and the Chief Executive personally) at the heart of the work on the Sustainability and Transformation Plan (STP). The peer team saw that the council is nimble enough to respond quickly to new opportunities, for example the emerging work on the Oxford to Cambridge corridor which is on a very short timetable. It is also essential to ensure that the different strands of activity the council is involved in – many of which operate in different geographies (for example quadrants, Central Bedfordshire, pan-Bedfordshire, STP area, Oxford-Cambridge corridor, SEMLEP economic area) – have a read across of vision, delivery and governance across those different activities.

Partners told the peer team that they welcome and value the council's leadership and that they are keen for the council to both continue to lead this kind of work and to increase their leadership of place. As such, it would be worth the council considering the opportunities for wider partnership engagement as a means of shaping plans for the place and agreeing responsibilities for action. This engagement would be most effective if it were to take place as early as possible to consider the proposals from partners' perspectives to allow partners to both shape thinking and also consider implications for their own resource allocation. The council needs to recognise that lead-in time is important if they want partners to be able to think about how to reconfigure resources to deliver a shared agenda for a different delivery model. The earlier partners are involved the more likely they are to be able to contribute fully.

There have been examples of senior management and members meeting regularly with their counterparts from partner organisations, for example the council and police senior management teams met recently. This is a helpful development and will enable the council to increase its understanding of the priorities partners are pursuing and the challenges they are experiencing, and vice versa. However, it appears that few people across the council are aware that these meetings take place, perhaps missing opportunities to flag up and escalate issues to alleviate problems quickly. The peer team would encourage CBC to make this type of meeting a regular occurrence to strengthen partnership working, and to ensure that key staff are aware of the meetings so that it can use the meetings as a vehicle to address issues of concern quickly should they arise.

The emerging quadrant-based approach to delivering services and improved outcomes for communities provides an opportunity to bring all partners together to focus on local priorities. To do this, the council will need to enable partners to be better connected to this work. It might also be worth considering establishing a strategic partnership vehicle that could own and share accountability for the delivery of the integrated services deployed through the quadrant model. This might be a formal strategic partnership or some other mechanism where partners could collectively own and be accountable for the work that is going on around locality-based, integrated service delivery so that the work that is happening for example on children's services integration feeds into an accountability mechanism that holds the ring on the work across the four quadrants.

The peer team picked up a perception that the council and its partners need to pick up the pace on health and social care integration. There is a need to ensure that work on health and social care integration is not purely seen as the STP work, which is looking at issues at a larger scale and over a larger geography. The peer team saw evidence of a great deal of willingness among the council and partners to tackle the complexities of health and social care integration head on, and collectively the council and partners could make more of the opportunities to harness the ideas and experience each organisation brings to this work. Furthermore, it would be helpful to create space to have more creative and constructive challenge both to explore how to do things differently and learn from elsewhere.

## **Recommendations**

- The council needs to be the place leader taking responsibility to bring all partners on the change journey for the area
- Build on the council's existing vision to look further into the future to embed a long term vision – supported by a narrower set of priorities and delivery plans – to jointly establish a shared plan for the place. This should set out clearly an agreed framework for the type of partnership working required to deliver the vision
- Ensure activity operating in different geographies have a read across of vision, delivery and governance across those different activities
- Consider what strategic partnership vehicle would provide ownership and accountability for the services and outcomes for communities delivered through the quadrant model across the area.

### 4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

It was very clear to the peer team that the Chief Executive, Corporate Management Team (CMT), the Leader of the Council, and the Executive provide strong and visible leadership to the organisation. CBC's councillors are very able and well-thought of, with a wide range of skills drawn from professional backgrounds, and they make an active contribution to support and improve the work of the council. Cabinet members have a strong handle on their portfolios.

The staff the peer team met spoke very positively about the Working Smarter model, which is an achievement given that often this type of project is met with a fairly high degree of resistance.

There is some strong emerging values-based work in Children's Services to establish a 'restorative practice' approach, that is to say employing the concept of doing things with families, rather than doing things for or to families, with the council acting as an enabler to support people to find solutions for themselves. The peer team heard that the plan is to spread this culture "virally" throughout the organisation. This is an ambitious plan that will require wide engagement and clarity about aims, objectives and priorities, and consideration needs to be given to what this means for existing workstreams. It will also need clear and consistent leadership from senior management, and the peer team reiterated the importance of having a transformation plan which connects the transformation project to the emerging place vision and quadrant work that can be shared with staff, members and partners.

It is inevitable that there will be points when the new style of working will butt up against the legacy of the command and control culture that CBC had to have in the past to move the council to the strong financial position it is in today. Given the importance of the successful implementation of this cultural change project, it would be worth giving some attention to considering where a more command and control approach is needed to ensure proper accountability, and where there can be greater autonomy and devolution of decision making.

When looking at some of the council's big ticket projects it was not always possible for the peer team to see evidence of delivery plans to enable them to understand the journey of where the council has come from, where it is now, and what happens next. If this was an issue for the peer team then it raises the question about the extent to which this impacts on CBC's partners in the same way. If it is hard for partners to engage then the frustrations around partnership working have potential to grow. As mentioned above, the peer team would therefore urge the council to ensure that there is sufficient codification of high level ambitions, strategy and delivery plans, with appropriate governance arrangements to support accountability.

As the council moves to greater integrated locality focus through the quadrant approach, it is important to consider what impact this would have on the role of local CBC councillors. If the focus is to shift to quadrants, then those representing those quadrant areas need to be clear about how they inform, influence and engage with that emerging structure. Alongside this, there is an opportunity to consider how non-executive councillors can best make a

contribution to delivering the council's priorities, whether through the quadrant work, the overview and scrutiny function, or other routes. It might be worth reviewing the overview and scrutiny function to consider how to maximise its impact and value to the council and place.

## **Recommendations**

- Develop a clear transformation plan that can be shared with staff, members and partners, making clear links to the emerging place vision and quadrant work, to be led by CMT
- Take care to ensure that the corporate services – including HR and IT – are robust enough to support the wider transformation programme for the organisation
- Consider reviewing how non-executive councillors can best make a contribution to delivering the council's priorities, including through overview and scrutiny and new structures

## **4.4 Financial planning and viability**

CBC is in a relatively healthy financial position, having built up reserves, employed a smart and prudent approach to borrowing, used New Homes Bonus to support infrastructure investment, and consistently underspending year on year. It is clear that the council has had to invest in this to get it right and has done so successfully. There has been significant effort made to strengthen the credibility of the financial management system and there is now widespread confidence in this. Furthermore, staff understand the budget setting and financial management process and their role in ensuring confident financial monitoring.

Other examples of careful financial management include using the Housing Revenue Account creatively to tackle homelessness, impressive income generation in leisure, including meeting targets for Flitwick Leisure Centre ahead of schedule, and the planning enabling team working proactively to remove blockages to accelerate NNDR-generating schemes to come on stream as soon as possible.

All this has created a strong financial platform that has enabled CBC to invest in some things that other councils have not been able to do, and to avoid doing things that other councils have had to do to balance their books. This means that there are opportunities that CBC could now look to exploit to generate more income and change the way some services are delivered to relieve pressures on council tax and avoid threatening other services. For example, it would be helpful for the council to pin down what its appetite is for commercialisation. The peer team heard about examples of this work across the organisation, however there are more opportunities that could be pursued, supported and driven by an agreed strategic approach to commercialisation for the whole organisation. Similarly, while CBC is looking to centralise the asset management function, the council's intentions around strategic asset management are not yet clear, ie what is the approach the centralised team will be pursuing on assets? There are opportunities to learn from how other councils have already done this so that you can benefit from their learning and borrow ideas from elsewhere.

The managing vacancy programme came up frequently in discussions with managers. This

is seen as a means of controlling expenditure, and as a tool appeared to the peer team to be most disliked by those managers who would typically manage their vacancies appropriately, although there is wide recognition that the redeployment part of the process has resulted in the organisation retaining quality staff and avoiding redundancies. The managing vacancy process is a bureaucratic solution to what is essentially culture change challenge. This culture change needs to be owned by Directors and their reports and the council would benefit from thinking about how the principles of responsible and effective vacancy management become an integral part of 'how we do things at Central Bedfordshire'.

## **Recommendations**

- Recognise the strong financial position CBC is in and the opportunities this affords you to generate additional income and do things differently before you are forced to do so by financial pressures
- Maintain strong financial management and create political and managerial focus around commercialism, income generation, and asset management
- Consider how you can increase benchmarking against others and learn from other councils who are 'further down the line' or working with more limited budget options

## **4.5 Capacity to deliver**

CBC benefits from having very capable senior managers in post and members who are on top of their portfolios, and this is supported by good member/officer working relationships. The staff are enthusiastic and committed, and feel valued and proud to work for Central Bedfordshire Council, and this was backed up by the positive trajectory of staff survey results. The peer team was struck by the positivity emanating from all the staff they met while in Central Bedfordshire.

Staff secondment models are effective and valued by the organisation, and there are structures in place to support leading, learning and sharing – for example the Leadership Network – that had been missing previously. The council has a great asset in its staff and has invested in 'growing its own' and retaining its best people.

The council has a first class Children's Social Worker academy that is having a real impact on recruitment & retention. As CBC is now experiencing emerging problems in recruitment and retention of adult social workers; is there learning from the Children's model that you could replicate here?

CBC has started to explore more opportunities for shared services to increase resilience in its services, for example with the LGSS Law shared legal service. This is very sensible and, although recognising that entering into shared services is dependent on finding suitable partners to share with, it would be worth the council actively seeking out additional opportunities.

To ensure the success of the transformation programme, it is essential that internal corporate services – including HR and IT – are modernised and are robust and effective enough to support the wider programme across the organisation. Care should be taken to

consider these services in the round, particularly given that they are currently situated in different parts of the organisation.

Similarly, there is a need to express more clearly the skills needed to be the type of organisation it is working to become and track the path between the current skill sets of staff and the end point the council is aiming for, and that this supports future recruitment and learning and development for staff.

As part of the transformation programme ambition to develop a 'One Council' approach and culture, it is essential that directors lead to enable collaboration and horizontal activity at the right levels between departments and across the whole organisation. It would also be helpful to clarify this as part of the recommended work to establish CBC's strategic priorities to ensure that all activity underpinning this work is focussed and brought together in a clear delivery plan.

## **Recommendations**

- Roll out your vision for workforce across the council as a whole as part of the transformation programme (and recognising where elements need to be co-designed with partners), based on good practice, and backed up with clear delivery plans
- Consider how you can increase resilience via shared services opportunities

## **4.6 Partnership working**

Central Bedfordshire Council asked the peer team to have a particular focus on partnership working, and there are comments on this peppered throughout this report. This section aims to give some high level messages on this theme.

The peer team saw examples of good strategic partnership working (for example business partnerships, the work on the STP) and also examples of good operational partnerships (for example work to tackle Child Sexual Exploitation, and support for vulnerable adults) which are generally working well now.

At an operational level, the peer team heard consistently from officers and partners that colleagues recognise that there is a need to invest time and effort to develop and maintain working relationships and arrangements. The peer team did not see evidence of many challenges at an operational level.

The peer team found widespread strong acceptance across all partners of the importance of partnership working and a willingness to strengthen how that works in Central Bedfordshire. The challenge with partnership working is how to deal with the blips that all partnerships experience from time to time, for example changes in personnel, or occasional inconsistent attendance at meetings.

The quadrant working plan provides an excellent opportunity to bring together a variety of partners and services in the place to the table and set down shared ambitions for Central Bedfordshire. The peer team would recommend using this opportunity as a chance to reboot local partnership working. By working to develop a clear strategic sense of purpose shared across all partners could provide a helpful vehicle to drive closer working at a

strategic level and garner commitment to shared objectives.

## **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. Rachel Litherland, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are: 07795 076834/  
[Rachel.Litherland@local.gov.uk](mailto:Rachel.Litherland@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 2022.