




# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council

28<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> March 2023

Feedback report





1. Executive summary.....	3
2. Key recommendations .....	5
3. Summary of the peer challenge approach .....	6
4. Feedback .....	8
5. Next steps.....	21


## 1. Executive summary

Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council (NULBC) had its previous Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in 2012 and much has changed since this time, including the leadership of the council from a Labour to Conservative administration, with a new Leader, and also a new CEX who started in 2019. The peer team heard how the Leader and CEX are widely respected internally and externally - recognised for their commitment to improving the Borough. No better example could be the exemplary work which has been led on behalf of the Borough's communities to address the environmental issues related to Walleys Quarry since 2020.

There is clear leadership from the Cabinet and senior officers and their visibility and accessibility is appreciated by NULBC staff and partners. The council's Castle House office, opened in 2018, has contributed to this – bringing NULBC, Staffordshire County Council (SCC) and Police teams together – within a modern workplace helping to provide efficiencies and opportunities for closer working between the council and its partners.

There is a strong pride of place and Newcastle-under-Lyme has a distinct identity. Both Members and staff are proud of the place and look to champion and make the most of its range of assets including: building on the history (through a programme of events for the Borough's 850 year charter celebrations in 2023); reflecting the cultural contributions of its communities including the development of the Astley Centre for Circus (as the birthplace of Philip Astley who invented the modern circus); the award winning parks and open spaces; and education and skills through the Digital Society Centre with Keele University to create a hub for students and for the wider community. Without exception all Members and staff the peer team met wanted to deliver positive outcomes for the Borough and its communities.

The council's approach to partnership working is particularly strong and the role it has in bringing others together to collaborate is highly valued for the outcomes




delivered. The peer team consistently heard how well the council is working with all its partners noting how it ‘brings people together and makes things happen’. An often cited example of this is the work of partners and the council through the Vulnerability Hub to facilitate intensive multi-agency support for individuals in the most need. In doing this the council is an equal partner and is flexible about how the work is best delivered, working collaboratively.

This is a critically important moment for the Borough. The £51M Town Deal and Future High Streets programmes are clear priorities for the council and widely recognised as being ‘once in a lifetime’ opportunities to deliver its aspirations for the place. These are ambitious projects which the council has secured through working with partners on a successful bid. Due to the economic conditions these are challenging times for delivering capital projects. Therefore, the approach adopted by the council for scheduling these programmes is critical. Consideration of the resources, capacity to deliver and the external environment will be factors to be kept under constant review.

The council’s finances are healthy, and actively managed, which places it in a stable position. The One Council Programme is important to NULBC as the key means for delivering its future work and addressing some of the financial challenges. This transformation programme already has a lot of recognition and buy-in from council staff, with officers supportive of the benefit of the changes and keen to be clearer on the next steps. The council will want to ensure that the following phase is scheduled, widely understood and the appropriate levels of support and capacity across the organisation is in place to deliver the intended outcomes.

Council officers are recognised as important assets for NULBC and they are committed and keen to deliver for the communities. The council is actively supporting staff development through apprenticeships and training and is putting in additional plans to provide development opportunities and facilitate succession planning. NULBC will also want to remain conscious of the impact that staff sickness and recruitment and retention issues are having in particular areas of the council.



NULBC is competing with neighbouring councils and employers when attracting staff and will want to consider how to market the unique offer the Borough has for prospective applicants.

Newcastle-under-Lyme BC has set out its ambitions for the place and its communities and attracted enviable amounts of Government funding to deliver physical regeneration. The council recognises that 2023 is a significant point as it celebrates the 850th anniversary of the granting of the first charter and it looks forward towards an exciting time for the Borough's future.

## 2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

### **Recommendation 1**

Everyone is signed up to the One Council programme. Regularly review the alignment of resources to the programme and ensure staff are kept updated on its achievements

### **Recommendation 2**

Continue to consider the capacity needs of the organisation and the ability to flex resources to deliver council services and ambitions

### **Recommendation 3**

The council has a 'once in a lifetime' opportunity and ambition for high quality regeneration - consider how you schedule delivery to maximise impact

#### **Recommendation 4**

Consider how to keep partners better informed on the progress of regeneration projects

#### **Recommendation 5**

Recognising strong financial management, it is important to continue to promote joint responsibility and accountability for the financial health of the organisation and to put in place robust plans and governance to meet future financial challenges

#### **Recommendation 6**

Build on the recent successes in Scrutiny regarding Budget Scrutiny and Walleys Quarry and consider how this approach can be incorporated to ensure Scrutiny works effectively across the organisation

#### **Recommendation 7**

Consideration should be given for how the council can remain fully involved in discussions to develop and shape post-LEP arrangements and further collaboration with other Councils across the County

#### **Recommendation 8**

The council can build on the fantastic relationships it has with partners and work together to deliver its strategic ambitions

### **3. Summary of the peer challenge approach**

#### **3.1. The peer team**

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected Member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Larissa Reed (CEX - Swale BC)
- Cllr Peter Fleming (Leader - Sevenoaks DC)
- Sue Cuerden (Executive Director for Corporate Services & Assets, S151 Officer - Basingstoke and Deane BC)
- Natalie Wigman (Corporate Director - Eastleigh BC)
- Max Taylor (National Graduate Development Programme Trainee – Warwickshire CC)
- James Millington (Peer Challenge Manager - LGA)


### 3.2. Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

### 3.3. The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. 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 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 two and a half days onsite at NULBC, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings onsite and virtually, in addition to further research and reading
- Spoke to more than 100 people including a range of council staff together with Members and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and Members.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1. Local priorities and outcomes

NULBC has a good knowledge of its communities and their needs which has shaped the development of the council's priorities. This is because Members are active and staff are engaging with communities, alongside utilising data to understand the Borough's challenges. The council has used national and local datasets to create the new 'State of the Borough' Digest and Experian's MOSAIC data on customer segmentation. The Council Plan 2022-2026 was approved in November 2022 and clearly sets out the council's priorities as:

- Priority One: One Council Delivering for Local People
- Priority Two: A Successful and Sustainable Growing Borough
- Priority Three: Healthy, Active and Safe Communities




- Priority Four: Town Centres for All

This Plan is unambiguous and reflects the challenges and opportunities facing the council and the Borough.

A new approach to performance monitoring of the Council Plan has been introduced with the creation of a Strategic Hub and a performance management framework. The council recognised an opportunity to strengthen its monitoring and invested in additional capacity to ensure a closer alignment between service delivery and the council's ambitions. The Hub co-ordinates this work and ensures performance is monitored and reported across NULBC. NULBC will want to ensure that this approach is effectively integrated across the council in 2023/24 and utilise the business intelligence tools to adjust activity to achieve the outcomes it is anticipating.

During 2020, and in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the council reviewed how it operates to deliver outcomes and applied learning from this experience to review its future operations. The One Council Programme was developed from the council's keenness to build on the experience of working flexibly and proactively for its communities and driving efficiency through service redesign and digital investment, with relevant staff development and an enhanced focus on performance management. The aims of the transformation are to deliver a financial benefit to the council, but the wider aims are to provide staff with 'the ability to see transformation and continuous improvement as a way of working'. The One Council Programme aims to direct resources to the priorities identified in the Council Plan and the peer team heard from staff that there are clear links from these plans to the activity of staff.

The peer team heard much about the change activity, particularly around the ambitious regeneration programme. This is rightly a focus for the council. At the same time NULBC will also want to ensure that statutory services are maintained. These are just as important as the big change projects and NULBC will want to



ensure that the focus remains on both aspects of council activity. The enhanced performance management arrangements will help keep a close overview on service delivery. A regular review of activities and resources may be helpful.

Local partners are clear about what NULBC is aiming to achieve through the regeneration plans in Newcastle-under-Lyme and Kidsgrove. Partners articulate a clear and consistent plan from the council and cite the strength of the council in maintaining this focus – NULBC is not incoherently changing projects and ideas. NULBC is working closely with its partners to seek the best outcomes for these programmes, engaging appropriately and utilising their knowledge and experience for the benefit of the Borough. This includes the Aspire Housing Association Executive Director of Place as the chair of The Kidsgrove Town Deal Board and the Vice Chancellor of Keele University as chair of The Newcastle-under-Lyme Town Deal Board.

The council has harnessed critical external funding opportunities to support the delivery of its ambitions. The £51M Town Deal and Future High Streets programmes are clear priorities for the council and widely recognised as being ‘once in a lifetime’ opportunities to deliver its aspirations for the place. The council has been proactive in taking advantage of this by bidding for funding to deliver its priorities. This is a time consuming process but NULBC has focused its efforts on attracting the funding for the longer term rewards. All the partners the peer team met with recognised the critical role the council has played in this and support NULBC’s approach.

The council recognises the health and wellbeing challenges facing its communities and is a key priority in the Council Plan. NULBC takes its role here seriously, utilising and developing its assets and providing attractive and inviting outdoor spaces including: six Green Flag parks; the Britain in Bloom programme; and a new BMX Pump Track and 3G football pitches in Kidsgrove. The leisure offer within the Borough is important to the council and this has included improvements to the Jubilee2 leisure centre in Newcastle-under-Lyme town centre and the refurbishment and reopening of Kidsgrove Sports Centre – with the centre transferred to a local




trust.

The council is passionate about the sustainability agenda and has articulated how it is playing a crucial part through its Sustainable Environment Strategy. A target has been set to meet net zero for the council's own estate and activities by 2030, and for the wider borough by 2050. NULBC is leading the way through: opportunities in the new Local Plan; the use of alternative technologies and using Hydro-treated Vegetable Oil (HVO) in the majority of the waste and streetscene vehicles to reduce emissions; and a programme of tree planting across the Borough. The Leader is the Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Change at SCC and chairs the Staffordshire Sustainability Board below the Staffordshire Leader's Board. NULBC led work to establish '10 base pledges' to which all the Staffordshire councils have committed.

#### **4.2. Organisational and place leadership**

The Leader and CEX are seen as effective both within the council and externally, and have delivered a 'step change' in the council's approach to partnership working. This was particularly noted by the council's partners who felt that the community engagement and political leadership role was very strong on the key issues of local importance and challenge. Partners look to the council for leadership, and receive it. A consistent theme was the positive way NULBC has responded to the issues around Walleys Quarry.

The Leader's critical role in addressing the issues from Walleys Quarry was often cited as demonstrating the council is an effective place leader. Since 2020 the council has been addressing the environmental issues of Hydrogen Sulphide (H<sub>2</sub>S) from the local landfill site. Gaining national coverage and debated in Parliament this has led to more than 20,000 complaints received by the council. This has been a significant focus for NULBC and its role in leading on behalf of communities is recognised as being central to the current positive position in securing an Abatement




Notice against the site operator. Partners agreed that the council came together and stood up to lead the community response 'above and beyond' what is typical. The ongoing commitment of the council to this cannot be overstated and the peer team recognise the crucial role it has played in committing resources and capacity to this.

There are very strong partnership relationships in place and developing and nurturing these is a key strength of NULBC. The council's role in bringing others together to collaborate is highly valued for the outcomes delivered and the effort the council makes is widely appreciated and it is seen as an important and proactive partner by the public, voluntary and community sector.

The peer team consider the multi-agency Vulnerability Hub as sector leading and a great example of the strong partnership work delivering impressive outcomes. The first Hub where partners came together to discuss individuals and families identified as the most vulnerable was held in September 2017. With representation from NULBC, Police, adult social care, children's social care, mental health, the fire service, local housing providers, and third sector organisations cases are dealt with efficiently. This is working well and handled more than 1,100 cases since inception - delivering impressive outcomes with partners to address homelessness, rough sleeping and health and wellbeing issues. Partners all have the same passion to make the difference and with no hierarchy – with everyone's contribution being equally valued.

To enhance the relationships with partners there could be further consideration about how to keep them informed on progress and council decisions. For instance, partners would welcome more information on where decisions are to be made and the timescales involved. This might be particularly important during the current regeneration programme activities to ensure all partners remain sighted on this important activity.

NULBC has 446 staff (392 FTE) across nine service areas including in-house



operational services for waste, recycling and street scene. Sickness absence is currently around 10 days per FTE, at a cost of £390k last year. The council recognises that its staff are one of its greatest assets and has undertaken a health and wellbeing 'Thrive at Work Health Needs Assessment' survey to understand their needs. Headlines from this survey in December 2022 positively show that:

- 92% of respondents agree that they understand how their work contributes to the objectives of the council
- 93% of respondents agreed that they can use their personal initiative or judgement
- 84% agree that they can have 1:1 meetings with their line manager
- 81% agree that there is good cooperation between colleagues

Responses for further development and exploration which the council is addressing include:

- 47% of respondents feel under strain at work
- 53% of respondents feel communications is good at work
- 40% of respondents feel there are opportunities for staff to develop and progress in the organisation

The council is exploring this feedback and this will inform the basis of a new Workforce Strategy to respond to the findings. This will include themes around: Engagement and Cultural Development; Developing Compassionate, Strategic Leadership Competencies and Behaviours; Resourcing and Workforce Planning; Inclusion, Diversity and Allyship; Operational Excellence and Performance; and Wellbeing. NULBC has a good relationship and works closely with the trade unions and will continue to work closely with them on workforce matters. Particular examples cited were where close working facilitated the flexible use of staff to



support service delivery and provide support to communities during the pandemic.


A new management structure will be implemented from April 2023 and the current Heads of Service will ‘play a greatly enhanced role in the visible leadership of the corporate body’. These changes will provide opportunities to create capacity and provide NULBC staff with new and exciting projects through the rotation of staff and stepping-up to lead on key activities for a period of time. It is clear that NULBC is considering the importance of succession planning for the organisation and building capacity within the senior team. The focus on developing internally is important given the challenges in the recruitment of certain roles. The council will want to remain agile on these proposed changes to the Executive Management Team (EMT). These are innovative changes and ensuring they are monitored on roll-out, considering the impact on staff and heads of service, and flexed and adjusted if things are not working as anticipated will be important.

#### **4.3. Governance and Culture**

The Leader and CEX are available and visible and this accessibility is valued by council staff and partners. The ability for individuals to be able to contact senior managers of the council and to raise issues and opportunities in an open and transparent way is appreciated.

NULBC is Conservative controlled and operates a Leader and Cabinet model. The peer team heard that Cabinet has priorities which are clearly articulated within the Council Plan 2022-2026 and that this reflects their manifesto. There is good experience and knowledge within the Cabinet and the wider group of Members, and more recently elected councillors are keen to play a full part on the council, and further develop and utilise their skills for the benefit of the Borough.


There is clarity on the roles of officers and Members with good relationships in place between Members and officers. The political and officer groups work well together



with Members speaking highly of the advice and reports which they are provided. NULBC adopted the LGA Model Code of Conduct in May 2022 and there is a process in place for dealing with complaints. There have been very few complaints against NULBC Members since January 2020, and no findings of a breach of the Code.

There are some good examples of cross-party working and good practice identified within the council's scrutiny arrangements. This has included around the Budget Scrutiny process and the work on Walleys Quarry. Members of the scrutiny committees can continue to build on the important role they have in challenging and supporting the council to deliver using learning from these as a blueprint for other work. Officers play a key role in supporting this and a 'Scrutiny Champion' who is the EMT officer most closely aligned to the particular committee ensures that the work of Scrutiny has the appropriate profile. The LGA has recently delivered sessions for NULBC Members on scrutiny and would be happy to offer any further support which the council identifies.

The council offers Members development and support both through the NULBC, and therefore open to all councillors, and the political groups providing their own support which may include mentors for those who are newly elected. NULBC-led Member development has included: the induction programme for Members following the 2022 elections; the introduction of all Member events to brief councillors on specific issues such as on Walleys Quarry, council budgets, One Council; and specific support to Members involved in the work of the licensing and public protection, planning and audit and standards committees. The council's recently developed Member intranet is still to be more widely accessed by all Members. The council will wish to consider regularly updating this to provide information on: development and support, including that which is accessed through the LGA; promoting the use of available meeting spaces for all Members; and signposting key contacts at partner organisations and SCC. The peer team were aware of discussions including access to IT equipment and committee papers for Members and the approach taken to deliver meetings effectively. The council will want to ensure that its processes and support remains




adequate and Members continue to have opportunities to raise issues. Ongoing development and support needs for all Members should be kept under consideration to ensure the council is addressing the needs of newer and more experienced councillors.

Whilst on site the peer team were pleased to be able to join a council THRIVE Group meeting. This is chaired in partnership between HR and the trade unions which focuses on staff wellbeing, and is attended by the Portfolio Holder - Community Safety and Wellbeing to provide political input and leadership. This was an engaging session where staff were keen to support each other, share ideas around staff welfare and discuss their health and wellbeing plans for upcoming events and celebrations. This forum is appreciated and is an important component in the council's support offer for its staff and the development of policies including the Fostering Friendly Policy, an Employee Led Volunteering Scheme and the training and roll out of Mental Health First Aiders.

The council does have an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy but this is recognised as an area which needs more work. There is some good practice including the activity of the THRIVE group but equalities impact assessments and other tools are not as widely utilised as the council may wish. The emerging Workforce Strategy is seen as an opportunity to embed a culture which reflects the council's commitment to equalities and for NULBC to be an organisation which celebrates, supports and welcomes diversity and actively promotes inclusive processes and practices.

A positive organisational culture is integral to the One Council Programme and the future Workforce Strategy. The peer team heard from staff who enjoy working at the council, have good positive relationships with colleagues with lots of informal peer support already in place across the organisation. The council will want to consider how to build on this and work with staff to develop this further. Internal communications such as Team Talk and the recently introduced internal communications e-bulletin, CastleNEWS, are appreciated by staff and a response to





the staff feedback regarding communications. NULBC staff are actively engaging in these also creating their own content to share with colleagues.


The delivery of the council's ambitious priorities may require staff to be upskilled in particular areas, for instance around project management. Staff may already be confident they have the skills to deliver but understanding where there are any gaps would help NULBC to respond and support staff development. Undertaking a skills audit with officers might be a helpful means of then focusing training and development support to staff.

A full review of the Annual Governance Statement may be beneficial to be clearer on the key risks, associated actions and delivery. Whilst the internal controls are strong on finance processes and practices, further consideration should be given to ICT, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and projects. These are important and could impact on the overall audit opinion for the council. The peer team understand that staff turnover may be a factor in this and with recent appointments will now be picked up.

#### **4.4. Financial planning and management**

NULBC has strong financial leadership and overall financial management, and fully recognises future potential financial pressures and challenges. The council's finances are healthy, and actively managed, which places it in a stable position. The council places significant focus on its overall financial resources to ensure that there is financial resilience in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and consideration is given to the longer term position and how the budget gaps can be addressed.

The finance team is well respected across the council and is promoting wider good financial management. The council operates a robust process for identifying potential budget proposals - pressures and savings - with significant involvement of




Members and key staff in developing the proposals. Early engagement and sound processes contribute to the robustness of proposal development and means that between 90 – 95% savings proposals are then subsequently achieved. In doing so the council is managing its financial position well. Discussions are now being considered for how to close revenue budget gaps in future years.

NULBC is good at identifying external factors – particularly in 2023/24 - and recognising that the economy is recovering and inflation pressures remain. Whilst positive action has been taken to put provision for potential additional revenue pressures in the 2023/24 financial year, there are a number of potential calls on this funding with regards to the additional pay award, loss of service income and further inflationary pressures. As such the council may wish to:

- Consider any other management actions now and have these ‘ready to go’ in-year should the need arise
- Undertake some benchmarking of its fees and charges with other areas. This may be useful for informing political decision making
- Review the council’s Commercialisation Strategy and consider the impacts of Covid-19 alongside the further roll-out of the One Council Programme.

The One Council Programme is on track to deliver the recurring savings of £1M per annum at the end of 2022/23. The Programme is in its second year and this represents good value from the £1.2M original investment. The council should consider if the current arrangements around the One Council Programme will provide sufficient resources and capacity to deliver the clear drive and outcomes of the Council Plan and consider the appropriate scheduling and alignment of funding to the programme.

Whilst consideration is being given for how to meet the future years’ revenue budget gaps, significant reliance has been placed on the One Council Programme. The council may want to consider what other actions are needed to ensure the ongoing financial resilience of the council – through the current known challenges around pay



and inflation, as well as the unknown challenges. This may include the council reducing or stopping activity to concentrate on its ambitions.

Significant additional funding of £51M has been secured from the Government for the regeneration of the Borough with successful partnership working arrangements put in place to support the delivery of the key projects. However, this funding may not now be sufficient to meet the original aspirations for the funding in the current economic and market conditions. There may be a need to be flexible in the delivery plans, in order to respond to market conditions and changes in timescales, with clear understanding of affordability and resources available to deliver the projects. There is also a further need to consider the position following the demolition works, for how future development on the sites is funded and delivered. As things progress the governance should remain tight so that everyone continues to be clear what the funding will deliver and that this is being monitored appropriately.

The council has had great success in attracting Government funding and it can continue to build on its strong local partnership approach to continue to look at opportunities to attract additional further funding and to deliver strategic ambitions.

NULBC's capital programme is utilising external funding. The council is currently considering a proposal to undertake some borrowing – which it has not done in some time. It would be prudent to obtain some external advice and to test the council's assumptions to ensure what it is planning is achievable and deliverable.

#### **4.5. Capacity for improvement**

The One Council Programme considered the experience and lessons learnt during Covid-19 and NULBC has reflected on how to take this forward. Staff the peer team met spoke of the one front door ambitions and how this was borne out of the needs of communities and the council during the pandemic. This was a good use of the positive experience from what was a difficult and challenging time and illustrates the




ability of the workforce to respond to challenges and change in a positive way.

Whilst staff are supportive of the One Council Programme and are working hard to deliver it, consideration should be given for how staff are supported to deliver the programme in a more sustainable way. Staff are committed to this and at the same time are delivering this as part of their day jobs. The council will want to review how to support staff with this and how it is delivered over the long term.

Work has been undertaken to develop the performance management culture of the organisation and to ensure NULBC's priorities are fully aligned and integrated into Priority Delivery Plans (PDPs), which inform individual employee objectives. This provides a clear link from the strategic to the operational. Good performance monitoring arrangements will report into Cabinet. This means the council will understand the performance and where to focus attention. Importantly, staff are signed up to this and own it so that the council is clear on its priorities and what needs to be done.

Staff the peer team spoke to enjoy working for the council and are proud of the role the council has locally. They appreciate the support offered to officers including through apprenticeships and how the council is supporting staff through professional skills programmes. This 'train your own' approach also offers good value for NULBC against recruitment costs and issues. NULBC is focused on the importance of succession planning including the senior staff rotations to build experience in officers and enhance the capacity of the council.

NULBC will want to remain aware of the impact that staff sickness and recruitment and retention issues are having in areas of the council. The council is ambitious and is delivering critical projects whilst ensuring statutory service delivery is maintained. The council will want to be mindful of the capacity and scheduling when driving activity forwards. Additionally, similar to other councils, there are challenges in recruiting staff into particular areas including Finance, Planning and Legal services.



Further considering the council's approach for attracting and developing staff may be valuable in helping to address this. Levels of remuneration is a recognised issue and there are other employers which the council is in competition with when recruiting staff. Continued opportunities for staff training and development will be important, ensuring there is a consistent approach which all staff are able to access. This may be more challenging to deliver when finances are tighter but is important to the culture of the organisation and its ability to deliver - and will help with recruitment issues over the longer term. Existing staff were complimentary about the flexible working policies and the benefits and support offered and NULBC may want to consider how to best promote this to attract potential future staff too.

A number of important and underpinning strategies and policies are to be reviewed including around Workforce & ICT and Digital. The council is aware that this work is important, so setting out the expectations and timeframes for completion may be helpful in order to finalise.

## 5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a six-month check-in meeting. This will be a short, facilitated session which creates space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, Helen Murray, Principal Adviser for the West Midlands, is the main contact between your authority and the LGA. Helen is available to discuss any further support the council requires [Helen.murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:Helen.murray@local.gov.uk).