

Corporate Peer Challenge

Test Valley Borough Council

3 – 5 October 2018

Feedback Report

1. Executive summary

Test Valley Borough Council is a well-led and effectively managed authority. The council benefits from very good working relationships between officers and members. The peer team found that members and officers clearly understood their respective roles and worked together in a positive way. There are also good relationships between members and examples of constructive working across the political groups. This culture provides a solid foundation for strong political and managerial leadership going forward.

The peer team met with a significant number of council employees during the challenge process and found staff to be dedicated to the council and the borough. The positive messages from staff about the organisation are supported by the council's recent staff survey results which are good and an improvement on the previous year's findings.

The council can be proud of its strong track-record of good investments and delivery. This includes Project Enterprise, which has delivered a strong rate of financial return to the council through property investment, and recent work to develop new contractual arrangements for leisure services that will significantly improve facilities in the borough.

The council's current financial position is comparatively strong and there is a focus on longer-term financial planning to ensure financial sustainability. There has also been an effective use of New Homes Bonus to deliver local priorities, including placed-based working and the community councillor initiative.

The council is a respected partner locally and regionally. The peer team received positive feedback from a wide range of organisations within Test Valley about the council's ambitions and work for the area. In addition, partner organisations outside of the borough highlighted the council's leadership role across Hampshire, including when working with other councils and discussing controversial issues such as devolution.

There is a strong commitment to, and emerging plans for, Andover and Romsey – both members and officers recognise that there is a once in a generation opportunity for the borough's principal towns. The importance of developing a clear vision and working closely with communities is recognised, and there is already a focus on delivery in Andover.

The achievements highlighted above underline the peer team's view of the council as a well-run organisation. The council's self-awareness is growing and there is an appetite to improve. This is evidenced by a willingness to work with others, including other local authorities and national bodies, to assess progress and develop new solutions.

The council has a focus on sound financial investments and a significant economic growth agenda. It is an opportune time for the council to develop an overarching investment strategy and narrative aligned with the corporate plan and its priorities, including the relative importance of a securing a financial return to address future funding challenges, supporting economic growth and achieving other social and community benefits.

The council could communicate its achievements more effectively, including its role in community projects and developments. Communications, including social media use, should be at the heart of the council's approach to better engage residents and stakeholders about the council's vision and delivery successes. There may also be additional opportunities for the council to better communicate with parish councils.

The scale of change in Test Valley – and in particular local regeneration activity in Andover – will mean the council will need to explore different approaches, secure additional capacity in some areas and benefit from new skills. A joint venture partnership should be considered in order to bring relevant expertise, and extra resources, to support the regeneration of Andover town centre.

More generally, the council should continue its focus on how the organisation will need to adapt for the future. The council's work on the development of a people strategy is a positive step and will support a strategic approach to workforce issues. The council is also considering aspects of its governance, including arrangements for planning decisions.

The peer team is confident that the council is well-placed to build upon its achievements over recent years.

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, many of the conversations onsite provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

- 1. Communicate consistently the council's excellent investments and community leadership on leisure, economic and community projects**
The peer team identified a broad range of significant successes, which were a direct result of strong council leadership and investment – from Walworth Business Park to the former Romsey Magistrates Court. However, the significant role of the council was often not communicated consistently.
- 2. Explore different funding models, including joint ventures, to deliver further investment and economic growth opportunities**
The step-change in local regeneration activity will require the council to consider different approaches to ensure that the benefits of development are maximised for Test Valley residents. In particular, the peer team recommends that the council consider a joint venture partnership to support the regeneration of Andover town centre.
- 3. Develop a strong narrative that sets out the linkages between the council's proactive growth and regeneration role set out in Andover Vision and Romsey Future and the council's approach to investment**
There is a potential benefit for the council in developing an overarching investment strategy that aligns with the council's economic development agenda. While the peer team recognises that the council will seek to deliver varying levels of financial, economic and community benefits across different projects, there is merit in

developing a strategic investment narrative, which includes key principles and criteria that will inform the council's decision-making.

4. Continue to be a strong voice for Test Valley in Hampshire

The council is a respected partner in Test Valley and beyond. The peer team found that the council had been a key player in a range of discussions across the county on both strategic and services delivery issues, such as devolution and waste management.

5. Develop, and co-design with staff, a workforce strategy for the council, including a focus on the skills and behaviours needed to meet changing demands

While the peer team identified workforce activity that was positively viewed by many staff – most notably coaching – there needs to be a council-wide view of organisational development. The council's emerging People Strategy should seek to address key workforce issues, including succession planning, talent management, skills development and workforce representation.

6. Reconsider decision making arrangements for planning informed by the forthcoming PAS review

Test Valley's existing planning arrangements are atypical, including the current involvement of all relevant ward members on the north or south area committee. The forthcoming Planning Advisory Service review provides an opportunity for the council to explore whether there are alternative arrangements that could be considered.

7. Maintain support and resources for the community councillor initiative beyond May 2019 and explore further opportunities for parish council engagement and information sharing on service and policy issues

The council's focus on place-based working, including its community councillor model, has received national recognition. The peer team felt that this work should continue beyond the 2019 elections (based on the new ward boundaries), complemented by further activity that builds on the council's engagement with parish councils.

8. Continue to improve communications, including the use of social media. Communications should be at the heart of the decision making process and seen as everyone's agenda

The council is seeking to take a more strategic and proactive approach to communications. The involvement of the communications service in early discussions on key decisions will help support this. However, effective communications should also be seen as the responsibility of all services and not just the central team.

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 the council's requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and were agreed with the council. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Test Valley Borough Council were:

- Jack Hegarty, Chief Executive, Malvern Hills District Council and Managing Director at Wychavon District Council
- Cllr Peter Fleming OBE, Leader, Sevenoaks District Council
- Gemma Barron, Head of Sustainable Communities and Wellbeing, South Cambridgeshire District Council
- Jane Eaton, Director of Corporate Resources, Horsham District Council
- Helen Sheppard, Business Change Commissioning Manager, Leicester City Council
- Paul Thomas, Strategic Director – Growth, South Kesteven District Council
- Kevin Kewin, 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:

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, the council asked the peer team to consider the council's approach to inclusive growth and development, particularly in Romsey and Andover.

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focused and tailored to meet an individual council's needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement arrangements. 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 three days onsite at Test Valley Borough Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 230 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings, and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 250 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than six weeks in Test Valley.

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 (3 – 5 October 2018). In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not as 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 the council is already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

There is an excellent understanding of the local area amongst officers and members. The borough is experiencing a growth in population and economic activity supported by residential and commercial development. Members and officers were both aware of the potential challenges this brings to different parts of the borough, as well as the benefits for local communities including in terms of jobs, homes and new infrastructure. The strong understanding of Test Valley – both rural and urban – is, in part, a result of the council's commitment to place-based working. Recent strong examples include the council's community-led planning approaches in Andover and Romsey, as well as the work of members through the community councillor initiative.

The council has a clear Corporate Plan which sets out ambitions for the area and local communities as well as the key actions to deliver them. The council is currently seeking to refresh the plan and recent engagement activity has seen more than 2,000 residents

participate in discussions on the council's future priorities. This high level of engagement is a reflection of the council's commitment to understanding local needs. The new Corporate Plan also provides an opportunity for the council to be more explicit on how the council will need to further adapt to deliver its ambitions. For example, the new plan could provide a narrative about how the organisation, including its operating models and workforce, will need to further evolve to meet the council's refreshed priorities.

The council has recognised the importance of aligning corporate priorities with spatial planning. Positively, the council's planning and corporate policy teams are co-located in the chief executive's service which encourages joined-up working on key issues including in the development of priorities, planning policy and infrastructure development. The benefits from a co-ordinated approach are significant. The new nature reserve at Fishlake Meadows is an example of a one-council approach that has led to strong community benefits. The focus on aligning corporate priorities, resident engagement and spatial planning will be particularly important as the Local Plan is reviewed and developed.

The council's understanding of place and commitment to delivering clear priorities is exemplified by its approach to development in Andover and Romsey. The council recognises that improvements in these towns will benefit all communities in Test Valley, including the significant proportion of residents (approximately 35%) that live in rural areas. The council's priority and urgency relating to Andover town centre was reflected by all stakeholders the peer team engaged with – including staff, community representatives, other public sector organisations and private partners. The peer team was impressed with the council's initial work in this area, and further details are provided in section 4.6.

The council recognises that its communications are improving but further work is needed to build more positive public relations. A key priority should be to better communicate, and clearly signpost, the council's contribution to achievements in the borough. The recent recruitment of a staff member to focus on digital communications and social media should help strengthen the council's approach. While it would be beneficial for the central communications team to be involved in early discussions about key council decisions as they are progressing, communications should be seen as part of everyone's role. The council could also give consideration to the periodic use of a residents' survey or other forms of citizen engagement to capture local views, in addition to the existing strong focus on one-off events.

4.2 Leadership of Place

The council is acknowledged as a reliable and effective partner both locally and regionally. Local organisations talked of the council in positive terms as a partner that delivers on its promises. The council has developed strong relationships with the voluntary and community sector (VCS). The council's commitment to three-year funding for many local VCS organisations supports medium-term planning and a focus on delivery. Similarly, the council has developed a long-term relationship with Places for People – a private sector leisure management company – that is set to provide both improved local facilities and a financial return to the council.

There have been tensions amongst some councils in Hampshire relating to competing devolution proposals. While the county council did not agree with Test Valley Borough

Council's preferred approach, the council has been decisive and transparent in its views. Similarly, the council has been clear on its preference regarding the borough currently being split across two Local Enterprise Partnerships – EM3 and Solent. If Test Valley must only be part of one LEP in the future, the council is clear that EM3 is the best option for the borough. The council has secured considerable benefits from its LEP engagement to date, including a significant skills and technology centre for Andover.

The council engages well with business across the borough. For example, the council has worked with Keir to rejuvenate Walworth Business Park to attract further inward investment. There is a small-business grants programme consisting of an Independent Retailer Grant and Business Start-Up Grant, which both assists independent companies and demonstrates a clear message of support from the council. The commitment to small businesses has led to Test Valley winning the Wessex Region Federation of Small Business Friendly Council Award for three of the last four years. The peer team were also made aware of the work of the council's senior political and managerial leadership to attract large and strategic employers to the borough.

The council has been active on a number of important service delivery issues that cut-across district boundaries, including Project Integra which seeks to provide an integrated approach to waste management in Hampshire. The council also played a leading role in the successful bid to MHCLG's Planning Delivery Fund, working with other councils, to better understand the impact of recreational pressure on the New Forest arising from development.

Test Valley has an impressive housing delivery track-record. The borough has seen more than 1,700 affordable homes built over the past five years, and the total number of homes delivered annually has been the highest in Hampshire in four of the last five years. Significantly, the council's housing delivery has been accompanied by community development workers, community buildings, green infrastructure and other improvements.

The council's community councillor model is well-resourced and highly regarded. Each councillor has access to a dedicated geographically-focused officer to help address local issues. In addition, the council has invested £1.5 million of New Homes Bonus funding into a councillor community grant scheme and a community asset fund to support local initiatives to get off the ground. The community councillor initiative has received national recognition and the council has actively sought to share its learning, including through its collaboration with De Montfort University and Kirklees Council.

The peer team identified examples of effective working with town and parish councils, including events to support parishes relating to resilience planning, getting advice on S106, CIL funding and how to access the community asset fund. The council has also developed a community planning toolkit in partnership with parish and town councils in response to the findings from its review of the Local Plan process which found that some parishes and communities felt that they were not sufficiently engaged through the plan development process. The peer team felt that there may be further opportunities for the council to build upon its progress and further strengthen its engagement and communications. The council could explore with parish and town councils what would work best for them; regular meetings between the council's chief executive, monitoring officer and parish clerks may be one mechanism to strengthen engagement between the tiers.

4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

The peer team found working relationships between officers and members to be respectful and effective. There is a shared imperative to deliver and a collegiate approach. There also appeared to be generally constructive relationships between members across political groups. Positively, the council has a number of cross-party forums to consider key issues, including recent work on community governance and the waste review.

The leader and chief executive are seen by stakeholders and staff as open and effective. Internal initiatives such as ‘talk talk’ where the leader and chief executive take (anonymised) questions from staff, and the weekly email bulletin, are viewed positively by employees. Outside of the organisation, partners – public, private and voluntary sector – talked positively of the council’s political and managerial leadership, including their visibility.

The council’s ‘corporate clockwork’ approach seeks to integrate performance, risk and budget management within services and across the council. As part of this, each service participates in a quarterly Performance Board which brings together the relevant head of service with the corporate directors and policy and finance representatives. This and other internal management arrangements are evidence of sound internal processes. As the council considers how it will need to adapt to meet its new Corporate Plan, it should keep under review the optimum balance between the ‘assurance’ elements of the corporate clockwork with the ‘empowering’ focus of the council’s approach elsewhere, including its coaching model.

Some of the council’s existing arrangements support agile decision-making. This includes, for example, governance relating to investment purchases. The Head of Estates has delegated authority for purchases of up to £3 million subject to the approval of a cross-party Member Investment Panel which can be consulted at short-notice. This allows the council to promptly respond to the property market when required.

However, some aspects of the council’s governance may be perceived as atypical. For example, currently all members of the council serve on the planning committee relevant to their ward (north or south area committee), and there is a further planning control committee. The peer team noted that scrutiny recently considered this issue and proposed no change to existing structures. The forthcoming LGA Planning Advisory Service review provides a further opportunity for the council to explore whether there are alternative arrangements that could be considered.

The current timings of committee and council meetings are uncommon rather than unique. Full Council meetings begin at 4pm, for example, and other committee meetings typically commence at 5.30pm. While the council is best placed to determine when its meetings take place, meetings that begin later in the evening may make serving on the council a more realistic option for those residents that work full-time outside of the borough.

The peer team found a number of strengths in the council’s existing scrutiny arrangements. Non-executive members set the agenda and it was felt that scrutiny has informed and influenced decision making. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSCOM) focuses on

key priority issues for the area and carefully considers its forward work programme through an annual away-day. Current and planned scrutiny activity includes work on economic development and affordable housing. OSCOM are also supported to consider key issues on the Cabinet's forward plan – such as the budget and corporate plan – at an earlier stage.

The council's scrutiny task and finish groups undertake work with purpose. Good examples include the Communications and Procurement Panel which explored what communications lessons could be learned from large projects informed by the recent experiences of recommissioning leisure services. More recently, the Public Involvement Panel has considered community engagement in decision making.

4.4 Financial planning and viability

The council's current financial position is comparatively strong. The council has a track-record of spending within budget and robust levels of reserves. The 2018/19 budget is based upon a realistic level of savings and income generation proposals; it is also balanced without the use of reserves. Encouragingly, there is also a focus on financial planning to 2026 to ensure financial sustainability.

Test Valley is a borough with strong housing growth, which has resulted in comparatively high levels of New Homes Bonus (NHB). The council does not rely on NHB to support its ongoing revenue funding but uses it to deliver and accelerate local priorities, including £1.5 million for the community councillor scheme and community asset fund.

There appears to be a robust and mature budget setting process, including a careful consideration of budget pressures. However, the peer team would recommend that the council explores the recurring areas of underspend. In 2016/17 the council reported an underspend of £0.52 million after making a £0.67 million contribution to reserves. The 2017/18 reported underspend was smaller – £0.43 million – but the council also made a £1.3 million contribution to reserves due to unforeseen income of £0.76 million (including some unannounced Government grants), revenue slippage of £0.29 million and slippage in the Asset Management Plan of £0.25 million. The current 2018/19 underspend (to 31 July 2018) is £0.5 million. There appear to be a number common causes of underspend which could be explored further, including staff vacancies, and income from planning fees and property.

The corporate challenge process has been financially successful over a sustained period; the council has delivered approximately £1 million of savings per annum. Some councils have found that a change in challenge process has encouraged alternative or different savings approaches to come forward. Now may be an opportune time to review arrangements for future years linked to the new Corporate Plan. This could include exploring different methods for the identification of savings, as well a renewed focus on the recurring underspends highlighted above.

The council has a strong investment approach. Project Enterprise, for example, was developed to support the council to become independent of government grants through the use of cash reserves and balances to support investment; its primary aim is to generate revenue. The council is projecting an income of £1.9m in 2018/19 and £2m in 2019/20

from Project Enterprise. The rate of return achieved to date (7.2%) is significantly higher than would have been otherwise achieved. The council is now moving into a borrowing situation following its prudent investment in Project Enterprise schemes. The council is planning to borrow £5.9 million for capital projects in 2018/19 having previously been debt free. This is a different context for the council and, as such, members will need to consider carefully the cost of capital in its purchasing and development decisions.

The council's work with Keir over recent years to support the Walworth Business Park has both provided a direct financial return and encouraged inward investment in Test Valley. The regeneration of Andover, in particular, provides a rare opportunity to generate income, drive economic growth and support the delivery of broader community and social benefits. The current context – including the ongoing development of Project Enterprise and the opportunity provided by Andover Vision – creates an opportunity for a broader investment strategy which considers the respective importance of different benefits (e.g. cash, economic and community) alongside an understanding of relative risk.

The council has reported its financial forecast to members for 2019/20, including a best, middle and worst case scenario. The peer team was also aware of longer term financial projection work that has been undertaken by the council. Positively, the council appears well aware of future financial risks, including the forthcoming spending review, fair funding review, business rates rebase-lining and potential changes to new homes bonus. The peer team was also pleased to note the council's proactive role in working with other districts and the county to bid to become a business rate retention pilot in 2019/20.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

The council has a strong track-record of delivery. Romsey Magistrates Court, for example, is a good example of the council leading multi-agency work to achieve a public and voluntary sector hub. The improvement to leisure facilities, including a new centre for Andover, is illustrative of a robust approach to contract development. The council's work to support the creation of Andover Technology & Skills Centre is evidence of effective strategic engagement and a commitment to working with others to achieve local benefits.

The peer team found that the staff they met were positive about Test Valley and working for the organisation. There appears to be a good organisational culture and morale across the council. The peer team heard examples of effective working across services on council priorities and at key times, such as the management of elections.

The council's most recent staff survey results are good. Overall, the proportion of positive responses has risen for nine out of ten of the 'barometer' questions since 2016. 80% of staff stated that they would recommend the council as a place of work. An issue that emerged from discussions with some members of the peer team is the need to ensure that staff not based in Beech Hurst feel as engaged and part of Test Valley's 'one-council' approach as other employees. It is notable that some of the council's services based in Portway Depot had generally lower scores in the staff survey. This is an issue for the council to explore further.

The council offers excellent terms and conditions. For example, staff have received a 2.5% annual pay increase in recent years. Despite this, and the positive organisational culture,

the council has recruitment and retention challenges in a range of areas including planning and building control. These recruitment issues are common across district councils in the south east. Positively, the council has taken a range of actions including the use of career grades and 'growing its own' in key areas of shortage. The planned regeneration of Andover town centre may also make the council a more attractive offer to potential employees.

The council's approach to coaching is positively viewed by many staff with more than a hundred employees participating to date. Test Valley's coaching model seeks to encourage staff empowerment and help employees work better together within and across teams. There are other examples of good workforce activity, including the council's work on apprenticeships. However, these initiatives could be part of a broader approach to organisational development which is explicitly informed by an understanding of the council's future workforce and leadership requirements. The council has acknowledged the need to tackle these issues more holistically and is currently developing a People Strategy. This provides an opportunity for the council to set out a strategic approach to key workforce issues, including succession planning, talent management, skills development and workforce representation. Given the importance of the workforce to delivering the council's ambitions, the council could also consider how the Officer Management Team (OMT) could best engage in strategic HR issues as the new People Strategy emerges.

4.6 Economic growth and regeneration

Members and officers recognise the current once in a generation opportunities for enhancing Andover and Romsey. The council's commitment to supporting the borough's principal towns is clear and well understood within and outside of the organisation. There is also an acknowledgement that successful delivery will require a whole-council approach. This will include a clear and strategic link between the council's investment strategy and its inclusive growth agenda, with a recognition that the optimum balance of financial, economic and community benefits will differ across particular development sites and investment projects.

The peer team visited Romsey to see the potential benefits of improving the town's offer while maintaining its historic character and sense of community. There is a significant redevelopment opportunity at the south side of the town centre. The team were impressed with the council's approach which has sought to develop a consensus and support the community to take ownership of the Romsey Future project. The council's collaborative approach to developing a vision has been excellent, and now needs to be balanced with a focus on delivery. The Romsey Masterplan is currently due for adoption in 2019 and will provide a strong foundation for the delivery of improved facilities for the area. The production of a delivery plan at the earliest opportunity will ensure that the benefits of a community-led model are not undermined and that the momentum for change is not lost.

There are strong ambitions for Andover's town centre area, including the Town Mills, Riverside Park, Chantry Centre and Cultural Quarter. While Andover has seen some key developments in recent years – including the theatre, a new cinema and securing the Chapel Arts Centre – the potential scale of future change is unprecedented for the borough. The Andover Vision – published in 2017 - sets out a clear partnership aspiration

for the town. Positively, the council is giving very careful consideration to the potential retail, leisure and residential offer for the town centre.

The peer team visited key sites detailed in the Andover Vision and were pleased to note that the council's plans are not just about buildings and infrastructure. Raising aspirations and skill levels, as well as improving the local environment, are at the heart of the vision. The council is in an excellent position to lead the successful regeneration of Andover. As well as a leader of place, the council is also a major land-owner, a significant investor and the planning authority for the area. The council has demonstrated a willingness to drive change and will need to carefully consider its strategic choices, across its different roles, in order to maximise the benefits for local residents. There are likely to be complex issues relating to site acquisition and land assembly that will need to be addressed prior to going to the market with a firm proposition.

Given the scale of potential change for Andover, the council should consider different models of delivery such as a joint venture arrangement. The council does not currently have the capacity in-house to fully realise the significant growth ambitions for Andover set out in its vision. A joint venture is one route for the council to gain the necessary expertise, skills and capacity to ensure that development can be delivered effectively and at a pace that can respond to market demands.

A joint venture approach would also mean that the council will need to work differently – acting as an intelligent client rather than a primary delivery agency. The council should seek specialist advice and learn from other councils that have effectively delivered schemes of a similar scale. These discussions will help shape the client-size arrangements and resources that will work best for Test Valley.

While the council should lead Andover's regeneration, delivering development on this scale will require a strong partnership approach to ensure that work is coordinated effectively across a wide range of stakeholders and professional disciplines. The council should give consideration to the creation of an overarching member-led Andover Regeneration Board to help oversee delivery of the town centre regeneration project. Such a forum can help ensure aims and resources are aligned across partners, respective delivery responsibilities are clear and the benefits of collaborative working are maximised for Test Valley residents.

5. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take issues 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. William Brooks, Principal Adviser, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). His contact details are: william.brooks@local.gov.uk, 07949054421.

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the council during the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform your 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 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 October 2023.