Local Government Association

Corporate Peer Challenge
Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames

7th to 10th January 2019

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

It very much feels as though 'the time is now' for Kingston, with us being struck by the potential and opportunity that exists for the council, both as an organisation and as a leader of place. The council has much to call upon to drive things forward, including a committed and talented workforce, a passionate elected membership and the goodwill of partners. The prospect of harnessing all of this and uniting it behind fulfilling the potential and the opportunity means that these are very exciting times for Kingston. Central to this is establishing a clear vision both for the place and for the organisation and, through this, engendering a sense of purpose.

People want the council to succeed and a key part of this is seizing the place leadership mantle. The council taking the lead in the borough would be strongly welcomed and there is nothing out-with the organisation that is acting as a barrier. All of the council's partner relationships require it to invest greater time, effort and engagement in them but some of them are seen to require complete re-building. As the council shapes up for the future, looking at how best to achieve improved outcomes for its citizens and deliver its ambitions, getting its approach to partnership working right will be crucial.

Whilst the council has delivered against its financial challenges to date, this has not been achieved in the most robust of ways. This financial year has been extremely challenging and the council has had to work very hard to manage the situation. Lessons have been learnt and are being applied. Going forward, the council needs to provide real grip and rigour around both the delivery of agreed savings and spend against budget.

There is a cumulative and on-going deficit in relation to the council's Dedicated Schools Grant, amounting to over £10m. The situation, if not addressed, threatens the future financial viability of the council. There are differing levels of understanding across the organisation about the scale of the overall financial challenge being faced by the council. It is important to establish a single, shared understanding of what is currently an unsustainable financial position and this then needs to be responded to with the establishment of a truly comprehensive Medium Term Financial Strategy detailing how it will be addressed.

The council has sought to bring about major organisational and cultural change in recent years. Staff are welcoming of what they are seeing as the greater openness at the senior leadership levels which has resulted from this. At the same time, they are crying out for this to be built upon by greatly improved communication within the council – for the development of a mindset and culture in which communication and engagement flow freely through the organisation.

There is widespread desire both within the council and amongst partner organisations for the senior managerial and political leadership of the authority to demonstrate greater collective leadership of corporate and strategic issues. Given the cross-cutting nature of many of the challenges facing the organisation, it is important for the senior leadership to take shared ownership of them and work up solutions together. Bringing this about necessitates creating the required space and time for the consideration of what are complex issues.

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There is a deep commitment on the part of the council to local residents, community engagement and democracy. The importance being attached to effective community engagement by the new Administration is very widely understood in the council and there is plenty of willingness to bring it about. However, people are looking for leadership on the issue. Determining how to take it forward needs to be undertaken in conjunction with the work that is underway to review the council's Constitution and governance arrangements. Developing the means by which to glean the widest possible spread of stakeholders' views and weave them into the authority's thinking and planning from the outset can only aid the decision-making process and contribute to better outcomes.

There is tremendous commitment and goodwill towards the council from people within the organisation. It is also the case, however, that they are feeling the impact of the state of flux and significant change of recent years. People are looking to be part of an organisation that is more modern both culturally and in the way that it operates and are therefore understanding of the need for the changes that they have been experiencing. However, things need to stabilise and settle and the council would derive benefit for all concerned from ensuring it fully values, supports and involves its people and makes the best use of what they have to offer. The goodwill will not last forever.

There is a growing list of corporate system and process enhancements and changes that the council recognises as being needed. These are key to the effective functioning of the corporate body. However, the council cannot establish all of them in the short term. In order to bring them about effectively, the council will need to prioritise and/or sequence them and then inject pace and apply rigour at each stage. For them to be successful they need to be seen as 'enablers' rather than a means of control. In devising them, we would encourage the council to ensure it capitalises upon existing good practice and expertise in the organisation, enables widespread staff involvement and engagement right across the council and draws in learning from elsewhere.

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of this report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations on-site – many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

- Capitalise upon the opportunity that exists for the council as an organisation and a leader of place, involving establishing a clear vision and sense of purpose
- Seize the place leadership and partnership mantle – undertake stakeholder mapping, re-build relationships where necessary and invest the required time, effort and engagement across the board
- Establish a single, shared understanding about the scale of the financial challenge being faced
- Establish mechanisms that provide real grip and rigour around the delivery of savings and budget spend
- Grip the financial challenge – create a comprehensive Medium Term Financial Strategy that reflects a range of means by which to address completely the full extent of the financial challenges facing the council
- Bring about greatly improved communication across the council

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- Establish greater collective leadership of corporate and strategic issues, which requires support and the creation of the necessary space and time
- Determine what community engagement means in Kingston and the approaches to be adopted
- Continue the review of the council's Constitution and governance arrangements
- Conclude the organisational re-structure in as timely a fashion as possible
- Prioritise/sequence the corporate system and process changes that the council recognises are needed and then inject pace and rigour at each stage

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 in Kingston were:

- Andy Donald, Chief Executive, London Borough of Redbridge
- Councillor Adam Paynter, Leader, Cornwall Council
- Councillor Melvyn Caplan, Chairman of Housing and Finance Committee, Westminster City Council
- Tom Hook, Director, Policy and Participation, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
- Peter Robinson, Financial Improvement and Sustainability Adviser, Local Government Association
- Sophie Poole, Programme Manager, Local Government Association
- Chris Bowron, 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?

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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?

Alongside these questions, the council asked the peer team to:

- Consider their ambitions and plans around community engagement

- Look at the 'financial planning and viability' element in greater depth

The peer challenge process

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

- Spoke to more than 150 people, including a range of council staff, councillors and external partners and stakeholders

- Gathered information and views from more than 35 different interviews and focus groups and additional research and reading

- Collectively spent more than 225 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than six weeks in Kingston

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team on Thursday 10th January at the end of their visit. In presenting feedback to the council, they have done so as fellow local government officers and elected 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 the council is already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority-setting

Throughout the course of our work we were struck by the potential and opportunity that exists for the council, both as an organisation and as a leader of Kingston the place. With everything that the Royal borough has to offer, combined with an organisational change agenda that is looking to establish a more modern council both culturally and in the way that it operates, a new Strategic Leadership Team (SLT – the council's most senior management cohort) and a tremendous level of goodwill that exists both internally and externally towards the local authority, it very much feels as though the time is now for Kingston.

There is a deep commitment on the part of the council to local residents, community engagement and democracy. This is reflected in the mechanisms within the council's governance arrangements that have facilitated a long-standing tradition of public involvement and participation, including at council meetings. Supplementing this are the commitments and ambitions of the new Administration to put residents at the centre of the plans the council develops and place an emphasis on engaging early and effectively with residents, communities and businesses.

The council had long been a stable organisation, with a long-standing management cohort and only one change in political control (switching from Liberal Democrat to Conservative in 2014) between 2002 and last year. Whilst there are many positive benefits that derive from stability, the council was widely characterised during our conversations as having been insular, passive and lacking pace for many years. In recent years the council has been in more of a state of flux and has experienced significant change managerially, including the departure of its former Chief Executive in June 2018 after around two years in the role, the creation of a new SLT during the last year or so and the appointment just a few weeks ago of a new Chief Executive who will commence in post in early February. A Liberal Democrat Administration took control of the council at the elections eight months ago.

Time is now of the essence if the council is to capitalise upon its potential. Central to this is the need to articulate the opportunity that exists for the borough and the council. This should entail establishing a clear vision both for the place and for the organisation and, through this, engendering a sense of purpose. The council has developed the basis of a corporate plan and we would encourage it to complete this as its 'touchstone' document. It is important for the future direction to be understood and shared by elected members, council staff, partners and the people of Kingston. Completing and publishing the corporate plan in the near future would help in this respect.

The council has much to call upon to drive things forward, including a committed and talented workforce, a passionate elected membership including a large proportion of councillors who were newly-elected in May, the goodwill of partners and the financial resources that remain available to the authority and within the public sector even though these are significantly diminished compared to before. The prospect of harnessing all of

this and uniting it behind fulfilling the potential and the opportunity that exist means that these are very exciting times for Kingston.

4.2   Leadership of Place

It is widely recognised that whilst there is much good work taking place between the council and many of its partners at a project or operational level, and that partners come together regularly at the strategic level under the Kingston Strategic Partnership, the council has not traditionally acted as a dynamic leader of place. This has been compounded in recent times with the council having become increasingly focused on internal change and its financial challenge. Despite this, the council has retained significant goodwill amongst partners we spoke to, with the future success of the authority seen as vital to that both of the borough and the sub-region.

People we spoke to want the council to succeed and a key part of this is seizing the place leadership mantle. The clear message to the council is that local partners want the council to take the lead in the borough. Doing so would be strongly welcomed and there is nothing out-with the organisation that is acting as a barrier.

All of the council's partner relationships require it to invest greater time, effort and engagement in them. Within and around Kingston, the council has a mixed set of relationships at the strategic level. However, some of them are seen to require complete re-building, specifically that with the Clinical Commissioning Group – although it is important to emphasise that we didn't have the opportunity to glean the views of health partners directly.

Achieving for Children is a social enterprise company co-owned by the council, the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead which provides children's social care and education support services to the three authorities. The quality of services and outcomes being delivered is seen to be high. There is, however, a significant issue in relation to the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), which has a cumulative and on-going deficit amounting to over £10m and a forecast overspend in the budget this year of more than £2m. The council is clear that this situation needs to be brought back under control. Working with the Schools Forum it has developed a draft three-year recovery plan which has been submitted to the Department for Education. An independent Education Commission has been established which is working with all stakeholders within the Special Educational Needs system to explore respective roles and responsibilities and identify whole system solutions to ensure effective outcomes are achieved within the resources available.

The council has participated at the London level over many years. It is now beginning to play a more active role, engaging more fully, and it has recently secured major financial benefit from its efforts in the form of more than £67million funding from the Greater London Assembly under its 'Building Council Homes for Londoners' programme.

What is starting to be achieved at the London level acts as an example of the benefit to Kingston of effective partnership engagement, although we are not in any way saying that the benefits from partnership should be measured simply on the basis of financial return. As the council shapes up for the future, looking at how best to achieve improved outcomes

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for its citizens and deliver its ambitions, getting its approach to partnership working right will be crucial. As part of this, we see benefit in the council undertaking stakeholder mapping, involving determining who it needs to engage and influence, to what effect and who, on its part, is best placed to lead the necessary engagement. A fresh start is required, headed by the Leader, her political colleagues and vice-chairs of committees, the new Chief Executive and the SLT, with them combining their skills and experience to inject the necessary commitment and spirit to all its partnerships.

4.3   Financial planning and viability

The council is progressing from a position where the budget has essentially been seen as the responsibility of the Finance function to something that is more widely owned across and down the organisation. This has involved major cultural change having had to be brought about, although the task is not finished yet.

Whilst the council has delivered against its financial challenges to date, this has not been achieved in the most robust of ways. A picture exists of a council that has always managed to deliver a balanced budget but this masks significant variance in the form of overspends in some parts of the council and underspends in others. This has been compounded by the organisation struggling to achieve its savings consistently through the means that have been agreed.

This financial year has been extremely challenging and the council has had to work very hard to manage the situation. The budget that was set required a level of savings much greater than the levels the council has achieved in previous years and the nature of much of what was agreed is now felt to have been unrealistic.

Lessons have been learnt and are being applied, with what is seen to be a more involving and robust approach to 2019/20 budget-setting having been established. This includes more involvement and engagement of middle managers as part of the process of developing wider ownership of the budget, a two-stage 'Star Chamber' process and effective dialogue with senior politicians from the Administration. People feel the approach that has been taken will determine ways to address the financial gap that are realistic and achievable, although obviously remaining difficult and challenging.

In order to give the council the best chance of success in delivering against its financial challenge in 2019/20 and beyond, it needs to establish the necessary mechanisms to provide real grip and rigour around both the delivery of agreed savings and spend against budget. The authority cannot afford, either financially or reputationally, for any continuation of the variations in the form of significant overspends and underspends or the trend of not delivering in line with its agreed savings plans.

As highlighted earlier, there is a cumulative and on-going deficit in relation to the council's DSG – a situation which is not unique to Kingston. This deficit will be exacerbated over the coming years by the forecast overspend in the budget this year of more than £2m and future planned deficits.   The SEND transformation plan aims to bring the high needs budget into balance but this is not without risks and does not resolve the cumulative deficit. If the council does not address the DSG position, the future financial viability of the council will be threatened because it has comparatively low levels of reserves.

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The council has improved the situation in relation to its reserves through the course of 2018/19 and plans to enhance their level further in 2019/20 to double the level that which existed in 2017/18.

There are differing levels of understanding across the council, even at the senior leadership level, about the scale of the overall financial challenge, including the DSG, being faced by the organisation. It is important to establish a single, shared understanding of what is currently an unsustainable financial position and this then needs to be responded to with the establishment of a truly comprehensive Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) detailing how it will be addressed. The council has developed an outline MTFS, which pragmatically runs through to the end of the financial year (2022/23) in which the next local elections will be held. However, significant work is required to establish a robust MTFS – one that sets out how a sustainable financial position will be attained. The context for this is a challenging one, given the major changes proposed to local government finance and the Comprehensive Spending Review.

There is a collective responsibility on the part of the senior political and managerial leadership of the council to determine how the medium term position is addressed. Jointly corporately developed solutions, reflecting the complex and cross-cutting nature both of what the council exists to deliver and the way it operates, are required. This should, naturally, extend further in order to maximise the opportunity for partner involvement. Stretching the horizon of the council's thinking so it genuinely runs through to 2022/23 will offer both increased scope for savings and move the authority away from a position in which the budget is seen as 'an annual event'. As part of this, there is a need to ensure the way the budget is allocated accurately reflects the council's priorities.

Whilst the financial position of the council is significantly challenging, and the resources available to it have diminished significantly over recent years, there would be benefit in the authority moving away from a 'deficits narrative' to one that focuses instead on the resources still available within the borough and the opportunity and potential that exist. Between the council and partner organisations, there is still significant resource – financial, people, assets, goodwill and social capital amongst others – to call upon. Centring the narrative and attention on what can be achieved with what exists would be more uplifting and galvanising than focusing on what has been lost.

4.4 Organisational leadership and governance

The council has sought to bring about major organisational and cultural change in recent years, led by the former Chief Executive who was appointed in 2016. Amongst other things, this has established the new SLT at Director level and a much changed Corporate Leadership Group cohort comprising Assistant Directors and Corporate Heads of Service. Staff that we spoke to from other tiers in the council are welcoming of what they are seeing as greater openness at these leadership levels.

At the same time, however, staff are crying out for this to be built upon by greatly improved communication within the council. The authority has a number of internal communications mechanisms in place, such as the weekly 'RBK Matters' updates and the 'Staff Conversations' forums, but what staff highlighted was less a matter of which and how

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many communications mechanisms exist and what is delivered by the corporate communications function and much more one of the need for the development of a mindset and culture in which communication and engagement flow freely and naturally up and down and across the organisation.

There is widespread desire both within the council and amongst partner organisations for the senior managerial and political leadership of the authority to demonstrate greater collective leadership of corporate and strategic issues. At present, individuals are seen to be focusing on their immediate area of responsibility and relationships tend to be bi-lateral in nature. The best local authorities have very close and effective team-working across the collective of lead politicians and lead officers. Given the cross-cutting nature of many of the challenges facing the organisation, such as the position with the Dedicated Schools Grant, the future relationship with Achieving for Children, continuing the work to establish a robust medium term financial position and further organisational and cultural change activity, it is important for the senior leadership – both as separate managerial and political collectives and the two collectives together – to take shared ownership of them and work up solutions together. Bringing this about necessitates creating the required space and time for the consideration of what are complex issues. The people involved also require support, supplementing what is already available in the form of mentors for individual Portfolio Holders with such provision as is felt to be needed for members of the SLT as individuals, SLT as a collective, Portfolio Holders as a collective and the SLT and Portfolio Holders together.

The council is currently reviewing its Constitution and governance arrangements. Doing so offers the opportunity simultaneously to address certain aspects of both that are generating confusion and ambiguity, enhance community engagement and streamline decision-making.

The council has a set of governance arrangements that supplement a committee system with the existence of Portfolio Holders, albeit without them either having decision-making powers or operating as a Cabinet, and seek to maximise public involvement through devolved decision-making at Neighbourhood Committee level and a range of mechanisms that enable residents to input at council meetings. There is clearly confusion within the organisation about the role and remit of Portfolio Holders within this 'hybrid' arrangement and this needs to be addressed. As part of this, the council should ensure sufficient regard is paid to the requirement for council officers to serve fully the entirety of the elected membership, including other committee members (Portfolio Holders are Chairs of each of the council's main committees) and the Opposition.

Another aspect of governance that would benefit from clarification is what was neatly summarised as the council risking "confusing meetings of the council held in public with public meetings". A key aspect of this is what was highlighted to us as local people, quite rightly and legitimately, utilising the mechanisms available to them to speak at council meetings on any matter of their choosing. Whilst this is clearly democratic, there is a risk that a small number of voices, who may or may not represent the view of a wider set of stakeholders, come to have an impact on the thinking on any given issue only at the culmination of the council's decision-making process or potentially switch the focus and attention of a meeting to a matter that isn't under consideration on the agenda.

Reviewing the council's Constitution and governance arrangements in tandem with determining how to take forward its community engagement ambitions would be of value here. Later in this report we encourage the council to determine more definitively what community engagement means to it. Currently it is defined at a broad level – the council looking to put residents at the centre of the plans it develops and place an emphasis on engaging early and effectively with residents, communities and businesses. Getting the thinking about this right, and in so doing developing the means by which to glean the widest possible spread of stakeholders' views and weave them into the authority's thinking and planning from the outset, can only aid the decision-making process and contribute to better outcomes.

Streamlining the way that the council conducts its business is essentially about speeding up the decision-making process and establishing greater clarity and focus. Central to this is distinguishing between reporting to committee for decision-making purposes and doing so to keep elected members informed. Real challenge is required around the latter whilst the former necessitates clarifying where a decision is best taken. This is based upon the anecdotes shared with us around the same report sometimes being taken to several committees and what should be fairly straightforward decisions sometimes taking months and possibly even years. Another strand of the streamlining is moving to a position by which, through the development of the most comprehensive means of community engagement possible, reports arriving at committee represent the culmination of a participative process rather than the point at which the debate comes to a head.
The council has 48 elected members across 16 wards in Kingston. In May last year, 30 new councillors were elected. All of the councillors that we met are keen to fulfil their various roles to full effect and, to this end, are looking for support from the organisation. There are two main strands to this. The first is the provision of training and development whilst the second relates to officer responsiveness on councillors' casework.

With the first dimension, we have already highlighted the mentoring support that has been made available to Portfolio Holders. The council also has a generic programme of training and development for councillors, including all-member briefings on such issues as the Code of Conduct. This programme follows on from, and supplements, the induction arrangements put in place for the period immediately following the elections. As the council's Constitution and governance arrangements are revised there is clearly an opportunity to adapt the training and development provision accordingly so councillors are clear on how things should operate.

We would also encourage the council to look to develop opportunities for elected members to engage more with wider local government. As we outlined earlier, the council has been seen traditionally to be insular. The influx of new officers to the council is bringing in learning and changed approaches, which is proving beneficial. Combining this with elected members having the chance to learn from elsewhere would be very powerful. The Leader is clearly active in the local government sector and it is hoped that others might be willing and enabled to follow suit.

With regard to officer responsiveness to councillors' casework, there is clearly some frustration around this. At the heart of this would seem to be a lack of a shared understanding of what can be expected. We understand that there is an IT-based system through which councillors can raise an issue they are looking for a response on. However,

there is no indication through the system of who is picking the issue up or on what timescales a response can be expected. We also understand that some councillors simply approach directly the officer they feel is most relevant to deal with an issue. Councils have different arrangements in place for councillors raising casework issues and any system can be made to work but establishing clarity around how the system works is paramount. In Kingston, the key issue would seem to be around ensuring councillors know who is taking something forward and the timescales on which they might expect a response.

4.5   Capacity to deliver

There is tremendous commitment and goodwill towards the council from people within the organisation. The staff that we spoke to see positive aspects emerging from the organisational changes, including the greater openness at senior leadership levels highlighted earlier and the introduction of agile working with its related office refurbishments. It is also the case, however, that they are feeling the impact of the state of flux and significant change of recent years.

People are looking to be part of an organisation that is more modern both culturally and in the way that it operates and are therefore understanding of the need for the changes that they have been experiencing. However, things need to stabilise and settle and the council would derive benefit for all concerned from ensuring it fully values, supports and involves its people and makes the best use of what they have to offer. The goodwill will not last forever.

There was a marked difference across the range of focus groups that we undertook with staff at different levels, with this reflecting whether people had already been through the organisational re-structure process or it was still to be applied to them. Everybody is keen to see the process reach a conclusion soon but the greatest imperative is clarifying as quickly as possible the further stages that are to be undertaken and when they will be applied.

The agile working changes have not touched everybody yet and, understandably given the nature of the changes and their cultural impact, people are adapting to them in different ways and on varied timescales. What was also clear is that some aspects of the agile working changes could, in the eyes of those we spoke to, have been communicated and explained better, with greater engagement, including changes to the flexi-time system and the ability to print documents.

We highlighted earlier what staff are keen to see in the way of the development of a mindset and culture in which communication and engagement flow freely and naturally up and down and across the organisation. Getting this right and bringing the organisational re-structure to a conclusion soon will be important in addressing the growing cynicism and fatigue that we came across. We met a lot of very good and clearly talented people during the course of our work. We reiterate that it is important to fully value, support and involve them.

There is a growing list of corporate system and process enhancements and changes that the council recognises as being needed and has started work on. These include the following:

- Corporate performance management framework
- Project and programme management infrastructure
- Risk management framework
- Corporate commissioning and contracts function
- Transformation programme infrastructure
- Data and insight function
- Enhanced IT capability
- Organisational development (OD) strategy

These are key to the effective functioning of the corporate body. However, the council cannot establish all of them in the short term. It needs to be mindful of the limited capacity that it has. In order to bring them about effectively, the council will need to prioritise and/or sequence them and then inject pace and apply rigour at each stage. It is important for the council to establish a track record for delivering its change activities in a rigorous and effective way.

For the systems and processes to be successful they need to be seen as 'enablers' rather than a means of control. Thus, in devising them, we would encourage the council to ensure it capitalises upon existing good practice and expertise in the organisation, enables widespread staff involvement and engagement right across the council and draws in learning from elsewhere. As examples, in the absence of corporate approaches, some directorates have established their own performance management systems and approaches to commissioning and contracts. The added value will lie with exploring how a corporate approach to systems and processes can aid and facilitate the work of directorates rather than be seen as imposing centralised control. Staff we met at all levels are keen to be involved and engaged in the council's activities beyond their own immediate areas of responsibility and the authority will benefit from enabling this to happen.

We would also urge the council to be mindful of the cynicism that exists within the organisation about the use of consultants (as distinct from interim staff and the additional capacity they offer), which is seen to have been fairly prevalent in recent times. There will undoubtedly be times where their expertise is vital but there is also much that the council can do both to tap into the knowledge of its own staff and draw in learning from others in local government.

4.6 Community engagement

The importance being attached to effective community engagement by the new Administration is very widely understood in the council and there is plenty of willingness to bring it about. However, people are looking for leadership on the issue. Whilst they understand the principle, they are grappling with what it entails and what is required of them. They are asking 'what needs to be different to what the council is already doing?' and 'what does good community engagement look like?'.

Thus the council needs to determine more definitively what this agenda means to it. There is a very wide spectrum of community engagement, ranging from the council communicating its key messages to people and undertaking consultation on a project by

project basis, through to co-design and co-production. It is important for the authority to decide where it wishes to position itself on that spectrum. In doing so, we would encourage the council to ensure considerations around the drive for increased engagement are balanced against a real desire from many people we spoke to for the council to 'just get on with it' – seizing the place leadership mantle and demonstrating greater collective leadership of corporate and strategic issues.

Good examples already exist in the council around consultation on individual projects, including within adult services, and a number of new initiatives are being brought in or thought about, including the Community Engagement Committee, Community Hubs and a Citizens' Assembly. The very strong sense is that the council's ambitions rest more around those concepts of co-design and co-production and people are finding the prospect of this exciting. The challenge is around helping people translate the ambition into tangible action.

As we highlighted earlier, determining how to take forward the council's community engagement ambitions needs to be undertaken in conjunction with the reviewing of its Constitution and governance arrangements. Developing the means by which to glean the widest possible spread of stakeholders' views and weave them into the authority's thinking and planning from the outset can only aid the decision-making process and contribute to better outcomes. Essentially, reports arriving at committee should represent the culmination of a participative process rather than the point at which the debate comes to a head.

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. Kate Herbert (Principal Adviser) and Sophie Poole (Programme Manager) are the main points of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Their e-mail addresses are kate.herbert@local.gov.uk and sophie.poole@local.gov.uk

Follow-up visit

We are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the council through the course of the peer challenge.

The LGA corporate peer challenge process includes a follow-up visit. The purpose of this 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 usually involves

some, rather than 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 two 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 four to five years. It is therefore anticipated that Kingston will commission its next peer challenge by 2024.