

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

London Borough of Waltham Forest

24th – 27th June 2024

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance and governance information and then spending four days at the council to provide robust, strategic, and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principals of Sector-led Improvement (SLI) put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are: Responsible for their own performance, accountable locally not nationally and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

CPC assists councils in meeting part of their Best Value duty, with the UK Government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years.

Peers remain at the heart of the peer challenge process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

This report outlines the key findings of the peer team and the recommendations that the London Borough of Waltham Forest Council is required to action.

2. Executive Summary

The London Borough of Waltham Forest (LBWF) is one of the most diverse areas in the country, characterised by ambition, energy, creativity and opportunity. The council is committed to improving the lives of its residents and has a strong track record of delivery (particularly in place-making and regeneration) which has enhanced the council's credibility with partners locally and across London. The investment in the built environment has led to positive changes in the borough's physical appearance and reputation and within the council itself. These are providing strong foundations for future progress in the council and across the borough.

The council's strategic vision and ambitions are enshrined in 'Mission Waltham Forest' (MWF), which aims to create a more equal borough by 2030 by focusing on equality, people and communities; and with a clear commitment to 'hardwire

prevention'. The council's priorities are set out in six 'borough missions' contained within MWF that address residents' key concerns and four 'council missions' aimed at transforming the way the council works to enable it to deliver MWF.

MWF has been well-received within the council and provides a strong hook from which to drive both delivery and cultural change – *'there's a really good vibe in the council'*. The council now needs to embed this mission internally and externally to ensure that it is seen as a genuine place-based initiative requiring joint action with partners. This will help to link physical regeneration with the borough's social and economic needs to enhance social value and demonstrate the tangible impact the place-based investments are making on improving residents' quality of life.

The council has got the necessary political and managerial leadership capacity to drive the transformation and improvements needed to deliver MWF. The peer team was impressed by the quality of reports and thought leadership underpinning the work of the council. The leadership is value-driven and committed to addressing inequity and ensuring changes that are taking place in the borough benefit everyone. There are strong relationships at councillor and officer levels and with some strategic partners – with opportunities to further strengthen relationships with others.

The council is aware of the need to turn plans into action, and this is being driven through its transformation programme. It should continue integrating MWF into its governance, business planning, performance management, and organisational development - clearly defining what needs to change and why.

Given the extensive ongoing changes taking place, the council must use its resources and capacity wisely. It can do this by:

- 1) Promoting greater levels of distributed leadership across the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and the Extended Leadership Team (ELT) to drive change at pace.
- 2) Supporting and empowering middle managers to lead cultural change, encouraging greater levels of self-service, and getting them to manage resources effectively.
- 3) Ensuring that the council's working practices are aligned with its communicated values to prevent derailment of MWF.
- 4) Using the council's employee voice mechanisms to help shape the organisational

design to align the organisation and its staff behind MWF.

The council is making good progress to transform itself to deliver its missions, and there is more to do - *‘Waltham Forest needs to keep the knitting going’!*

3. 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:

3.1 Recommendation 1

Develop a clear narrative which tells the story of the council’s success and builds enthusiasm for the future, identifying how MWF will work and a focus on what success looks like for residents, business, young people and employees.

A compelling story of place will enable staff, partners and residents to visualise the future and their place within it. It will also assist in influencing the alignment of external resources and capacity to the key priorities of the council and enable everybody to better understand their place and role in delivering for Waltham Forest.

3.2 Recommendation 2

Review and reset the strategic borough leadership arrangements in order to oversee and coordinate the delivery of the six outward-facing ‘borough missions’ of the MWF. In particular, reset relationships with schools to deliver for the borough, ensuring that there is sufficient leadership capacity to work with local schools.

This will provide an opportunity for deep engagement with strategic partners, help build a ‘Team Waltham Forest’ ethos and inform thinking about refreshed partnership structures to make an impact. Working with schools is critical to ensuring that every child is given every opportunity to succeed. Close working relationships with schools enables the council to better understand the family and socio-economic factors that determine the success of a child in academia and the transition from school to work.

3.3 Recommendation 3

Ensure the delivery plan translates MWF and provides clear phasing and sequencing of activity and benefits, and takes account of the capacity, capability and

engagement of middle managers as part of a wider organisational development approach.

This will be critical in delivering the transformation programme in a planned and coordinated way to ensure that resources, capacity and capability are utilised in the most effective way and that senior leadership is able to maintain a clear line of sight on what is being achieved and where.

3.4 Recommendation 4

Work with staff (including staff networks) and Trade Unions to bring forward clear organisational development plans which are visible to staff and set out how the council will close the gender and ethnicity pay gaps and ensure that the workforce reflects the community at all levels of the organisation; and take prompt action to ensure that the office and wider estate, and ways of working are supporting front line practitioners to meet the needs of more vulnerable residents.

This will be a good way of engaging with the workforce in a completely different and authentic way to help to strengthen communication lines in the council, facilitate more cross-organisational working, address inequality, promote equity and embed the desired organisational culture. Focusing on ways of working will ensure that back-office functions are effectively aligned to the delivery of outcomes at the front-line and that impact on improving the quality of life of the more vulnerable residents can be felt.

3.5 Recommendation 5

As part of the council's transformation programme bring forward business cases for the investment in the social infrastructure - notably to promote the effective engagement of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector and business community.

This will ensure investments in infrastructure leads to effective joined-up responses to the needs of different communities and neighbourhoods. It will also provide an opportunity to develop a partnership approach with the VCSE and business community to boost capacity and work to deliver good growth and address inequity in the borough.

3.6 Recommendation 6

Ensure that SLT continue to embed, on a quarterly basis, a proactive focus on organisation-wide assurance, covering audit recommendations, risk management, and statutory officers' assurance.

This will provide challenge, assurance and confidence in the governance arrangements of the council and enable it to take proactive steps to continue strengthening its governance and mitigate against future risks.

3.7 Recommendation 7

Develop the impact framework for MWF to identify shorter-term proxy measures against which to assess longer-term impact, which is reported formally to Cabinet.

This will strengthen the link between intent and delivery and provide a clear corporate line of sight on what is desired, how resources are being deployed, what is being achieved, what impact is being made against the 'missions', and how the organisation and communities are feeling.

3.8 Recommendation 8

Review support for councillors to ensure they are equipped for the varied roles they hold in the council, e.g. ward councillors, executive, scrutiny, etc.

This will provide clarity on roles and responsibilities and help to maximise the resources, expertise, and capacity of elected councillors so that they are able to provide political governance and represent their residents effectively.

3.9 Recommendation 9

Build on the strength of the capital finance function to support development of a robust approach to revenue management using the CIPFA five-star model.

This will ensure more effective fiscal management across the board and can support and drive effective performance in financial management and financial governance throughout the council by using an internationally recognised framework and diagnostic tool, enabling the council to have an independent assessment of its financial management against best practices in the public sector to optimise systems, processes, resources, compliance, and reporting.

4. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1 The peer team

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

- **Kate Kennally** - Chief Executive at Cornwall Council
- **Councillor Kieron Williams** - Leader at Southwark Council
- **Minesh Patel** - Corporate Director Finance and Resources at Brent Council
- **Florence Kroll** - Director of Children's Services at the Royal Borough of Greenwich
- **Gereint Stoneman** - Head of Strategy at Warwickshire County Council
- **Kate Herbert** – Principal Adviser at the LGA
- **Satvinder Rana** - Senior Regional Adviser at the 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? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
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? What is the relative financial resilience of the council like?

5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

As part of the five core elements outlined above, every corporate peer challenge includes a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance, and assurance.

In addition to these themes, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on

- 1) What more can the council do to ensure a relentless focus on tackling inequality, ensuring staff feel empowered and supported in embedding this into everything it does?
- 2) What will be the key factors the council needs to improve upon for the delivery of the council's transformation programme, with the necessary pace and ambition?
- 3) How can the council build more effective and focused partnerships to achieve their shared vision?
- 4) How can the council improve its oversight and assurance on both the financial sustainability and quality of the services for its most vulnerable residents?

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 members 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. This included a position statement prepared by the council in advance of the peer team's time on site. This provided a clear steer to the peer team on the local context at the

London Borough of Waltham Forest and what the peer team should focus on. It also included a comprehensive LGA finance briefing (prepared using public reports from the council's website) and a LGA performance report outlining benchmarking data for the council across a range of metrics. The latter was produced using the LGA's local area benchmarking tool called LG Inform.

The peer team then spent four days onsite at Waltham Forest Council, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from around 55 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to over 170 people including a range of council staff together with Councillors 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 councillors.

4. Feedback

4.1 Local priorities and outcomes

The council has a clear vision and priorities, and these are set out in the MWF. This ambitious borough-wide plan extends to 2030 and aims to create a more equal borough. MWF was developed with key stakeholders' engagement, including input from around 400 staff through workshops. There is good buy-in and strong support for the vision and objectives from across the organisation – *'MWF has sharpened the alignment between corporate and political aspects.'*

The council's priorities are set out in six 'borough missions' within the MWF, focusing on the key issues important to residents; and four 'council missions' that aim to transform the way the organisation works to deliver the vision and ambitions. These are being addressed through the council's transformation programme and the development of a new Target Operating Model (TOM).

The council's vision and priorities are underpinned by qualitative and quantitative data, including regular resident surveys and borough-wide commissions. These surveys have shaped council priorities and communications, which are positively

influencing resident satisfaction (64%) and trust (72%). These findings suggest a generally positive outlook among Waltham Forest residents, with higher-than-average levels of satisfaction tempered by concerns about affordability and equality - *'there's a sense of a really special place and purpose here'*. There is now an opportunity to use these surveys to track impact of MWF, gaining more insights into the views of the diverse communities in the borough as well as segmenting data at a local level.

The adoption of the Local Plan in 2024 was a significant milestone and provides an opportunity to join up the narrative regarding the spatial plan and capital investment with the 'people' based objectives of MWF.

Whilst the connection between MWF, the transformation programme, savings programme, and corporate performance is evident, it is not explicit. There is no succinct roadmap for the realisation of each mission and/or clear overview of progress, although the peer team was aware that the performance framework for MWF is developing. However, there is clear evidence that the council is about to make a 'step change' using Power BI (the interactive data visualisation software) and the development of data warehouse from which to drive real time performance management and measure impact.

Council-wide service planning processes are now in place to link MWF to service delivery and service plans are being developed and embedded. These processes are supported by a review of internal governance and a reinvigorated ELT, with the Chief Executive working to develop a stronger more proactive assurance culture within ELT, thereby encouraging curiosity about what is going on and expecting greater rigour and discipline in assurance. This has been backed by a £1.4m business case for Human Resources (HR) and Organisational Development (OD) and a stronger emphasis on the role of ELT. Furthermore, information provided to portfolio holders through Portfolio Leadership Meetings (PLMs) is comprehensive and helps to keep them informed about performance and delivery.

Equality is a top priority for the council, and it has made significant investments in this area. Equality impact analysis is well-developed and embedded in the council's decision-making processes. Recent changes to the role of scrutiny have placed a greater focus on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) resulting in impressive levels

of councillor engagement. The council is committed to closing the gender and ethnicity pay gap, but progress requires attention to data, talent management and culture in partnership with the Trade Unions.

LBWF is seen in London as a leading council on climate change and has taken actions through its 'Enjoy Waltham Forest' programme to make it safer and easier to walk, wheel, and cycle in the borough. Going forward, the peer team would encourage the council to be sufficiently more explicit in integrating its ambitions on climate change into its place leadership and its transformation programme.

4.1.1 Performance

Whilst the council delivers a good standard of core services and performs around average in many areas compared to other London boroughs (excluding City of London), there are areas where performance and the quality of services provided need improvements. For example, the latest reported performance against the Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework (ASCOF) performance indicators shows comparatively low performance. The council is self-aware of its strengths and the opportunities for improving adult social care following the peer review of adult social care carried out by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS); and is confident that the next published ASCOF measures derived from the two statutory surveys e.g. the Survey of Adult Carers in England (2023-24) and the Adult Social Care User Survey in England (2023-24) will show significant improvement.

The OFSTED Inspection of children's social care services in January 2019 rated the council's children's services as 'Good', stating that *'leaders have made strong progress to establish a resilient, sustainable and child-focused service. This is underpinned by strong, effective political and corporate support'*.

A Joint local area SEND revisit in Waltham Forest in March 2019 concluded that 'the local area has made sufficient progress to improve each of the serious weaknesses identified at the initial inspection' of March 2017.

An OFSTED focused visit to Waltham Forest's children's services in May 2022 upheld the 'Good' rating of 2019, noting that *'effective performance regarding the arrangements for children in need or subject to a child protection plan has been maintained in many aspects. Children benefit from positive and helpful relationships*

with committed and enthusiastic social workers and their lives improve’.

The latest OFSTED inspection of children’s services in Waltham Forest took place straight after this corporate peer challenge and rated the council’s children’s services as ‘Good’, stating that *‘children in the London Borough of Waltham Forest continue to receive good-quality services delivered by knowledgeable and committed social workers. Clear strategic direction, strong partnerships and good political and corporate support have enabled leaders to strengthen the quality of social work practice since the last ILACS inspection in 2019’.*

An inspection of youth justice services in Waltham Forest in May 2024 by HM Inspectorate of Probation rated the service as ‘Requires Improvement’, noting that *‘there is inconsistent police representation at the management board, and this is having an impact upon the understanding, analysis, and oversight of out-of-court disposal practice and policy’.* Following the inspection, the council developed an action plan to address all areas that required improvement and has been working to put the necessary improvements in place.

A comprehensive performance management framework linked into the council’s new priorities is currently being developed. It will be important to establish a stronger connection that shows how these activities and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) contribute to better outcomes for individuals, the community and the area. This may involve reinforcing the alignment of outcome targets and performance measures with the council’s ambitions to demonstrate how the vision, priorities, and projects translate into meaningful results that enhance the quality of life for residents. Furthermore, it will be critical to ensure that the performance management framework provides a clear line of sight on progress to senior management and leading councillors through user-friendly dashboards, as well as providing the right level of information and in the right format to resident, partners, and staff at all levels.

While a performance management culture is evident in the council, there is an opportunity to build an even stronger ‘assurance’ culture within the internal governance arrangements of the council, particularly governance around joint ventures and partnerships (decisions/meetings/representation) as activity increases in the new capital programme.

4.2 Organisational and place leadership

There is effective political and managerial leadership in Waltham Forest Council. Experienced councillors in both executive and non-executive roles are driving ambitious goals for the borough and its communities. Strategic leadership is provided by SLT, while ELT provides senior level management support.

The relationships between the Leader and Chief Executive, as well as between Cabinet and SLT, are strong; and councillor-officer relationships across the council are positive. Staff and partners are welcoming of the leadership being provided by the Leader and the new Chief Executive, who together are driving a bold and transparent transformation programme to tackle the borough's challenges. The peer team was pleased to note that permanent chief officer roles have also been fully appointed to during 2024.

There is now an opportunity to explore how the mission-based approach in MWF aligns with cabinet portfolios, scrutiny committees, and service planning and delivery.

The council is also providing some political leadership at sub-regional and London-wide level, which should be leveraged to raise the borough's profile and further enhance Waltham Forest's Unique Selling Point (USP). The borough has a good reputation among residents, partners, and within London from which to take forward the MWF. This is supported by excellent communications with resident covering both council and wider community content.

Businesses and partners find the council good to work with and acknowledge the investment made by the council into the borough. Regeneration activity is creating opportunities for new businesses and ambitious projects such as Soho Theatre are positioning Waltham Forest as a desirable destination. It is now crucial for the council, alongside its partners, to make a clear and visible connection between the regeneration of the 'place' and meeting the needs of the 'people' thereby creating greater social value and demonstrating a tangible impact on residents' quality of life. Connecting local people to these opportunities through clear pathways to new skills, jobs and business opportunities will ensure these projects are more accessible to local people.

Effective place leadership requires strong partnerships, excellent collaborations and closer alignment of resources and capacity towards shared goals. Currently, partners

across the borough are unclear about their role in delivering MWF. There is, therefore, an opportunity to strengthen strategic place-based leadership and reshape partnership working in Waltham Forest. By fostering a more collaborative approach to delivering MWF and building a 'Team Waltham Forest' ethos, the council can promote and achieve shared ambitions and address inequalities, thus making a greater impact on the quality of life for residents.

Specifically, the contributions of the committed and enthusiastic young advisors should be maximised by maintaining good communication with them regarding MWF. Their major concerns include affordability, housing, community spaces and community events for young people, and training in vocational skills such as plastering, mechanics, carpentry and building skills. Furthermore, Waltham Forest has an active and vibrant VCSE sector and business community. With further capacity building support, these groups can fully contribute to the delivery of MWF at a place level to achieve the ambitions for an inclusive community and economy.

Relationships with schools and the Metropolitan Police need to be reset. Schools desire more visibility and effective joint working with the council, expressing frustrations at the current relationship. By collaborating with the London Borough of Newham and the respective Greater London Assembly (GLA) members across the area may be necessary to lobby and advocate for change to bring about clear, visible, consistent leadership from them across the Borough Command Unit (BCU) footprint.

The peer team believe a stronger narrative of place needs to be developed, building on strengths and reputation, and defining the role of LBWF at a sub-regional and London level. This narrative should convey what it means for current and future businesses, residents, communities and young people, highlighting LBWF's USP. As a place leader, the council should tell the story of its successes over the past decade to set the stage for the next 10 years, for example, what kind of place will LBWF be to visit, live, do business in, and invest in in the future?

4.3 Governance and culture

The council has the required governance and assurance arrangements in place, and these are being strengthened.

The new scrutiny structure, developed from the 2023 external scrutiny review is now in place. Work is taking place to strengthen scrutiny through training, a new coordination function and a focus on the quality of reports. Scrutiny chairs report that there is respect for the scrutiny function from both cabinet and officers, with value placed on the thematic reviews to shape policy. A scrutiny and audit co-ordinating group has been established to drive a stronger emphasis on forward work programming.

During 2024/25, attention should be given to embedding enhanced performance management and involving scrutiny chairs in the work of the budget scrutiny committee. The number of scrutiny committees is comparatively high, and once the recent changes are embedded, the council should evaluate whether to streamline these further.

The internal audit programme is comprehensive with good quality reports and a strong focus on assurance. The peer team heard about the work already taking place to build a robust assurance culture within the council. For example, it is working with CIPFA to develop a strategy to enhance the financial management capability within the council; has redesigned the monthly budget monitor so that the year-end forecast numbers and narrative - in particular the required management actions - are provided by the budget managers; a new bi-monthly monitoring assurance of MTFS savings proposals and transformation programme to give SLT an oversight of financial risk and facilitate proactive discussion of reputational and statutory risks relating to some specific high-profile activities; and the 2020/21 accounts have been signed off and plans are being developed with the external auditors to resolve the position for the 2021/22 and 2022/23 accounts. The external auditors have commenced work on systems overview and plans are also being developed to meet the backstop date of February 2025 for the 2023/24 accounts.

Going forward, the peer team would urge SLT to continue incorporating a proactive, quarterly focus on organisation-wide assurance, covering audit recommendations, risk management, and statutory officers' assurance. The council should also seek to reset relationships with the external auditor, beyond the S151 officer level, and consider additional methods to provide assurance on the council's financial statements, given national audit backlogs.

Cabinet and SLT have well established mechanisms for providing joint leadership (iCab, Leaders Board, PLMs) and there are plans to embed MWF into the new governance arrangements at both a strategic and operational levels during 2024/25. There are opportunities for frontline councillors to lead the delivery of ambitions in their local areas - building on the devolution of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding to wards and community chest monies - using local insight and intelligence from casework systems and data. Councillors are positive about the council and its journey of improvement. However, support for councillors, including training and handling councillor enquiries needs to be refreshed.

The strategic risk register should be reviewed in light of MWF, ensuring a clearer distinction between strategic and service/ delivery risk. The risk register should then be incorporated into scrutiny and audit reporting.

The council has a strong and vibrant organisational culture. Staff that the peer team met came across as committed and passionate about delivering quality services to residents – *'warmth of staff hits you in Waltham Forest'*. There is enthusiasm about MWF and its potential impact, which could be enhanced through a series of actions, including:

- a) Resetting relationships with Trade Unions, with a particular focus on addressing pay gaps and working in collaboration with schools.
- b) Ensuring the office estate and working practices support frontline practitioners in meeting the needs of vulnerable residents.
- c) Using front line staff, young advisors and resident panels to simplify the language and terminology associated with MWF and the mission-based approach to *'make it real'*.
- d) Inducting the new Director of Adult Social Services (DASS) and Director for Children's Services (DCS) into the MWF journey and ensuring their onboarding shapes local improvements.

4.4 Financial planning and management

The council has sound financial management processes and systems in place and overall manages its finances well. It has an integrated budget setting process and delivered a balanced budget for 2024/25 with an assumption that all services would

be delivered within budget. The Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) shows a funding gap of £13.4m for 2025/26 and £6.8m for 2026/27. To manage the immediate pressures, budget savings of £6.7m and management actions totalling £11.8m were planned during the latter half of 2023, with delivery mainly in 2024/25.

The council's transformation programme aims to strengthen organisational resilience and adaptability to meet the evolving needs of the community, addressing future financial pressures and ensuring long-term financial sustainability.

Monthly budget monitoring and reporting processes for the MTFS are in place and they now triangulate information across finance, performance and transformation. The month 10 monitoring report identifies net pressures of £16.043m due to a combination of pressures across several directorates. Capital projects forecast an underspend of £22.8m for 2023/24 due to programme slippage.

The council recognises the financial challenges, particularly in adults & children's services, and has initiated both short-term and long-term transformative actions focused on prevention through the longer-term stronger communities programme, and shorter-term actions focused on demand and cost management. The narrative around short-term/long-term actions could benefit from clarification as there is some confusion among staff and partners.

The council should also consider developing demand management strategies to evaluate the adequacy of the base budget for 'demand-led' services (e.g. housing, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities [SEND], Children's Social Care [CSC], and Adult Social Care [ASC]) as part of the MTFS, risk management and productivity approaches. An outcomes-based budgeting approach linked to the missions in the MWF would help in setting clear commissioning priorities.

There is a considered and professional approach to decision making with a clear focus on return on investment. The peer team noted the current focus on transformation to be near term savings based and that future plans relating to transformation are to be developed in due course and will be integrated into the new delivery plan. Given the importance being placed on the stronger communities approach to reducing demand for people services in the longer term, it will be crucial to ensure that business cases for prevention follow His Majesty's Treasury's (HMT) five case model and that they are supported by the new DASS and the DCS, as well

as key partners in the Integrated Care Providers (ICP) and the voluntary and community sector

The council has an impressive capital investment strategy that links to borough and council priorities. It should now consider how this approach could be used for other finance areas and revisit the use of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) five-star tool from which to continue to enhance financial competency across the authority.


The peer team recommends that the council regularly review and assess the risk appetite for large-scale development and investment decisions against global fiscal and economic conditions. This will help to mitigate financial risks associated with major capital projects during periods of market fluctuation, rising inflation, and the cost-of-living crises. Proactive financial scenario planning and due diligence now will benefit the council in the long term.

4.5 Capacity for improvement

The council is undergoing an ambitious transformation programme to become radically more inclusive, aiming to be an employer of choice and an organisation that nurtures future leaders. To help achieve these aims and to deliver the ambitions of MWF, a council and borough-wide transformation programme has been launched. Through this programme the council aims to make the organisation more resilient, dynamic and adaptable to the evolving needs of the communities it serves.

However, transformation activity feels like it is primarily at the discovery phase and within existing capabilities. As the programme progresses into more complex areas there may be a need for specialist skills, which should be planned for. There is a risk of diluting efforts if everyone is involved in everything, so there is a greater need for phasing and scheduling of activities both for service delivery and longer-term transformation. Attention should also be given to the capacity of middle managers to deliver the changes implied by MWF and the wider council transformation plans.

The peer team recommends leveraging leadership capacity strategically to strengthen its focus on place leadership while enhancing service delivery. This includes addressing the 'plumbing' in critical areas such as SEND and ASC demand, work on prevention, as well as reducing silo working within the organisation and with



partners. The messaging around MWF should be clearer and reflective of these priorities. Portfolio holders, strategic directors and corporate directors are best placed to ensure consistency across directorates, promote organisational values and uphold responsibility – where portfolio holders own the missions, strategic directors provide the outward-facing strategic direction and the corporate directors drive service delivery.

The local area partnership needs further development to create an effective, efficient and safe SEND partnership. This should focus on the system interdependencies with an emphasis on the experience of children and families and the relationship with schools.

Building on the recent ADASS adult social care peer review findings, the transformation programme should include a review of the council's strategic commissioning arrangements to map spend and return on investment so that more effective commissioning arrangements can be put in place. Previous fragmentation issues that led to costly spot purchasing and a lack of transparency highlight the need for a solid commissioning framework. The newly established commissioning board is a positive step forward.

Furthermore, the adoption of Oracle marks a significant improvement in internal processes and providing more visibility. Ongoing efforts are needed to maximise its benefits as digitisation, modern telephony and technology are now critical to improving customer experience. By focusing on these areas, the council can achieve its transformation goals and thereby making it more inclusive, resilient and capable of meeting the needs of its diverse communities.

Maintaining a strong foundation of business as usual, particularly in children's and adults' services, will be required to achieve savings, manage risks, and meet statutory requirements. It is important to value routine operations alongside change initiatives of the transformation programme so that all staff understand their contribution to achieving the overall goals of MWF – *'there's a lot to do, we need to keep a balance between the knitting and the transformation'*.

MWF resonates differently across the organisation and means different things to different people. This is a potential strength that can galvanise effort, but it also risks losing focus on the core equality themes. It is essential to explicitly show what

equality means within each of the missions – akin to a ‘stick of rock’ running through everything – *‘there’s still a gap between what’s happening on the ground and in communities and how that is fed into strategic directors.’*

A commitment to EDI across the council is apparent and is achieving influence among the workforce. Staff networks are strong and embedded throughout the organisation, each supported by a corporate sponsor. These networks are confident, collaborative and are seen as part of the council’s strategic objectives. The network representatives the peer team met appreciated the vision in MWF and cultural tones established by the Chief Executive e.g. the importance of culture, inclusivity, being more open and welcoming, and focusing on the needs of vulnerable people. Regular engagement with staff networks is crucial to provide key information for the EDI dashboard of performance metrics and to listen and understand the staff experience of change, as well as help to strengthen talent management and succession planning.

Other specific focus areas

The council asked for specific feedback on the following questions as part of the corporate peer challenge. The peer team has made suggestions on each of these themes throughout the main body of this report. In addition, it would suggest the following actions:

1. *What more can the council do to ensure a relentless focus on tackling inequality, ensuring staff feel empowered and supported in embedding this into everything it does?*
 - Ensure that senior leadership, both political and managerial, continue to model the behaviours they wish to promote across the council and the borough to demonstrate their commitment to tackling inequality. This includes continuously reinforcing the messages through regular communication, setting clear goals and targets, and being transparent about progress and challenges in achieving the goals and targets.
 - Expand the role of the corporate sponsors of the staff networks to take the lead on driving specific corporate activities and key strands of the transformation programme dealing with tackling inequality.

- Ensure that clear activities, backed up by SMART equality targets are included and embedded within all service plans. The extraction of these activities and targets should then be amalgamated to form the council's corporate equality plan.
- Develop a corporate dashboard of EDI performance metrics aligned to MWF and regularly report on progress to build trust and transparency.
- Provide training, mentoring, career counselling support, and positive action opportunities to staff in jobs and at levels where they are under-represented. This could be through short-term secondments and acting up opportunities to help with skills development and succession planning.
- Conduct regular audit of policies, practices and outcomes to identify and address areas where inequality persists. Use data and feedback to inform these audits.
- Work with the staff networks to create innovation hubs or task forces that focus on developing new and effective ways to address inequality.
- Work closely with community organisations and stakeholders to better understand and address the specific needs and challenges faced by different groups and within the community.
- Regularly celebrate and recognise diversity through events, awareness days and communication campaigns to help build an inclusive culture and raise awareness of different perspectives. Furthermore, offer flexible working arrangements (where possible) to accommodate different needs and circumstances, such as those related to disability, caregiving responsibilities and/or religious practices.

2. *What will be the key factors the council needs to improve upon for the delivery of the council's transformation programme, with the necessary pace and ambition?*

- Establish clear, measurable and deliverable projects, actions and activities with clear timelines, milestones that align with the overall objectives of the transformation programme; and ensure these are well communicated to all stakeholders, including staff, partners and the community.
- Put in place the necessary governance arrangements to oversee the

transformation, make timely decisions, allocate resources, and address issues as they arise. Ensure regular reporting of what is being delivered and the impact that is making.

- Identify champions at councillor and senior manager levels to sponsor and lead on key themes/strands of the programme, ensuring that there is corporate ownership of key themes/strands of the programme and promote collaboration across directorates and with external partners to leverage expertise and resources as well as fostering learning and sharing of ideas.
- Encourage a culture that embraces change, innovation and continuous improvement; and provide resources and training to help key stakeholders to adapt to new ways of working/receiving services, overcome resistance to change, and develop the necessary skills and capabilities to implement and sustain the transformation.
- Conduct regular reviews and audits to ensure transformation and change is future proofed, remains relevant and effective.

3. *How can the council build more effective and focused partnerships to achieve their shared vision?*

- The delivery of MWF across the borough will need a clear governance 'home' that has both council and partner membership and long-term community involvement to deliver lasting impact. This may mean critically evaluating current partnership structures to ensure they are fit for the future; and that co-design and co-production of solutions and services with partners - utilising the key strengths of others to lead where appropriate - particularly at community and neighbourhood levels becomes the normal ways of working.
- Create a governance framework that includes decision-making processes, conflict resolution mechanisms, and reporting and communication processes. Share data, information, insights and performance reports to collectively improve services.
- Ensure that all partners understand and share the aims of MWF and can highlight the contribution they can make to achieving the shared goals. Foster a culture of aligning and sharing resources and capacity to deliver the shared

goals.

- Celebrate successes.

4. *How can the council improve its oversight and assurance on both the financial sustainability and quality of the services for its most vulnerable residents?*

- Maintain comprehensive long-term financial plans that include projections for revenue, expenditures, and potential risks; and maintain regular financial monitoring and reporting processes to track budget performance, identify variances, and take corrective actions promptly.
- Engage stakeholders, including community members and service users, in the budgeting process to ensure transparency and align spending with community needs. This should include clear and transparent allocation of funds which prioritise critical services for vulnerable residents.
- Perform cost-benefit analyses for major projects and initiatives to ensure they are delivering the expected value and conduct regular value for money audits to ensure that resources are being used efficiently and effectively. Benchmark against other similar councils and services providers to identify best practices and areas for improvement.
- Establish key performance indicators to measure the quality of services to vulnerable residents and maintain holistic approaches to service delivery that consider the broader context of residents' lives. Addressing the social, economic and health-related factors through preventative work where possible.

5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. The LGA will continue to provide on-going support to the council. As part of the CPC, the council are also required to have a progress review and publish the findings from this within twelve months of the CPC. The LGA will also publish the progress review report on their website.

The progress review will provide space for a council's senior leadership to report to peers on the progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations, discuss

early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC action plan. The progress review will usually be delivered on-site over one day.

The date for the progress review at the London Borough of Waltham Forest is April 2025.

In the meantime, Kate Herbert, Principal Adviser for London, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Kate is available to discuss any further support the council requires and her contact details are: email: kate.herbert@local.gov.uk, Tel: 07867 632404.



Satvinder Rana
Senior Regional Adviser, LGA
(On behalf of the peer challenge team)