Corporate Peer Challenge

Gravesham Borough Council

1st to 4th October 2013
1. Background and scope of the peer challenge

It was a pleasure and privilege to be invited into Gravesham Borough Council (GBC) to deliver the recent Local Government Association (LGA) corporate peer challenge. The team appreciated very much the efforts that went into preparing for the visit and looking after us whilst we were on site. We also appreciated the participation of elected members, staff, partners and members of your community in the process.

It is important to stress that peer challenges are improvement-focused and tailored to meet individual council’s needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council’s own performance and improvement focus. Peers use 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 provides feedback as ‘critical friends’, not as assessors or inspectors.

Peer challenges are managed by the LGA and delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at GBC:

- Andy O’Brien: Chief Executive, East Staffordshire Borough Council (lead peer)
- Councillor Sharon Taylor O.B.E.: Leader of Stevenage Borough Council
- Councillor Nick Worth: Deputy Leader, South Holland District Council
- Elaine Jewell: Head of Community Services, Wycombe District Council
- Katherine Marriott: Executive Manager, Transformation, Rushcliffe Borough Council
- Nick Skeet: Director, Skills for Local Government, Sector Skills Council
- Bob Ross: LGA Peer Challenge Manager

The peers used their experience and knowledge to reflect on the evidence presented to them. The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 4 days onsite at Gravesham Borough Council during which they engaged with a wide variety of elected members, officers, partners and members of the community.

In terms of the scope of the peer challenge, you asked the peer team to consider five core components that are common to all corporate peer challenges

- **Understanding of local context and priority setting:** Does the council understand its local context and has it established a clear set of priorities?

- **Political and managerial leadership:** Does the council have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?

- **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?

- **Governance and decision-making:** Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?
- **Organisational capacity**: Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

To reflect your specific circumstances you also asked the team to consider two additional areas as follows:

- **Meeting the opportunities and challenges of a diverse community**: how is the council meeting the needs of its diverse community and, in particular, how are elected members acting as community leaders in their wards?

- **Organisational culture and the operation of a one council ethos**: How is the council promoting and embedding a one-council ethos, agility and the appropriate risk-taking needed to become excellent?

This report provides a written 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.
2. Executive summary

The council has faced some very difficult challenges during recent years. This includes considerable financial pressures and the issues raised by a rapidly changing community. During this period the council has been proactive in dealing with these challenges and has also undertaken significant improvements in its internal working arrangements and overall modernisation approach. These successes are based upon strong and proactive leadership, well motivated staff and good links with the established local communities.

Particular achievements in recent years have included sound financial management and the creation of a Medium Term Financial Strategy, an emerging entrepreneurial approach, good community working and the creation of an evolving 'one-council' approach. The council has also adopted an inclusive approach with its ‘Cabinet Committee’ system and various corporate working groups. These have supported a variety of policy development and individual projects.

However, the council faces still more challenges – including its own desire to become an ‘excellent’ council. In particular, further financial pressures have been identified beyond 2015, and work is required with regards to future savings initiatives to deal with further cuts to Government funding on the horizon. This is coupled with the changing needs of the community due to its increasing diversity.

The council has created a good foundation to meet these challenges and to take forward its modernisation programme. However, in order to do this it should harness the energy and enthusiasm of its staff and leadership and consider action in a variety of areas. These include a clear articulation of the council’s vision for the community and itself as an ‘excellent’ council, empowering staff still further, challenging its own procedures to create a more streamlined approach and ensuring good programme management and strict prioritisation regarding what is business and politically critical. The council has already shown its ability to benefit from adopting shared services approaches in some areas and should consider a more strategic approach to developing these further.

The council has demonstrated its ability to lead and manage itself in difficult times and is well positioned to make further progress in the future, building on its current successes.
3. Detailed findings

3.1 Understanding of local context and priority setting

It was apparent throughout the peer challenge that GBC has a good general awareness of the issues that is facing it both as a leader of the community and internally within the council itself. In particular, it is aware of the changing and increasing diversity of the community and the issues this can bring, the need for robust financial management and the need for further modernisation including the further embedding of a ‘one-council’ ethos.

In June 2011 the council adopted a Corporate Business Plan for the period 2011-15 which set out 18 Areas of Focus. It has been recognised by GBC that in the current circumstances this does not provide a sufficiently ‘sharp’ focus or prioritisation. In view of this the council has been pro-active in undertaking a mid-term review and the future focus is now intended to be around five key priorities. The reasoning for doing this mid-term review is sound and welcomed by the peer team. However, it was felt that the review was fairly ‘light-touch’ as distinct from a fundamental review. In view of the suggestions in this feedback regarding the need to be explicit regarding your vision for the community, what being an ‘excellent’ council means and the changes to your already diverse community, the council should consider whether a more fundamental review should be undertaken in the near future. Any such approach should include more detailed information about your residents (including census information) and integration with updated service planning within a clear strategic and prioritised framework.

This clear strategic framework approach is important to the next stage of the council’s progress. There is a real sense of energy from the Leader, Chief Executive and generally throughout the council and others around the need to focus the prioritisation and a stated ambition to be an ‘excellent’ council. This energy and the review outlined above should be harnessed to create a clear articulated high level strategy around what Gravesham ‘the place’ wants to be renowned for and how you wish the council to operate e.g. its ‘one council’ ethos. This is felt especially important in view of the changing diversity within the community and the financial and service pressures that the council has identified.

3.2 Political and managerial leadership

The peer team found that the profile of both the political and managerial leadership is high and well respected. Staff in particular felt that the leadership is active and providing a clear sense of direction. The council has recently recognised the importance of the officer leadership in meeting the further challenges facing the council by re-creating a full time Chief Executive role. This will also support the council’s ambition to be an ‘excellent’ council. Both political and officer leadership have genuine personal involvement in key issues, including strategic projects and finance. The relationship between the political and officer leadership appears constructive and with good mutual respect. It was also noticeable that many staff highlighted the accessibility of political and officer leadership.
The profile and involvement of the leadership is also evident to partners and community groups. There is a willingness to embrace and use partnerships to achieve community outcomes. This is evidenced through initiatives such as the Gravesham Area Board, Waste Partnership with Kent County Council etc.

The council’s leadership does face further challenges in its drive to become an ‘excellent’ council. The need for a clear high level strategy around what Gravesham ‘the place’ wants to be renowned for and how you wish the council to operate has already been mentioned in the previous section. A challenge for the council’s leadership will be to ensure that this is articulated consistently and understood at all levels within the council and throughout the community. This may be made easier by the articulation of what leaders see as key to the achievement of the strategy and what are the key components within it i.e. a clear programme focus and identification of the key projects.

Both political and officer leadership has in recent years taken a very ‘hands-on’ approach. This is understandable in view of the financial situation facing the council, the desire to create a one-council ethos and the ambition to modernise. This approach has brought significant benefits in dealing with these issues. However, considerable progress has been made and it is time for the leadership to consider whether it can support the next stage of the council’s development by devolving more responsibility downwards through the council. This would have the benefits of creating additional leadership time and capacity but would also role model the approach to modernisation and can be used to support the one-council approach desired.

3.3 Financial planning and viability

The council, in common with most other councils, has faced significant financial issues including grant cuts since 2010-11 of £2.3m (up to and including 2013-14). It is understood that, by 2014-15, the total reduction in Government funding since its austerity measures began will equal 41% excluding New Homes Bonus, or 18.4% if New Homes Bonus funding is taken into account. There has been a very strong emphasis on financial management within the council and with detailed personal involvement at senior levels to deal with these pressures.

The council has been active in putting together a range of measures to tackle these issues. These include a range of savings (especially in non-filling of staff vacancies) but also income generation including entrepreneurial activities such as the ‘Free up a Floor’ project which enabled new public sector tenants to lease the second floor of the Civic Centre. The council has also looked to make itself more efficient and has had particular success in reducing Council Tax arrears prior to 1 April 2012 by £1.8m and to reduce Business Rates arrears prior to 1 April 2012 by £531,000. In addition, significant reductions in sickness absence levels have been achieved.

These measures have proved their effectiveness at least in the short term with a provisional out-turn position for 2012-13 of £11.59m which represents an underspend of £446,220 against the original budget. Within the 2013/14 financial year the council is currently on track to achieve its financial targets based on quarter one.
However, longer term measures have also been put in place. These include improved financial coding and reporting systems but crucially a Medium Term Financial Strategy that has four core principles:

- Prior to the start of each financial year an annual balanced budget must be produced, together with a probable outturn for the current year and indicative estimates for the remaining MTFP period.
- To maintain the minimum working balances for emergency purposes of £1.25 million during the MTFP period.
- To provide an additional safeguard of £2 million, above the minimum level of working balances to assist the Council with meeting the forthcoming reductions in central government funding and the risks on the horizon around Universal Credit, Localisation of Council Tax Support, and Business Rates Retention (in practice meaning that at least £3.25 million is retained in General Fund working balances).
- That excess amounts in working balances above £3.25 million, be available to support the General Fund revenue or capital budgets on an annual basis.

These medium term measures have produced a positive audit letter and findings from an external review of financial resilience by the Council’s external auditors. The combined proactive approach of management of reserves and identification of savings ensure that the council can have a balanced General Fund revenue budget until 2016/17.

The current financial climate means that the council still has challenging financial issues to be resolved and significant savings to achieve beyond its current Medium Term Financial Strategy. The council has recognised this and has created a New Assistant Director post to assist in identifying the further savings required post 2015/16. This move is welcomed as it will support the council in identifying the required savings necessary beyond 2015/16 by way of a considered and systematic process, ensuring that changes to services are in accordance with statutory responsibilities and corporate plan objectives. It is recommended that considerable priority and speed is given to identifying firm proposals to achieve the financial targets set.

The council is also aware that this longer term financial planning should not place an undue reliance on the new homes bonus and performance of the economy. The council’s conscious desire to avoid this means that it is already considering some alternatives such as increasing shared services, leasing council owned land etc. However, the need for urgency outlined above still applies.

It was not clear to the peer team how the council links its financial planning to council priorities. It is suggested that there should be a more explicit approach to priority led budgeting. This would also help to articulate and support the vision as to what is important for the council and what it wants Gravesham to be.
3.4 Governance and decision making

Throughout the peer challenge it was reported consistently that there are very good member/officer relations at all levels. Again the staff statements around the accessibility of leaders are worth noting and service and middle managers regularly attend Cabinet member briefings.

The council has adopted the Kent-wide code of conduct for member/officer relations as part of its constitution and there is a very low number of reported complaints about members by officers. Whilst Member development opportunities have been taken by the council, there is a recognised need for an on-going programme of Member development to ensure robust governance, understanding and challenge where appropriate.

The Council has an uncommon structure in that it makes wide use of a system of what is termed ‘Cabinet Committees’ (although they do not have the legal status of a committee). These are used to promote inclusivity with the council and provide a platform for a wider range of members to contribute to debate, policy formation etc. This inclusive approach extends to the co-option of external persons onto the ‘Cabinet Committee’ e.g. members of the public, a faith member and, since September 2013, includes two members of the Youth Council on each committee.

These forums are valued by backbench members and Cabinet members alike. It was reported that members felt they can question performance and raise questions. Cabinet members, however, are not bound by the discussion and the Cabinet member makes decisions via a Decision Note. This system does provide opportunity for debate and feedback from the Administration’s and Opposition’s backbench members was about their welcoming the opportunity to be involved in discussions. However, there is a potential danger of overlap and confusion between the role of these ‘Cabinet Committees’ and the scrutiny function as well as a possible blurring, in the eyes of the public, as to whom is accountable for the eventual decisions taken. The council should ensure that it is satisfied that there is no confusion or duplication of effort in this respect.

The scrutiny function itself appears non party political, focused on improvement and on current issues. Scrutiny has an opposition Chair and is used for policy and issue reviews as well as the traditional call in function. Call ins are relatively uncommon and are not used to be obstructive. There are two instances of recent call ins relating to the PV installation project on the council’s housing stock and the leasing of Floor 2 of the civic offices. Scrutiny has completed a review on community engagement and the next two reviews on domestic abuse and health (access to GP surgeries) have had their terms of reference defined and agreed along with their membership.

Mention is made in the financial planning section of this feedback as to the personal involvement of senior staff in the financial control of the council’s finances. The reasons for this are well understood during the recent period when there was a need to ensure a firm financial base and controls. However, mention is also made of the need to drive forward the modernisation process and for the council to consider the wider devolution of powers as part of this. As part of this approach it is suggested that this should include consideration as to whether it is still necessary for Directors and Assistant Directors to approve all purchase orders as a relaxation of this procedure may free up senior time and increase financial awareness of middle and lower staff.
The peer team noted that the written constitution has areas where it is intended that reviews be undertaken. It is recommended that this be completed as soon as possible and that the council ensures regular and timely updates of the constitution are undertaken.

3.5 Organisational capacity

The team was impressed with the consistent enthusiasm and pride in the council shown by all staff who were interviewed. The turnover of staff is low and the workforce is generally long serving. Obviously this has benefits as regards experience and stability but due to the recruitment freeze any ‘new blood’ is likely to be restricted. The council does need to ensure it is proactive in sharing internal skills and experience (and it is helped in this by the corporate working groups). Emphasis must also be given to ensuring that staff have access to external learning opportunities through activities such as liaison with other authorities, partners etc. The use of apprentices is welcomed and it is recommended that these be used as imaginatively as possible and in non-traditional roles both for the benefit of the apprentices themselves and for the way in which apprentices can be useful for questioning why things are done and providing challenge to the organisation.

There is good evidence that staff feel valued throughout the organisation. This has been recognised in the achievement of the IiP Gold Award by GBC. Initiatives such as the ‘Managers for Tomorrow’ programme (which has been run twice) were also mentioned frequently and there are examples of participants ‘moving up’ the organisation e.g. the new Assistant Director role to examine future savings.

A co-ordinated and strategic approach to shared services was not evident to the peer team, although it is understood that various discussions are underway. This is perhaps unfortunate as where the council has created shared services it appears to have done so well. The team heard of several examples of shared services especially in back office environments e.g. internal audit as the council has demonstrated the ability to harness the reward and savings arising from shared services it should consider how to develop a more strategic approach to shared services and other models of service delivery and it may be helpful to consider whether the council wants to pursue a strategic approach with one or more partners and identify a lead person to put together options. It is understood that various discussions are already underway and these, obviously, should be incorporated into any strategic approach.

The council makes wide use of corporate working groups and these have significant advantages. These advantages include harnessing resources and skills to take forward a variety of projects, increasing overall staff resilience and creating good cross working and inclusiveness which is helping to engender a ‘one council’ ethos. Staff spoke very favourably of these groups and articulated how they have helped the staff with their corporate awareness and reduced silo working. There are, however, some potential drawbacks and the peer team were surprised at the large number of groups being used. This is coupled with a lack of clarity regarding how overall programme management (as distinct from project management) operates. The council may wish to consider a more formalised approach to programme management (possibly through a Programme Office approach) and should be explicit as to what are the “big ticket” projects that are business critical or political priorities.
Managers spoke enthusiastically about the way the council has tackled sickness absence over the last few years and the benefits to productivity and morale. Managers felt they had been supported by HR with training on “difficult conversations” and were supported by colleagues and HR officers in undertaking these conversations. This was believed to be the biggest contributor to the reduction in sickness absence. The council has achieved a fall from 8.9 days in 2009-10 to 4.8 days which compares very well with the national average.

The council has also demonstrated its ability to ‘do things differently’ and look at new ways of working and service models. Good examples of this include the Gr@nd which is an example of a Community Interest Company set up to win commissioned work, rather than being reliant on grants. Learning from this project, particularly as regards the entrepreneurial approach adopted, will be useful in the challenges ahead, including protecting some of the community development work and cultural services/events. Also the team was impressed by the clear direction and goal set in tasking the DLO with being able to insource more work.

Another impressive achievement (and which has significantly improved customer access) is the creation of the Gateway customer approach. Not only is this organisationally efficient for the council but the incorporation of partners into the approach is beneficial for the customers. There are also staff benefits in the opportunities for learning more about other council services, partners and supporting the one-council ethos.

The willingness to ‘do things differently’ can be extended and incorporated into the council’s overall modernisation process. There are two particular aspects in this respect:

- The first is that there is scope for a range of workforce modernisation initiatives as there was not clear evidence that the council has embraced concepts such as agile location working, creating generic skill pools and flexibility, non-traditional working hours etc. This would be assisted by the production of an integrated ICT development strategy enabling modernisation of the council’s workforce and working practices through embracement of modern technologies and opportunities.

- Secondly, there also appears to be something of a meetings and reporting culture (including, we were told, minuting of one-ones). This is generating a large amount of paper for the management team, members etc. including reports, minutes from corporate working groups etc. Some of the reports sent to the peer review team did appear unduly long. Anecdotally, the peer team were also told that it can take eight weeks for a report to members to get through the system. The council should consider ways to reduce the amount of paper produced, length of reports and number of meetings within its overall modernisation process.

The peer team also felt that the council may wish to examine whether its service plan approach could be simplified and made ‘sharper’. We were advised that each service manager/Assistant Director has their own service plan and some even have three or four. This suggests the possibility that they may be over detailed and there may be scope for some streamlining, including the creation departmental service plans. SMART targets in service plans were not always apparent and it was not always clear when specific tasks had been completed or missed.
3.6 Meeting the opportunities and challenges of a diverse community

The council has a clear commitment and is devoting much of its resources to creating true community cohesion amongst its diverse community. This is a strategic objective and there is a sincere desire towards ‘Embracing and celebrating the diverse cultures within the borough’. The council is clearly ‘working to integrate communities within the borough, whilst celebrating their difference’ and sees this as key to the delivery of council services.

This commitment already has an embedded approach with established communities such as the long standing and well regarded relationship with the Sikh community and involvement in the activities of the Gurdwaras. Feedback from ethnic community representatives was positive, including good and regular liaison between the Sikh community and the Leader of the Council plus direct ward member involvement which extends into other direct community involvement such as members acting as mentors for ex-offenders and through the Community Gateway ‘roadshow’ which is in turn informing them of local issues that are then being put on the forward plan of the scrutiny committee.

Whilst the approach with established communities has become a ‘way of life’ it was difficult to discern an overall strategy for new sections of the community and the council should consider how to explicitly develop this. This aspect is particularly important in view of the rate of influx of such new communities and the need for different approaches to those used with established communities. The fact that there are few natural community leaders from people in the new communities has been recognised by the Community Cohesion Working Group. Their action plan is picking up some new approaches, for example speaking to St John’s Catholic Church, but needs to build on the work in the Children’s Centres and encourage the start up of ‘conversational’ English classes as opposed to ESOL classes that may provide a barrier to learning.

There is a danger that the whole of the new community can be perceived by some within the borough as a ‘problem to be solved’ (particularly as regards community safety) whereas it is understood that there is only a handful of ‘difficult families’. This can obscure the wider integration issues. While community safety is important, and is being tackled by the Community Safety Partnership, the integration issues are equally important. Actions from the Community Cohesion Working Group should help with this.

Allied to this is that whilst updating the community profile, the council should ensure that this is adequately reflected in the consultation groups.

The updating of the community profile is particularly important in terms of the new communities. Until this is updated (we understand it is a work in progress in the Community Cohesion Working Group Action Plan) the council will not know the true picture as to where the new communities are living, what work they are doing etc. The residents panel is currently not meeting the target set of 1% of the population and does not reflect the new communities, which will be important if they are to engage with the council.

There are very many events and individual projects undertaken to boost community cohesion and these appear well regarded by the community. These projects include Fusion Festival, Festival of Lights, St. George’s Day Parade, “My Place” (pride in place) etc. However, the desired outcomes / assessment of impact of projects are not always
clear. Whilst the numbers of people attending events is monitored and will indicate levels of interest, there is little evidence of how this is making a difference or what are the impacts of the activities. There is a cost to these activities and they need, therefore, to show they are good value for money. The Community Cohesion work plan is relatively new, so there is an opportunity to include measures that show the impact of the activities.

There are also good initiatives such as ‘Street Champions’ which have a contribution to street cleaning and homelessness and 20 street champions have been recruited. They provide intelligence, encourage litter picking schemes and inform the council of fly tipping and issues such as homeless people. They are a good two way link with the community.

There is good evidence of GBC giving priority to community cohesion activities and allocating resources to this. This includes establishing a reserve and funding for Gravesend CAN Grants of £500,000 available for community funds made up of member budgets (£1,500 each), and £120,000 to fund larger grants and a smaller grant pot of £14,000 (providing for £200,000 of overall grants in 2013/14, 2014/15, and £100,000 in 2015/16). Again this is a good example of GBC’s commitment but the impact will require monitoring.

3.7 Organisational culture and the operation of a ‘one council’ ethos

As well as being impressed by the enthusiasm and obviously well motivated members of staff that were seen during the peer challenge, it was also noted that there was consistent feedback from across the organisation that people feel, supported, included and valued by colleagues and managers. In particular managers were reported as being accessible, approachable and with staff commenting favourably on the ‘open door’ policy operated by many of their managers. Although a scientific examination was not possible, the relationships between colleagues within and across teams also appear to be positive and productive. People consistently expressed a pride in their work and in being part of the council.

Comments in relation to both the impact of increasing the use of Apprenticeships within the organisation and the legacy of the Managers for Tomorrow programme were favourable with Apprentices clearly bringing new skills (such as IT), enthusiasm and a vibrant approach. In an organisation which has an ageing workforce profile the introduction of young people through the Apprenticeships is also having a beneficial effect on the future potential for succession planning and securing a rich pipeline of talent.

There is clear evidence of knowledgeable individuals within the organisation being supported to deliver formal and informal training to their peers e.g. within Revenue and Benefits. This is an effective, low cost approach to developing skills and practice that also helps develop the confidence and transferable skills for those delivering the training.

There is a clear vision and desire by senior leaders for the council to have a ‘one-council’ ethos and approach to working. This stems not only from a desire to improve internal efficiency but also to increase the accessibility of services to the community. Many examples at all levels of the organisation were given of there being a ‘sense of team’, ranging from joint working to support the Olympics to the obvious valuing of the corporate working groups and, in particular, joint working around the community cohesion agenda. As stated above, this is underpinned by a pride by staff in being part of the council.
The commitment from senior management and energy throughout the council to develop a more cohesive organisation delivering integrated services is clear, consistent and visible. Staff have developed their links with and knowledge of related services, such as across tenancy advice and council tax, and use this to provide a more joined up service to residents and save the organisation time and duplicated effort. All staff praised and are rightly proud of the Gateway approach.

Such is the benefit of the one-council approach and the progress made, that the peer team recommend that the council consider whether it is maximising the potential of the approach. In this respect it should consider a more formalised organisational development (OD) approach that encompasses the one council ethos and other change management initiatives. The one council ethos is being established along with the integration of services and improved joint working across the council but is lacking a formal or visible strategic plan, communication strategy, branding, or ‘key messages’ approach. Whilst there are benefits to an informal approach and a danger in ‘initiative overload’, perhaps a more formalised and explicitly high profile approach would prove useful and help harness the staff enthusiasm noted. Putting a more comprehensive strategic plan and approach in place would ensure that all staff are clear on what the ethos is being used for, their role and what the end results will look like in terms of an ‘excellent’ council.

A number of strategically important pieces of work could be captured, articulated and coordinated via this approach including:

- being clear on what is required of the business to achieve ‘excellence’
- analysis of the current capacity and skills base,
- design of the career and learning pathways required
- how the council will achieve its next level of modernisation

The meetings culture has already been mentioned in the section on organisational capacity. Meetings, whilst appearing largely popular with those spoken to, do appear to predominate as a way of conducting business and making decisions. Every form of meeting appears to involve agendas and formal minutes with many of these being sent up and down the chains of line management. As the pace of change quickens and demands more of the organisation at a time when resources will come under greater pressure, we encourage the council to consider where meetings and their attendant bureaucracy truly add value, how meetings are conducted and whether there are other more efficient and effective forms of doing business. This also links to the broader modernisation process.

Allied to the above point the peer team recommends that you consider the number, wider purpose and longevity of the corporate working groups. The working groups are focused on a combination of different projects, issues, business areas, events and opportunities. It is unclear as to whether some, or all of these groups have a defined end point, have outcomes that are strategically linked and how they contribute to the wider organisational development, cultural change process and modernisation of services. Whilst the groups have clearly succeeded in beginning to integrate ideas, services and build productive relationships they should be reviewed for their longer term purpose and effectiveness.
Bringing them under a more robustly defined programme management approach would see them contributing more clearly to the strategic goals.

**Key Issues**

As already recognised in this report GBC has had significant achievements in difficult times. You asked the peer team to suggest ways in which the council can make its next moves towards ‘excellence’. The peer team suggests that you focus now upon the following key organisational development areas:

- Establishing and articulating your strategic vision for the borough and what being an ‘Excellent’ council means to you, your staff and your residents
- Enriching this with all of your corporate intelligence to move forward
- Empowering your staff still further so as to increase capacity to deliver the strategic vision
- Streamlining meetings, reporting and paper as part of your transformation
- Ensuring strict prioritisation and making clear what is business and politically critical to you
- Maintaining a drive to modernise as well as ‘balancing the books’

You have made good progress over the last two years and can build upon the foundation you have established to achieve your ambition.

**Next Steps**

Through the peer challenge process we have sought to highlight the many positive aspects of the council but we have also outlined some challenging messages. It has been our aim to provide some detail on them through this feedback in order to help the council consider them and understand them. The council’s senior managerial and political leadership will, therefore, undoubtedly want to reflect further on the findings before determining how they wish to take things forward.

Members of the team would be happy to contribute to any further improvement activity in the future and/or to return to the authority in due course to undertake a short progress review. Heather Wills, as the LGA’s Principal Adviser for your region, will continue to act as your main contact, particularly in relation to improvement. Hopefully this provides you with a convenient route of access to the LGA, its resources and packages of support going forward.

Once again, our grateful thanks for all your co-operation and hospitality during the peer challenge. All of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish the council and the borough every success in the future.