

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Gravesham Borough Council

21st to 23rd May 2025

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge

Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Executive summary.....	3
3. Recommendations	7
4. Summary of peer challenge approach	8
5. Feedback	11
6. Next steps	31

1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involved a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance and governance information and then spending three days at Gravesham Borough 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 principles 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 government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years.

Peers are 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 council are required to action.

2. Executive summary

Gravesham is a council driven by making a difference for local people and there is much for it to be proud of in relation both to what it is achieving and the type of organisation that it has become. The drive of the council and partners to improve impacts and outcomes for local people is underpinned by a focus on the wider determinants of health and maximising social value. The council has an impressive level of ambition and a positive ethos and the organisational culture that has been engendered is integral to what is being achieved.

The council has developed a drive and commitment to making things happen in recent years, recognising the importance of looking beyond the borough and having become adept at using its influence to secure support and funding for the benefit of local people. It is committed to providing sound stewardship for the borough. The organisation is keen to be evidence and insight-led and has established a sophisticated understanding of the place and people it serves and the related challenges and opportunities. There is good community engagement and there has been a focus from the council and partners on building and maintaining community cohesion in the borough. The council has gripped some very significant issues in recent times and responded to them.

The progress the council has made in recent years and what has been achieved is reflective of the strength of leadership of the organisation. There are positive and constructive relationships between elected members and officers generally across the organisation and the 'can do' and driven political leadership style creates an energy and sense of ambition. However, the desire to deliver can sometimes overlook the capacity of the organisation and be received as over-bearing and unrealistic. The style of the political leadership needs, at all times, to be conducive to retaining the positive organisational culture and the drive and commitment of officers. Care is also needed to ensure that the respective roles and responsibilities of elected members and officers remain clear and adhered to appropriately.

Amidst its extensive ambitions, the priorities of the council are at risk of 'becoming lost'. Officers reflected that it is difficult for them to see what matters most and where to apply their focus in a context of limited and decreasing resources. Faced with local government reorganisation, there is no hint within the organisation of a desire to slow down or become less ambitious. Indeed, there is a shared desire and determination across the political leadership and the council as a whole to leave a great legacy. However, dialogue is required across the political and managerial leadership to determine what that legacy involves and sharpen the focus on priorities. Without this, there is a risk of continuing tensions between ambition and capacity to deliver.

The council is committed to working in partnership, both at the strategic and local level. Gravesham is highly regarded by partners, being perceived as proactive and

ambitious. Partners reflected the leadership of the organisation as ‘straightforward’, leaving them clear on where the council stands and them having confidence that the council will deliver on the commitments that it makes.

The council has developed a governance structure that emphasises the importance of involving and engaging the wider elected membership. There is, though, acknowledgement that the ‘servicing’ of the ‘meetings heavy’ organisation that exists as a result is absorbing capacity across the council.

There is a widely held view in the council that the Overview and Scrutiny function is not working to particularly good effect. In probing this, we came to see a blurring in the respective remits and functioning of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Cabinet Committees. The latter don’t exist in most councils and our impression is that they are fulfilling important elements of what would usually constitute the remit of Overview and Scrutiny. We recommend that the council reviews the Cabinet Committee and Overview and Scrutiny elements of its governance arrangements in order to benefit accountability, impact and organisational capacity.

Some adaptation of approaches to elected member training and development has been seen in the council in recent months. Generally, however, the offer to councillors in Gravesham is seen to be ‘traditional’ both in terms of what it covers and the means of delivery and take up is ‘patchy’. Diversifying the range of activity and the means by which it is delivered would be beneficial. Central to this should be providing opportunities to councillors to engage more in learning beyond Gravesham.

It is nowadays unusual for councils to have elected member involvement in staff employment appeals. We recommend that Gravesham moves to follow such practice.

The council is mindful of the risk to the financial sustainability of the organisation centred on the depletion of working balances. It recognises that the key to mitigating the risk is ensuring the ‘Balancing the Budget’ programme becomes more robust, with increased deliverability and accountability and it being accelerated. The requirement for this is becoming pressing.

In November 2024 the council underwent the re-accreditation process for ‘Investors


In People' and is very proud of the level it secured. Aspects highlighted within the assessment, which we have heard echoed, include the managerial leadership being open, approachable and personable; recognition being given to people for their contribution and achievements; positive relationships within teams and with line managers; and people feeling trusted and empowered. Staff that we met at a range of levels in the organisation spoke passionately about feeling part of the 'Gravesham family'. This is reflective of the mutually supportive nature of people in the organisation and staff feeling part of something, with them highlighting to us their pride in their work and what the organisation delivers. There is a strong culture in the council of developing people, with many examples of officers progressing through the organisation.

We gained a privileged and helpful insight to the council's housing journey and context and the strong commitment to safety, quality and the delivery of services to, and engagement with, tenants. Being a landlord is both a privilege and a responsibility and it is clear that the two aspects are taken seriously in Gravesham. Housing is an area of increased prominence and significance nationally and the council has placed a renewed focus and emphasis on it as a core responsibility. The housing service in Gravesham has progressed a long way for the better in recent years. It has an ethos of genuine and authentic collaboration and problem solving for the benefit of tenants. The council cares about people it is the landlord to.

Recent managerial appointments in housing have brought fresh perspectives and ideas to Gravesham which have gently and constructively challenged former ways of working and are improving the service. The senior leadership and managers are present, visible and approachable both in the organisation and in the community.

Housing partnerships are strong, with the council being respected for its good practice and improvement. Partners see the council as a good, willing and motivated partner with ambition that is matched by delivery. They view the housing service as being innovative and demonstrating a willingness to explore new opportunities.

We gleaned mixed views on the council's current position in relation to compliance with the Housing Consumer Standards. Work is being undertaken within service areas to analyse gaps in the meeting of them but the council needs to form a



strategic over-arching view of what this means. For the areas identified as being in need of further development, the council would benefit from a clear plan and narrative on the drive for continuous improvement.

The council may find it helpful to assess its routine governance and oversight arrangements in relation to its landlord function. There is a need to establish the mechanisms through which the council generally and the Portfolio Holder specifically can be provided with the necessary oversight and assurance in this area.

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

Maintain a healthy balance between the benefits of the driven, ambitious political leadership and the capacity of officers to deliver

3.2 Recommendation 2

Sharpen the focus on priorities to ensure that the council's ambitions to make a leading contribution to local government reorganisation; leave the legacy of an excellent council; and bring forward priority initiatives are achievable. Without this, there is a risk of continuing tensions between ambition and capacity to deliver.

3.3 Recommendation 3

Review the Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet Committee elements of the council's governance arrangements in order to benefit accountability, impact and organisational capacity

3.4 Recommendation 4

Follow common practice in local government and move away from elected member involvement in staff appeals (Appeals Sub-Committee in Gravesham) because of the

risks that such involvement represents to them and the organisation

3.5 Recommendation 5

Ensure the 'Balancing the Budget' programme becomes more robust, with increased deliverability and accountability and it being accelerated

3.6 Recommendation 6

Establish the mechanisms through which the council and the Portfolio Holder for Housing can be provided with the necessary oversight and assurance specific to the council's landlord function

4. Summary of peer challenge approach

4.1 The peer team

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

- John Robinson, Chief Executive, Newark and Sherwood District Council
- Councillor Amanda Serjeant, Deputy Leader, Chesterfield Borough Council (Labour)
- Councillor Isobel Darby, Buckinghamshire Council and former Leader of Chiltern District Council (Conservative)
- Michelle Howard, Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Housing and Communities, Melton Borough Council
- Rory Doyle, Strategic Director, Colchester City Council
- Sophia Chivandire, Pensions Policy Support Officer, LGA (shadowing)
- Chris Bowron, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

4.2 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.

Specifically with Gravesham, the council asked that the peer team additionally explore how the organisation is gearing up to meet the housing Consumer Standards and preparing for future inspection by the Regulator for Social Housing.

4.3 The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. 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 for Gravesham Borough Council and what the peer team should focus on. It also included an LGA finance briefing (prepared using public reports from the council's website) and an 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 three days onsite at the council, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 25 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
- Spoke to more than 120 people including a range of council staff together with elected members and external stakeholders

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

5. Feedback

5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

Gravesham is a council driven by making a difference for local people and there is much for it to be proud of in relation both to what it is achieving and the type of organisation that it has become. The drive of the council and partners to improve impacts and outcomes for local people is underpinned by a focus on the wider determinants of health, maximising social value and ensuring that Gravesham reaps the economic benefits from its strategic location close to London. The council has an impressive level of ambition and a positive ethos that are reflected in the 'Together – Proud to be Gravesham' Corporate Plan for the borough and the organisational culture that has been engendered is integral to what is being achieved.

With 107,000 residents, Gravesham is the smallest council area in Kent by size of population. The borough in recent decades has experienced low productivity; a high proportion of low pay jobs; low qualification levels and low skills; and relatively high unemployment levels. Health inequalities are seen in a north-south divide around child health; adult health; life expectancy; and personal wellbeing. Deprivation is concentrated in the northern part of the borough, particularly in Gravesend and Northfleet but with some pockets across southern and more rural communities.

There are currently 210 households in temporary accommodation and 1,027 households on the housing register. The borough has challenges around housing affordability and housing over-occupancy and there has traditionally been slow delivery of housing growth. This is at least partly due to a reliance on a few key sites to deliver large numbers of homes on brownfield land in Gravesend and Northfleet, combined with increased development costs due to wider economic factors. Recently delivered housing is the borough's least affordable, with prices much higher than regional and national averages.

Both the borough and the organisation are seen as welcoming and embracing of diversity and it is one of Kent's most diverse local authority areas. Nearly 32 per cent of the population is from a non-White British ethnic group, compared to an average in

Kent of 16.8 per cent and 25.6 per cent nationally. Gravesham is home to one of Europe's largest Sikh Gurdwara. There are a range of Eastern European cultures and sizeable Muslim and Afro-Caribbean communities. The borough has a comparatively young population, with a mean average age of 39.5 years relative to 41.6 years for Kent and 40.6 years nationally. The largest age cohort in the borough is 30 to 34 years.

The council has developed a drive and commitment to making things happen in recent years, recognising the importance of looking beyond the borough and having become adept at using its influence to secure support and funding for the benefit of local people. This includes securing £20m of Levelling Up Funding, £1.6m in Brownfield Land Release Funding and a proportion of UK Shared Prosperity Fund monies. The council has generated positive interest in the borough across a number of government departments and formed constructive relationships with key strategic partners such as Homes England and the Thames Estuary Growth Board.

The ambition, vision of place and the related 'offer' is encapsulated in 'Gravesham 2040' which acts as a prospectus for stakeholders. It outlines a Thameside borough comprising a mixture of historic towns and countryside and diverse communities with strong identities, supplemented with excellent connectivity which includes access by train to central London in just over twenty minutes.

A significant number of possible projects along Gravesham Riverside have the potential to deliver thousands of homes and jobs and a major uplift in Gross Value Added (GVA), with the emerging Local Plan to 2042 seeking to act as an enabler in achieving this. This is supplemented by the potential that the Lower Thames Crossing offers the borough, not least in terms of employment on the back of the related skills pipeline currently being developed in the borough with partners.

The Charter, a project to create 242 new homes and being delivered through a company (Rosherville Property Development Limited) set up specifically by the council for this purpose, is now coming to fruition with planned occupancy from early 2026. The innovative Gravesham Community Investment Partnership, formed between the council and Hill Group, is also establishing a pipeline of hundreds of mixed tenure homes.

The council has gripped some very significant issues in recent times and responded to them. The pandemic is an obvious example here. Another example is the response to greatly increased demand for temporary accommodation, with the creation of a short to medium term strategy to control cost through an increased use of social housing and work with registered housing providers. The council is also demonstrating innovation in tackling homelessness and rough sleeping in the borough. This has seen the purchase of a property providing 10 rooms and four overnight 'crash-pads', along with a 24/7 support service focused on complex needs. Thus far, this facility has accommodated 50 people. An employment pathway programme has emerged from the project, acting as a 'stepping stone' for individuals and involving capitalising upon the council having a wide range of employment opportunities.

The council is committed to providing sound stewardship for the borough. This includes the development of the 'Design for Gravesham' Design Code which sets the standards and expectations for anybody looking to undertake development work in the locality. There is a commitment to achieve 'net zero' by 2030 and the council is mindful of its own climate change impact, with conversion to hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO) fuel reducing the contribution of the council's vehicle fleet to the organisation's emissions from 22.4% to 2.3%.

There is good community engagement and there has been a focus from the council and partners on building and maintaining community cohesion in the borough. The community infrastructure and cultural offer is extensive, including The Woodville Theatre; St George's Arts Centre; a programme of free events; and community-led pop-ups in town centres. The 'Summer Fun' six-week holiday programme run by the council and partners attracts over 8,000 participants each year. Active citizen involvement is also enabled and encouraged, with 710 'Street Champions' and the fiftieth anniversary year of the council dedicated to being 'the year of the volunteer'.

The 'Big Conversation' community engagement platform sees the council obtaining the views, input and ideas of local communities on a range of issues and through a variety of means. The council is proud of its 'Your Borough' magazine, which is in hard copy format and distributed to all households two times per annum. The

communications function values 'being at the table' when it comes to discussion across the senior political and managerial leadership. This enables the function to help shape and inform approaches and supports a proactive approach to communications by the council.

The council is keen to be evidence and insight-led and, through doing so, has established a sophisticated understanding of the place and people it serves and the related challenges and opportunities. One example is the analysis it has undertaken of the impact of the cessation of the Gravesend to Tilbury ferry, following the withdrawal of funding by other local authorities, and the potential benefits of it being reinstated. This analysis is informing discussion with government. Another example is the creation of the Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT) for the borough which serves to identify households in debt crisis or at risk of it and then links them to tailored services to meet their needs. This reflects what the council describes as a "laser-like focus" and has reduced the number of households below the poverty line from 3,214 in April 2021 to 2,202 now.

The council has secured a number of awards or been commended or shortlisted for them recently. Last year it became only the second council to be shortlisted for both the Local Government Chronicle (LGC) Awards for 'Council of the Year' and the Municipal Journal (MJ) Awards for 'Local Authority of the Year' in the same year. In 2024 it won the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) Awards 2024 in the Best Housing, Regeneration or New Build initiative category for its work on energy efficiency improvements to its housing stock. It was commended at the MJ Awards for the LIFT project and at the iESE Public Sector Transformation Awards 2024, under the innovation category, for the work around rough sleeping service and the related employment pathway initiative. The results will be announced shortly for the 2025 LGC Awards, where Gravesham is shortlisted for work supporting health and well-being in the Sikh community and an electrical recycling project, and the Municipal Journal Awards, where the council has been shortlisted for the Chief Executive of the Year.

5.1.1 Performance

The council's key performance indicators are generally positive. There is a strong commitment and ethos in the organisation to comparing itself with others and drawing in learning and perspectives from elsewhere.

Looking at the 'LG Inform' data and performance information system which the Local Government Association hosts on behalf of the sector, the following can be seen for Gravesham when comparing it with the other councils in its CIPFA 'family' grouping of similar authorities, using the most recently available data:

Where Gravesham is amongst the better performers:

- The percentage of non-domestic rates collected as a percentage of non-domestic rates due
- The proportion of the population aged 16 to 64 qualified to at least Level 2
- The percentage of vacant dwellings as a percentage of all dwellings in the area
- The number of households on the housing waiting list
- The time taken to process housing benefit new claims and change events
- New business registration rate per 10,000 resident population aged 16 and above
- Percentage of adults classified as overweight or obese

Where Gravesham is less high performing:

- The percentage of council tax collected as a percentage of council tax due
- The number of households living in temporary accommodation per 1,000 households
- Access to employment by public transport
- Smoking prevalence in adults
- Percentage of children in year 6 who are obese

Where performance in Gravesham is around the average:

- The number of affordable homes delivered
- The amount of residual waste per household
- The percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting
- Percentage of adults who are active (150+ minutes per week)
- Percentage of children in reception year who are obese

The following is a link to the information for the council in the LG Inform system:


[Headline Report for Gravesham Borough Council - Bar Chart View | LG Inform](#)

5.2 Organisational and place leadership

The progress the council has made in recent years and what has been achieved is reflective of the strength of leadership of the organisation. The Leader is seen to provide clear and strong leadership and to be strongly committed to Gravesham, whilst the Cabinet demonstrate a real passion for their Portfolios and a commitment to doing their best for the borough. The Chief Executive is held in very high regard internally and externally for his style and approach and the way in which he supports the organisation to achieve. The management style of the Corporate Management Team is much valued by the organisation and it is delivering effectively.

There are positive and constructive relationships between elected members and officers generally across the organisation and the 'can do' and driven political leadership style creates an energy and sense of ambition. However, the desire to deliver can sometimes overlook the capacity of the organisation and be received as over-bearing and unrealistic. The style of the political leadership needs, at all times, to be conducive to retaining the positive organisational culture and the drive and commitment of officers. Care is also needed to ensure that the respective roles and responsibilities of elected members and officers remain clear and adhered to appropriately.

The priorities of the council are at risk of 'becoming lost' amidst the council's



extensive ambitions, with people reflecting that it is difficult for them to see what matters most and where to apply their focus in a context of limited and decreasing resources.

Local government reorganisation (LGR) represents a further set of very significant demands that have come into the equation and which will need to be resourced appropriately to maximise the opportunities and support a successful transition for the benefit of the borough. The council is well positioned to play a key role in shaping LGR. It has influence; a good and strong reputation; generally good performance; and talented people. It is also stretching its remit beyond core district council services and maintaining a commitment to direct service delivery, reflected in the retention of its housing stock, setting up of trading companies and retention of a number of discretionary services important to the cultural offer and community involvement.

In a context of LGR, there is no hint within the organisation of a desire to slow down or become less ambitious. Indeed, there is a shared desire and determination across the political leadership and the council as a whole to leave a great legacy. However, dialogue is required across the political and managerial leadership to determine what that legacy involves and sharpen the focus on priorities. Without this, there is a risk of continuing tensions between ambition and capacity to deliver. It is also important to ensure that the council has the necessary capacity in core corporate areas, such as legal, procurement, finance and Planning, to support the delivery of the council's ambitions.

The council is committed to working in partnership, both at the strategic and local level. Our discussions revealed that Gravesham is highly regarded by partners, being perceived as proactive and ambitious. Partners reflected the leadership of the organisation as 'straightforward', leaving them clear on where the council stands and them having confidence that it will deliver on the commitments that it makes. Amongst partners who have experience of other local authorities, Gravesham was seen as one of the best council partners in the region.

Partner feedback mirrored what we touched on above in relation to the capacity constraints in the organisation to deliver across all of its ambitions. Some also highlighted a desire for earlier engagement and sharing by the council on key

strategic opportunities, including developing greater shared understanding of the opportunities and challenges within the Dartford, Gravesham and Swanley Health and Care Partnership and opportunities that exist for Gravesham around the Lower Thames Crossing. Others at the more local level outlined the need for greater consideration by the council of the importance of partners benefitting mutually from initiatives that it is keen to see move forward, with there sometimes being a tendency for the council to focus largely on the benefits to be accrued to it or local communities.

Partners also reflected on the tendency for the council to 'hold' relationships with them at very senior levels. Whilst this delivers many benefits and partners value engagement from, and the relationships formed at, that level, they also see the potential to integrate partnership further down the organisation. This is not to say that operational and 'on the ground' working and relationships are anything other than good – it is more a recognition of the demands and constraints being faced by the senior managerial leadership.

In 2019/20, the council established Rosherville Limited, as a holding company, and two trading companies underneath that – Rosherville Servicing Limited and Rosherville Property Development Limited. Two years later, a third company – Rosherville Repairs and Maintenance Limited – was established. These companies have come into being for different reasons but are all seen to be achieving their objectives. Rosherville Servicing Limited provides vehicle servicing, repairs and MOTs for commercial and private vehicles and safety and licensing checks for taxis and hackney carriage vehicles across the borough. It has also provided a small financial return to the council through the recharge of 'back office' costs. As outlined earlier, Rosherville Property Development Limited is taking forward The Charter housing development. Rosherville Repairs and Maintenance Limited was initially established to provide a handyman and general repairs and maintenance service across the borough but has expanded to provide pest control, energy efficiency inspection and grounds maintenance. This has saved the council money by providing services at a lower cost than similar providers. Council partners with experience of the service spoke extremely highly of it. Whilst not established to generate a revenue

return for the council, there is optimism about some profit starting to emerge from the companies over the coming years.

A couple of years ago the council moved away from any elected member involvement in the companies, with this representing an appropriate separation of council and company roles. There is regular oversight of the performance of the companies through the Shareholder Board.

5.3 Governance and culture

The council has developed a governance structure that emphasises the importance of involving and engaging the wider elected membership. This includes the existence of Cabinet Committees – one for each Cabinet Portfolio – which are cross-party and chaired by the relevant Portfolio Holder. They may make recommendations on or probe any matters within the Portfolio Holder's remit.

Elected members that we spoke to reflected the very good officer support that exists for all council committees, whether that be the Democratic Services side of things in terms of the administering the meetings or input from officers across the council in relation to reports being presented. There is, though, acknowledgement that the 'servicing' of a 'meetings heavy' organisation is absorbing capacity across the council.

There is a widely held view in the council that the Overview and Scrutiny function is not working to particularly good effect, reflected in limited council business being considered there and a pattern of meetings being cancelled on a regular basis. In probing this, we came to see a blurring in the respective remits and functioning of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Cabinet Committees. The latter don't exist in most councils and our impression is that they are fulfilling important elements of what would usually constitute the remit of Overview and Scrutiny. This by definition limits the scope of Overview and Scrutiny, although that doesn't mean this function hasn't undertaken valuable work such as scrutiny around a proposed battery storage facility being established in the borough. In that context, the remit of Overview and

Scrutiny becomes skewed towards Call-in and, whilst the committee fulfils this, the Chair is keen to avoid using this facility purely for the sake of it – with the consequence being the cancellation of Overview and Scrutiny meetings when there are no Call-ins.

Given all of the above, we recommend that the council reviews the Cabinet Committee and Overview and Scrutiny elements of its governance arrangements in order to benefit accountability, impact and organisational capacity.

Also, chairs of the more quasi-judicial committees, such as Planning, Licensing and Finance and Audit, would be welcoming of a refinement of the approach to developing agendas and the sharing of draft reports for their committees. Currently their experience is that they are notified when agendas and related reports have been published and at that point are invited to attend a pre-meeting with officers to consider the agenda. This approach both provides them with a ‘fait accompli’ in terms of what is being received by the committee and creates a significant time pressure, given the short timescales, to prepare for the pre-meeting.

Some adaptation of approaches to elected member training and development has been seen in the council in recent months. This includes the introduction of ‘bite size’ videos to support members of the Finance and Audit Committee in their understanding of reading accounts, treasury management and the capital strategy. Another example is the undertaking of an ‘all member briefing’ on LGR, which represents a model that councillors would welcome being used going forward both in relation to LGR but also other key issues facing the council or the borough.

Generally, however, the elected member training and development offer in Gravesham is seen to be ‘traditional’ both in terms of what it covers and the means of delivery. Take up is ‘patchy’. Diversifying the range of training and development activity and the means by which it is delivered would be beneficial. Central to this should be providing opportunities to councillors to engage more in learning beyond Gravesham.

It is nowadays unusual for councils to have elected member involvement in staff appeals because of the risks that this represents to them and the organisation. In

Gravesham, the Appeals Sub-Committee exists and is convened on occasion for dismissal hearings. We recommend that Gravesham follows common practice in local government and moves away from elected member involvement in such matters.

5.4 Financial planning and management

The council has delivered a reduction of over £9m in its base budget since 2016. The budget outturn for 2024/25 (in which the net budget was £14.6m) is anticipated to be a reduction in the planned use of working balances to fund expenditure in year, albeit still requiring just over £1m to be drawn down. The budget that has been set for 2025/26 assumes the use of £2.8m of working balances. The council is mindful of the risk to the financial sustainability of the organisation centred on the depletion of working balances. The two financial years of 2026/27 and 2027/28 see an anticipated financial gap of £2.6m, with the vast majority of this in 2026/27.

The council has a positive discipline of only factoring planned savings or increased income into the medium-term financial plan (MTFP) once they have been achieved. In this context, there is confidence that the level of working balances required to balance the budget in 2025/26 will be less than the £2.8m that has been assumed. Indeed, the council is confident that £1.5m of savings will come to fruition in the coming months. This fits with the council recognising that the key to mitigating the risk to its financial sustainability is ensuring the 'Balancing the Budget' programme becomes more robust, with increased deliverability and accountability and it being accelerated. The requirement for this is becoming pressing. This is a shared responsibility across the organisation but people are looking to the Corporate Management Team for leadership and it is at this level where the accountability primarily needs to be held. It is positive that there is regular reporting both formally and informally to the Leader and Cabinet on progress with the budget, savings and financial income. Reporting to the wider elected membership also takes place but on a less regular basis.

The council is very aware of the slippage that has been seen in the delivery of the General Fund capital programme. This is largely attributable to two major projects – The Charter housing development and the Cascades Leisure Centre. The council is clear that the causal factors here are contextual and beyond the organisation’s direct control. Progress on The Charter has been delayed through the initial contractor going into administration in 2023. With the £42m redevelopment of the leisure centre as a ‘health, well-being, employability and skills hub’, a crucial £17m contribution through the Levelling Up Fund was announced in October 2023 but it is only in very recent days that the agreement has been formally signed. This means that work can only now be given the go-ahead.

The council has relatively high levels of borrowing but sees this reflected in an increased net asset value of its balance sheet – which is the second highest amongst councils in Kent. The managerial leadership is clear that none of the borrowing has been undertaken for ‘speculative’ purposes – rather it has been used to fund its capital strategy objectives to support housing delivery, sustainability, economic growth and health and well-being.

A challenging situation has existed with the council’s external auditors in recent years, which has largely been relational in nature. However, things are seen to be more positive now. Whilst, along with many councils, there have been delays in recent times in the auditing and publishing of accounts, all of the council’s accounts for recent years have now been audited. This leaves those for 2023/24 as the only accounts in draft form and it is anticipated that these will be audited and published shortly.


The approach to, and corporate support for, procurement across the organisation is seen to need to be significantly strengthened. Resources in this area have been depleted in recent years and a shift away from a centralised approach has been made but it is recognised that this is not working for the organisation and is generating a set of risks that need to be addressed.

5.5 Capacity for improvement

In November 2024 the council underwent the re-accreditation process for 'Investors In People' (IIP) and is very proud of the level it secured. It was reconfirmed as a 'Gold Employer' overall but with many elements now reaching 'Platinum' level. Aspects highlighted within the IIP assessment, which we have heard echoed through our corporate peer challenge activities, include:

- The managerial leadership being open, approachable and personable, with their 'open door' policy and regularly visiting their teams or providing staff updates
- The effort that goes into internal communication, including the weekly e-mail from the Chief Executive or Deputy Chief Executive
- Recognition given to people for their contribution and achievements, with this forming a key strand of the leadership's weekly e-mail
- Positive relationships within teams and with line managers, including the supportive nature of line managers and the proactive approach they demonstrate to the development of their staff
- People feeling trusted and empowered
- The provision of staff well-being initiatives

Staff that we met at a range of levels in the organisation spoke passionately about feeling part of the 'Gravesham family'. This is reflective of the mutually supportive nature of people in the organisation and staff feeling part of something, with them highlighting to us their pride in their work and what the organisation delivers. The fact that a significant proportion of council employees live in the borough no doubt contributes to this. The council may wish to reflect on the fact that some staff that we met indicated a desire for increased opportunities to influence change, with one example being the valuable contribution that refuse collection staff could have made when it came to revising collection rounds.



There is a strong culture in the council of developing people, with many examples of officers progressing through the organisation. This ethos and commitment is well established and people emphasised that it is the culture and dialogue around development and the appraisal process that is key. Indeed, this plays a more important role than the formal documenting and recording element of the appraisal system, which it is widely seen as timely to review.

The council recently put in place a new Leadership Framework which outlines key leadership behaviours and competencies expected in the organisation. These will be central to structured leadership training programmes which are currently being developed. The framework is valued and seen to aid development and progression and includes professional qualifications, external and internal training, coaching and mentoring. The council may wish to consider revisiting the Workforce Development Plan, which has been in place for several years now, in order to ensure it reflects the context and needs of the organisation going forward.

People highlighted frustration with the three months 'wait time' when it comes to recruiting to posts that have become vacant. There could usefully be some organisational dialogue around this in order to alleviate those frustrations. The council is clear that there is not a 'blanket' approach here, with 'business critical' roles such as refuse collection not being subject to the arrangement. The principle behind the approach that has been adopted is common to many councils, essentially entailing carrying a certain percentage vacancy rate in order to aid the budget situation.

Finally, LGR represents an inevitable time of uncertainty and concern for staff. The staff that we met highlighted the importance of the council maintaining communication around this, even if there is nothing to say or the council doesn't have the answer.

5.6 Housing Consumer Standards and Housing Regulator


During the course of the corporate peer challenge we gained a privileged and helpful insight to the council's housing journey and context and the strong commitment to safety, quality and the delivery of services to, and engagement with, tenants. Our feedback seeks to provide reflections on areas of strength – with there being much to be proud of – and things to consider in relation to the next steps for housing in Gravesham.

Being a landlord is both a privilege and a responsibility and it is clear that the two aspects are taken seriously in Gravesham. Housing is an area of increased prominence and significance nationally and the council has placed a renewed focus and emphasis on it as a core responsibility. The housing service in Gravesham has progressed a long way for the better in recent years.

There is an energy and authenticity across the housing service and a genuine sense of embracing change, opportunity and new ideas to improve continually. Teams are proud of their achievements and of one other. The housing service is one with an ethos of genuine and authentic collaboration and problem solving for the benefit of tenants. We heard numerous examples of colleagues going above and beyond to resolve issues for tenants and to make the best use of contact with them. The council cares about people it is the landlord to.

Staff and stakeholders reflected the clear sense of presence, visibility and support from the Portfolio Holder and senior managerial team in housing. The Portfolio Holder is committed and conscientious and has immersed herself in the activities of the service. She is seen as a positive support to staff. The complex and changing landscape of housing and the need for insight to 'what good looks like' elsewhere means there would be benefit in the council providing her with additional support to continue her development.

Staff and stakeholders see strong and motivational leadership from the Director and Assistant Director and this is accelerating change and improvement. There is a culture of constructive learning from mistakes. Teams told us that recent managerial



appointments have brought fresh perspectives and ideas to Gravesham which have gently and constructively challenged former ways of working and are improving the service. The senior leadership and managers are present, visible and approachable both in the organisation and in the community. This is clearly welcomed by staff, tenants and partners and represents a connection with communities that is building trust. Staff have embraced the changes and opportunities to improve that new managers have brought and they spoke positively about the improvements that have been made, including in such areas as repairs and maintenance and fire safety.

From what we have seen and heard, health and safety compliance and knowledge of the council's housing stock are areas of strength. We heard this consistently from staff, managers and stakeholders and there is data and evidence that supports this perspective. This includes compliance dashboards; stock condition information; damp and mould analysis; and external validation around compliance works. The plan to carry out the remaining stock condition surveys is tangible and tenant focussed.

We saw organisational commitment to safety and quality and evidence that teams are supported to understand why this matters. One example is supporting teams to draw learning from both the Grenfell and Awaab Ishak tragedies. Another is obtaining the 'Building a Safer Future Charter'. Building safety has clearly featured prominently in the council's work, including the recently approved Building Safety Resident Engagement Strategy. The approach to this showed a commitment to hearing the views and voices of tenants and to responding to their feedback positively. This includes consultation on the draft strategy, development of a 'you said, we did' document and implementing the 'My Building Safety App'. We understand that the App enables tenants to gain a real time understanding of safety and compliance in their housing blocks, alongside an opportunity to be part of compliance inspections. The next phase of this work will involve having this data available at individual dwelling level.


Strong tenant relationships, tenant engagement activities and casework are creating multiple benefits and demonstrating a commitment to continuous improvement and learning. Examples include the Housing Hub and tenant Easter events. These were

cited as examples of collaboration; opportunities to build relationships and break down barriers; seeking ideas feedback; addressing issues that tenants may not otherwise have told the council about; and developing social connection for tenants at risk of isolation. Also, repairs and environmental quality issues are being addressed in real time and after each visit or event there is a process of reflection and learning which is improving the offer.

Whilst we gleaned some concerns about caseloads, patch sizes and complexity of cases for Housing Officers, we understand that these are being addressed through an increase in the number of Housing Officers. We heard some insightful and positive examples of how the council has responded to areas of deprivation or specific needs, for example establishing smaller patch sizes to allow for more intensive work or respond to more complex issues. Positive examples of building relationships with settled gypsy and traveller communities were spoken about by staff teams. Staff also spoke positively about changes that have been made to safeguarding arrangements, which has created a greater sense of support for them.

We heard a lot of positivity about the Independent Living Service from staff, stakeholders and tenants. They reflected this service as having a deep understanding of the profile, needs and expectations of its tenants and there is a strong tenant participation and engagement arrangement (with up to 40 participants) linked to the schemes. The indication is that tenants feel listened to and able to contact the council when things go wrong. There was some feedback about the opportunity for the staff supporting the independent living schemes to feel more valued by the council but this was balanced with a sense of feeling connected and very much part of the wider team.

There is positivity and optimism about the inspection regime from staff and managers. They recognise a shift in momentum as a council and that the housing service is on a journey. We heard consistently that there is pragmatism from the council, in the sense that perfection is not the goal. There is recognition that there will always be a need for revision of focus and further improvement, as is the case for all landlords.



Housing partnerships are strong, with the council being respected for its good practice and improvement. Partners see the council as setting the standard in the region by being a good, willing and motivated partner with ambition that is matched by delivery. They view the housing service as being innovative and demonstrating a willingness to explore new opportunities. The way in which activity and engagement with partners and contractors is maximising the social value from contracts is impressive.

Partners cited the Director and Assistant Director as making things happen and addressing operational and strategic issues of importance. The approach to negotiating with Homes England to unlock development sites was seen as particularly impressive. New developments are seen to have tenants need in mind, such as accessibility being a key consideration in developing homes fit for the future.

Partners were invited to indicate what advice they might provide for the council's housing service ahead of inspection and their views included:

- Get the 'data ducks in a row' and maintain the data
- Fully implement and embed the products and systems the council has purchased – the organisation has the tools, make good use of them
- Stay true to the organisation's values and moral compass
- Promote and celebrate what the council does
- Maintain focus, relationships and momentum following the departure of the Director

We gleaned mixed views on the council's current position in relation to compliance with the Consumer Standards. There is understanding across the organisation of the standards. Work is being undertaken within service areas to analyse gaps in the meeting of them but the council needs to form a strategic over-arching view of what this means. We understand that a more structured gap analysis is getting underway, overseen by a Consumer Standards working group and that there are plans to introduce a Consumer Standards steering group to support with oversight and assurance. The related structured diagnostic needs to provide a clear and consistent understanding of the council's position in relation to the standards and will be an

important tool to support the council's self-awareness and continued oversight and progress. Key to this will be being able to articulate the outcomes being achieved for tenants. For the areas identified as being in need of further development, the council would benefit from a clear plan/trajectory and narrative statement on the drive for continuous improvement. The council may find it helpful to consider a role for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and tenants in seeking assurance in regard to the council's preparedness for regulatory change and on-going compliance.

There is recognition that the council would benefit from taking some time to pause and reflect on all that has been achieved in the housing service and to document this as the start of an evidence base and associated narrative to inform inspection. An initial stage of inspection preparation will be the development of a 'context document' which presents an opportunity for the council to deliver a positive, clear and consistent narrative of the council's housing journey; the improvements that have been made; the culture and approach that exists both within the service and the wider council; and a clear plan for continuous improvement.

We gleaned mixed views about housing complaints handling, analysis and learning. Some staff felt that the council receives very few complaints but expressed that there may be a need to better manage tenant expectations. Conversely, managers shared that analysis has identified a high percentage (72%) of housing complaints being upheld at Stage 2 of the council's complaints procedure and that this is an area of lower tenant satisfaction. We heard that analysis has been undertaken and shared with the Corporate Management Team and that there is an intention to review complaints handling to support learning, increase consistency of approach and secure resolution at an earlier stage. It is positive that the role of 'Member Responsible for Complaints' (a role as required by the Housing Ombudsman) is valued and taken seriously in the council. A sample of complaint responses are reviewed at this level each month and this has identified a number of opportunities for improvement.

The council may find it helpful to assess its routine governance and oversight arrangements in relation to its landlord function, not least in a context of the regulatory regime. There is a need to establish the mechanisms through which the



council generally and the Portfolio Holder for Housing specifically can be provided with the necessary oversight and assurance in this area. We heard that officers regard the Housing Cabinet Committee as the primary route for scrutiny and wider feedback on housing matters. It is less clear what role the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee has or could play in support of this agenda – which links to what we outlined earlier in the 'Governance and culture' section of this report around the respective remits of Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet Committees. The council will need to be able to demonstrate clarity on these arrangements as part of the inspection process.

The imminent departure of the Director of Housing as he progresses to a new role within the housing sector represents both a risk and an opportunity for the council and the housing service. It will be important to ensure that any organisational structural changes arising from this do not represent a risk to pace or progress nor impact the ability to respond to the demands and requirements of both the service and the regulatory context, including preparing for inspection.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) has experienced budget pressures linked to the changing regulatory environment and improvement. Resourcing in key areas is being increased to align with service pressures; strengthen focus and resilience; and enhance support to tenants. One example is an increase in capacity around tenant engagement and we have already touched on the move to increase the number of Housing Officers. Outside of the HRA, additional resources are being provided within the homelessness function. We see an opportunity to review service budgets further to ensure they are aligned to HRA capital and service delivery requirements.

Listening to the 'tenant voice' is an area that is developing and there are some great examples, as we have outlined. A refresh of the tenant engagement strategy is due and this will look and feel very different as a result of recent changes and improvements. Bringing this forward sooner rather than later is likely to be helpful in preparing for inspection, drawing together the threads that form the council's vision for tenant engagement, voice and opportunity for influence.

The recent decision to transfer the repairs and maintenance system to the council's main housing management system (MRI) to enable a single view of the customer

and be better able to respond proactively to customer needs is positive. This is in progress and forms part of the wider focus on 'knowing who is behind each front door'. As part of this, it may be helpful for the council to reflect on and articulate how this will improve outcomes for tenants and where else the council may want to focus its time and energy to really get to know them.

Concerns were raised by some staff about managing anti-social behaviour (ASB), with mixed views on the value and outcomes made possible by the 'Noise App'. ASB was felt by staff to be an area in need of further development and it was noted that this was also mirrored in the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) feedback. The council may want to prioritise self-assessment on this as part of the Consumer Standards diagnostic.

Housing staff and stakeholders are aware of LGR and are keen to ensure that they and tenants are engaged about the changes. There is a recognition that for tenants, LGR represents not only a change of local council but also a change of landlord. Staff feel strongly that tenants need to maintain both a face that they know and their relationship with their landlord.

We heard consistently that there is a desire on the part of the housing service to 'be the best we can be' and to go into the LGR process as a council and landlord that sets the bar high for quality of homes and services to tenants. Stakeholders are anxious about what LGR means for them, for Gravesham and for the great work that happens now. This will inevitably form an important strand of future LGR considerations.

6. Next steps

It is recognised that the council's 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 the 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 a day and a half.

In the meantime, Mona Sehgal, Principal Adviser for your region, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. She is available to discuss any further support the council requires and can be contacted via mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk