LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Bolton Council

9 – 12 July 2024

Feedback report

Corporate Peer Challenge

Contents

1. Introduction

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

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

This is Bolton Council's second Corporate Peer Challenge. The first took place in June 2018. This is testament to Bolton Council's commitment to constructive external challenge and support.

This report outlines the key findings of the peer team and the recommendations that the council are required to action.

2. Executive summary

Bolton Council is a proud and caring council with a strong commitment to delivering improved outcomes for people, families, and communities. This was evident in conversations the peer team had with officers, councillors and a range of partners. Officers described the working environment as "*inclusive and supportive*" and that "*the focus on residents is very strong across all departments*". The concept of 'Team Bolton' was evident with many of those who spoke with the peer team. The peer

team also heard how the council's teams are "*constantly looking at innovation, prevention and early intervention*" but the "*capacity to transform*'" presents an ongoing challenge.

The council has been in 'no overall control' since 2019. During this period, the council has been led by a minority Conservative and a minority Labour administration and is currently led by a minority Labour administration. Peers were told that the 'Bolton first, politics second' ethos is evident at the council. The Leader has a clear commitment to cross party working (see section 5.3). It is clear how working in a 'no overall control' system is not stifling the council's ability to deliver against its priorities.

The Corporate Plan expires this year and work to develop the new Corporate Plan for 2024 to 2027 is underway. The council is also in discussions with strategic partners (through the Active, Connected and Prosperous Board) to re-visit the place-based vision and plan for Bolton up to 2040. It is important that the council maintains momentum on this. The peer team recommend that the council sets out a clear timeline for the development of the new plans and associated performance framework at pace. It will also be important to ensure the new Corporate Plan is aligned to the council's financial plans and budget.

During the CPC there was a sense of the leadership focus being on directorate-based services and functions with greater opportunities to grow cross-organisational working /dialogue and corporate oversight. A consistent message throughout this report is that there are opportunities to strengthen Bolton's 'one council' corporate approach in support of the council's priorities.

Key areas which will help strengthen a more corporate approach include a need to ensure stronger corporate oversight of quarterly performance, risk and financial monitoring information. It is recommended that the council publishes quarterly performance information (aligned to the new Corporate Plan) and quarterly finance reports for both Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and Cabinet on a consistent basis. It will also be important to produce monthly in-year financial monitoring alongside risk registers (between published quarterly reports). This will help to strengthen senior leadership oversight.

It is also recommended that the council should produce a four-year Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) aligned to the new Corporate Plan. The current financial plan is for the next two years when best practice indicates a four-year plan. This will support the CLT and Cabinet in looking strategically beyond the current budget period to support long term financial planning and financial sustainability.

It is positive that both the council's Monitoring Officer and s151 Officer (the council's chief finance officer) are members of the council's Corporate Leadership Team. Building on this, the council should establish formal meetings of the Chief Executive, s151 and Monitoring officer (the golden triangle). This needs to be in line with the latest LGA, Lawyers in Local Government, Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants (CIPFA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) guidelines. This will support joint working in support of strong and effective governance and decision making.

Peers met with a range of officers and councillors involved in the Audit arrangements of the council and heard about the ongoing work to strengthen the council's framework of governance, risk management and control. This includes work to build greater clarity on the accountability and responsibilities of all those involved in risk management and fraud risk assessments. It also includes a review of the Annual Governance Statement process. This ongoing work is positive, but it is not yet fully complete or corporately 'owned'. The council needs to continue to progress this at pace. The council should continue to support members of the Audit and Standards committee through training on internal audit, risk management and corporate governance.

Peers understand that the council's Standards Committee (at the time of the peer challenge) has not met since 2012. It is important that the role of the council's Standards Committee, beyond dealing with councillor complaints, is better understood, and enhanced to promote high standards of conduct. There are opportunities to review the code of conduct in line with the LGA's model code (or similar) and to link this with Member development and further embedding of the Nolan Principles.

There is a need to strengthen the council's corporate approach to risk management.

There are risk registers in place for each of the council's directorates. Building on this, the peer team recommends that the council also develops a Corporate Risk Register that is owned corporately by CLT and Cabinet. It is important to ensure both senior councillors and officers understand the key risks faced by the council to inform decision making. The Corporate Risk Register should be embedded throughout the organisation and reported to the Cabinet and Audit Committee on a six-monthly basis. It needs to capture key corporate risks, impact, likelihood, mitigation, actions, and a timeline for actions.

There are good examples of workforce strategies and approaches within directorates. Building on these, the council should develop an overarching corporate workforce strategy that covers staff recruitment, retention, succession planning and how to market the council as the 'employer of choice'.

The council has in place a change management and transformation programme which was launched in 2022. The projects undertaken to date provide strong foundations upon which to further develop organisational transformational priorities. The peer team found mixed levels of understanding about transformation and change. The council should undertake further work to engage officers and councillors on a clearer vision and aims for transformation and how this is aligned to corporate priorities and the council's ambition across its Digital Strategy.

The peer team were impressed with the strong and innovative directorate approaches being developed across social care and public health in relation to demand management, prevention and strengths-based working. These are considered in more detail in section 5.1. The council should continue to harness opportunities arising from the newly established demand management boards in both adult and children's social care to further grow demand management approaches. It is important that this work is aligned to the required savings identified in the council's financial plans.

Peers spoke to a wide range of public, private and voluntary sector partners and it is clear that the council is viewed as a valued partner both in the borough and within the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). There are many examples where the council is harnessing opportunities arising from the GMCA devolved

arrangements. This includes collaboration on climate change, recruitment, social care, transport, digitalisation, housing, skills and regeneration.

The peer team were struck by the strength of partnership working between the council and the voluntary sector. Peers heard how this had shifted from a paternalistic relationship to a more equal partnership.

The voluntary sector is playing a key role in the locality and neighbourhood working approaches being developed in the borough. Building on these initiatives, the council should consider opportunities to strengthen direct resident consultation and feedback. We recommend that the council develops a comprehensive engagement/consultation strategy for residents and town and parish council representatives which includes effective feedback loops to show how the council has or is responding to the issues raised.

Peers were impressed with the council's recent work, with partners, to build a place-based narrative and branding for Bolton called 'the Bolton Story'. The peer team recommend that the council continues to communicate and promote the Bolton Story and champion the work of the council. The council has a positive story to tell. This will further help to raise the profile of Bolton locally, regionally and nationally.

The peer team heard from some councillors and officers about opportunities to strengthen the current approach to councillor development. Whilst there are a range of courses and opportunities available, this needs to be brought together into a more comprehensive Councillor Development Plan to support councillors. It should be used to promote a more positive and inclusive culture of learning, development, and continual improvement for councillors.

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   Develop the council's hierarchy of strategic plans and strategies, starting with the refreshed place-based vision for 2040. This should then

align to the new Corporate Plan

We recommend that you set out a clear timeline for the development of these new plans at pace. It is important to ensure the new Corporate Plan is aligned to the council's financial plans.

3.2 Increase the frequency and visibility of financial, performance and corporate risk management reporting to Cabinet, Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and councillors

We recommend that this includes regular published quarterly performance reporting (aligned to the new Corporate Plan) and quarterly finance reports for both CLT and Cabinet. It will be important to produce monthly in-year financial monitoring alongside risk registers (between published quarterly reports).

3.3 Publish a four-year Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) aligned to the new Corporate Plan

The current financial plan is for the next two years when best practice indicates a four-year plan. This will help to strengthen Bolton's 'one council' corporate approach in support of the council's priorities and future financial planning and sustainability.

3.4 Enhance the role and profile of the Golden Triangle in line with the latest LGA, Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants (CIPFA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) guidelines.

We recommend that the council establishes regular formal meetings of the Chief Executive, s151 and Monitoring officer (the golden triangle). This will support joint working in support of strong and effective governance and decision making.

3.5 Continue to progress the work, already started, to strengthen the council's framework of governance, risk management and control.

This includes a review of the Annual Governance Statement process, ongoing work to build clarity on the accountability and responsibilities of those involved in risk management (including fraud risk assessments) and on-going training for members of the Audit and Standards committee.

3.6   Ensure the role of the Standards Committee, beyond dealing with councillor complaints, is better understood and enhanced to promote high standards of conduct.

The council should review the code of conduct in line with the LGA's model code (or similar) and to link this with Member development and further embedding of the Nolan Principles.

3.7   Develop a Corporate Risk Register that is owned by both the Corporate Leadership Team and Cabinet.

This needs to build on the good work already taking place in relation to directorate risk registers. It is important to capture key corporate risks, impact, likelihood, mitigation, actions, and a timeline for actions. Reports should be shared with both the Cabinet and Audit committee on a six-monthly basis.

3.8   Develop a council wide programme of transformation with a clear vision and aims

The work undertaken to date has provided strong foundations to build the council's transformation approach. We recommend that the council undertakes further work to engage officers and councillors on a clearer corporate vision and aims for transformation including how this is aligned to both the new Corporate Plan and the Digital Strategy.

3.9   Establish a new Councillor Development Plan and programme of training

This should be used to promote the purpose and importance of councillor development and ensure buy-in from councillors. It should be a mixture of skills-based development and information sessions and used to promote a positive and inclusive culture of learning, development and continual improvement.

3.10   Continue to develop the council's proposals in respect of demand management, harnessing the opportunities arising from the newly established demand management boards in social care (adults and children)

The peer team were impressed with the strong and innovative directorate approaches being developed across social care and public health in relation to demand management. It is important that this work is aligned to the required savings identified in the council's financial plans

3.11 Building on the strong community and locality based working initiatives in place, consider opportunities to strengthen direct resident engagement and consultation. This should include feedback to residents and stakeholders following consultations.

The council has already started this work through the development of a set of engagement principles which have been co-developed with the NHS and voluntary sector. Building on this good work, we recommend that you develop a comprehensive engagement/consultation strategy for residents and town and parish council representatives.

3.12 Continue to communicate and champion the work you do well to improve your profile both regionally and nationally

Peers were impressed with the council's recent work, with partners, to build a place-based narrative and branding for Bolton called 'the Bolton Story'. We recommend that you continue to communicate and promote the Bolton Story and champion the work you do well. You have a positive story to tell.

3.13 Develop a corporate workforce strategy

There are good examples of workforce strategies within directorates. The council should develop a Corporate Workforce Strategy. This should cover staff recruitment, retention, succession planning and how to market the council as the 'employer of choice'.

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:

- Delyth Curtis, Chief Executive, Cheshire West and Chester Council
- Councillor Sam Corcoran, Leader of Cheshire East Council
- Councillor Abi Brown OBE, City of Stoke-on-Trent and Chairman of the Local Government Association Improvement and Innovation Board
- Richard Barker, Corporate Director of Communities, Buckinghamshire Council
- Nigel Stevenson, Service Director, Finance, Infrastructure and Improvement (and section 151 Officer), Nottinghamshire County Council
- Gill Marshall, Chief Legal Officer, Wakefield Council
- Florence Drew, Head of Chief Executives Office, Barnsley Council (Shadow Peer)
- Cindy Lowthian, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

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.

Under the 'Local Priorities and Outcomes' theme, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on their approach to managing rising demand, particularly in children's and adults' social care.

Under the 'Organisational and Place Leadership' theme, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on their approach to community engagement and locality working.

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 at Bolton Council and what the peer team should focus on. It also included a comprehensive LGA Finance briefing (prepared using public reports from the council's website) and a LGA performance report outlining benchmarking data for the council across a range of metrics. The latter was produced using the LGA's local

area benchmarking tool called LG Inform.

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

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 49 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 150 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.
- Listened to and observed recordings of some meetings including the meeting of the Audit Committee in June 2024

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

5. Feedback

5.1   Local priorities and outcomes

Bolton is a proud and caring council with a strong commitment to delivering improved outcomes for people, families, and communities. This was evident in conversations we had with officers, councillors and a range of partners. We heard "*the focus is on the residents of Bolton and there is a dedication and passion to deliver the right outcomes for them*".

This focus on people and families is reflected in recent external inspection results. An Ofsted inspection, in September 2023, found Bolton children's services continues to be 'good'. It highlights how progress has been made "*against a backdrop of increasing need, significant financial pressures and an unprecedented national pandemic*".

In Adult Social Care, the Home Support Reablement Service has received an overall rating of 'good' by the CQC and Ofsted (published December 2023). The inspectors highlighted positive feedback from people's experience of using services, robust staff recruitment processes and '*innovative discharge planning processes*'.

An inspection of local services for children and young people with special educational

needs and/or disabilities (SEND), was undertaken in June 2024 by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and Ofsted. Whilst the report was not published/available to peers during our time on-site, it was subsequently shared with peers after our time on-site (following publication). It shows how the local area partnership's SEND arrangements "*typically lead to positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The local area partnership is taking action where improvements are needed.*"

Similar to other councils, rising demand, particularly within children's and adult social care social care, present an on-going challenge. The peer team were asked to consider this as a particular area of focus.

Peers considered the latest published LG Inform[1] data on how the council's social care spend compares to that of its statistical neighbours (2022/2023). It is reassuring that the council compares favourably, with Bolton's total social care spend (as a percentage of core spending power) being below the average of statistical neighbours (Bolton 61.4 percent, average is 69.8%).

However, the council are seeing an increased volume in demand for older people's care packages in the community, especially homecare and discharges from hospital. They also experiencing increased costs in relation to external provision in children's social care. The council's latest budget papers (February 2024) provide further insights into the current pressures faced. This includes estimated additional costs of £9.9m in 2024/25.

Part of the response to this challenge, over recent years, has been a stronger focus on prevention and strengths-based approaches, particularly in social care and public health. The latter is about empowering communities to be the co-creators of their own health and wellbeing.

Peers were impressed with the range of collaborative initiatives that have been implemented. Examples include the development of five Family Hubs (launched in December 2023), providing 'whole family' early help and support. Bolton's voluntary sector infrastructure organisation, the Council for Voluntary Services, are playing a

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[1] LG Inform is the Local Government Association's performance data benchmarking tool.

key role, helping to deliver a range of enhanced and transformed services. Initiatives also include Community Champions and work within Bolton's six neighbourhood footprints (overseen by a Locality Board). The latter is helping to bring health providers, social care teams, voluntary sector representatives and wider public services together. It is still early days in this journey, but the aim is to provide holistic and community centric provision of care services and connect people to local community assets.

Peers were also impressed to see how preventative and strengths-based practice is now permeating across all council services. Examples include the development of community alliances (see section 5.2 of this report), Bolton's Fund (the council's grants programme manged by Bolton CVS which is helping the voluntary sector to grow), the Digital Inclusion Activity Network, joint work with the borough's leisure trusts to promote health and fitness (with participation levels now standing a pre-covid levels) and a wider range of community safety initiatives. There is clearly good thinking, understanding and practice relating to prevention and strengths-based approaches for the council to build upon and continue to grow.

The council has established two new demand boards (in children's social care and adult social care). A range of initiatives to manage demand are being explored through these boards. These include revised commissioning approaches, capacity building, prevention and early intervention initiatives. The aim is to achieve cost savings and tangible financial benefits. Building on this, it will be important to ensure this work is closely aligned to the required savings identified in the council's financial plans.

The council declared a climate emergency in 2019 and has agreed a climate change strategy (2021 to 2030). The council's position statement shows how work is taking place to integrate climate ambitions across the council and with partners through a cross-organisational delivery team. The council will need to ensure that the new Corporate Plan is clearly aligned to the climate change delivery plan and performance framework (covering 32 key performance indicators).

Peers heard from officers about the council's work in relation to equalities, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). The council has agreed three overarching equalities objectives

relating to training, data and decision making. An EDI group meets on a monthly basis and there are staff networks in place to support employees with protected characteristics. We were told that mandatory EDI training is in place for both officers and members. We did find that there were mixed levels of awareness about the staff networks and opportunities to be involved. It is important that the council continues to to promote these networks across the council.

5.1.1 Performance

The council's current Corporate Plan (2022 to 2024) is built around a vision of the borough '*becoming Active, Connected and Prosperous. A great place to live, work visit or study'*, along with six priority outcomes. The Plan shows how the agreed priority outcomes are delivered via Directorate Plans.

The council's performance framework, aligned to the current Corporate Plan (2022 to 2024) should involve the publication of quarterly performance reports to Cabinet. In practice, we found performance reporting to be less frequent and more ad hoc.

As part of the on-going work to develop a new Corporate Plan and performance framework (outlined below) the council needs to ensure that performance reports are published on a regular quarterly basis to Cabinet, Corporate Leadership Team and the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This will help to maintain collective leadership oversight of performance against the council's agreed objectives.

The latest performance report shared (published in January 2024), is structured around a 20-page narrative update and a lengthy Corporate Performance Dashboard report (covering 77 pages). The council should consider, as part of the on-going work to develop a new Corporate Plan, how future performance reports to Cabinet can be structured more clearly and succinctly. The current approach appears lengthy, complex, and difficult to understand. This should include clearer information on the mitigating actions being taken where performance is significantly below target and identified owners for these.

As referenced above, the council is undertaking work to develop a new Corporate Plan for 2024 to 2027 and a new performance framework aligned to this. This includes positive work to establish directorate Performance Boards, helping to bring constructive challenge on performance, address challenges and celebrate success. It

also includes the establishment of Bolton's Research and Intelligence Network (BRAIN) to facilitate data sharing and collaboration amongst data analysts. Power BI (a visualisation tool to support the connection and presentation of different data sources) is also being used within some council teams but a stronger corporate approach could be secured to maximise the potential benefit and impact. Work is also taking place, alongside partners, to refresh the borough's current place-based Plan, called Bolton 2030.

This work is positive, but it is important that the council maintains momentum on this. We recommend that you set out a clear timeline for the development of the new plans and associated performance framework at pace. It will also be important to ensure your new Corporate Plan is aligned to the council's financial plans and budget.

Ongoing engagement of officers, councillors, residents, and partners in this work is important. This should help build an understanding of corporate priorities and how the different hierarchy of council plans are aligned. It will also help to open conversations about how best to harness partnership capacity, insights, and skills behind the agreed priorities.

The peer team looked at the latest published LG Inform Data[i] and how the council compares to its statistical nearest neighbours. We found that the council compares favourably or around the average across a range of indicators. These include a range of financial indicators (see section 5.4). They also include households in temporary accommodation (2023/2024 quarter 3), affordable home delivery (2022/2023) and recycling rates (2022/2023).

The council compares less favourably to its statistical neighbours in relation to the time taken to process housing benefit claims and change events (2022/2023 but from conversations with officers, the team understands work has already taken place to improve systems and processes.

The council has the highest percentage of major planning applications overturned on appeal (2023, Q2, 24 months ending) and has recognised the need for improvement within the planning service which is being progressed.

5.2   Organisational and place leadership

Bolton is a town with proud industrial heritage, located between Manchester, Blackburn, Wigan, Bury and Salford. Bolton Council's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment[2] shows Bolton's rich and diverse communities. The most common ethnic backgrounds of non-White British residents being Asian Pakistani and Asian Indian. It highlights health inequalities, with the health of people in Bolton generally worse over a range of measures than the average for England (similar to many other northern councils). A significant portion of the population reside in areas that fall within the top ten per cent deprived nationally, with 12 per cent living in areas among the least deprived 20 per cent.

As outlined in section 5.1, Bolton is a proud and caring council with a strong commitment to delivering improved outcomes for people, families, and communities. The council's political and managerial leadership are widely respected. A number of officers told us that both the Chief Executive and Corporate Leadership team are seen as visible, responsive and open. They also told us "*It is a great place to work*".

Peers also heard how the '*Bolton first, politics second'* ethos is still evident. There is a commitment to cross party working (see section 5.3). The peer team got a sense, from conversations with officers, councillors and partners, that being in 'no overall control' is not stifling the council's ability to deliver against its priorities.

The peer team spoke to a wide range of public, private and voluntary sector partners. The council is seen as a valued partner. Peers heard from strategic partners who said that '*It feels really inspirational to be part of the Bolton leadership community*'. As outlined in section 5.1, it is important that the council continues to work through the Active, Connected and Prosperous Board (the borough's strategic partnership) to review the shared place-based vision for Bolton beyond 2030 e.g. up to 2040. Peers were pleased to hear how these discussions have already started. It will be important to ensure these discussions include future ways of working together to deliver the placed based vision for the borough. This includes the key role played by the ACP in promoting equality of opportunity and good relations between groups and

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communities across the borough.

The borough is part of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) alongside nine other councils. Again, the council is seen a valued partner who are seeking to harness opportunities from the devolved arrangements. This includes collaboration on climate change, recruitment, social care, transport, digitalisation, housing, skills and regeneration. The Leader is the portfolio holder for the 'digital city region' and the Chief Executive is chair of the 'Green City Region Board'.

The council have signed up to the Greater Manchester Local Plan called 'Places for Everyone' alongside eight other councils. More recently, the borough was awarded the 'Greater Manchester Town of Culture' and is using this to promote cultural events including Bolton's Food and Drink Festival. Peers were impressed to learn that this is the UK's largest, attracting over 500,000 visitors each year.

The council is also part of the Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership (ICP). This is a partnership bringing together health and social care partners across Greater Manchester and wider public sector and community organisations to improve the health and wellbeing of all residents across the GMCA region. Peers heard feedback from some partners that there are further opportunities for the council and in particular their chief executive, to strengthen the place-based working and leadership within the ICP arrangements.

The council has ambitious regeneration plans with examples of tangible delivery to date. These include a £200m regeneration of the former Horwich Loco works with 1,700 new homes and a new link road. They also include Farnworth Green with new homes, retail, hospitality, and new community space. Other examples include Bolton's new Food Hall, part of a wider £5.9m transformation of Bolton Market and a £4.43m refurbishment of the central library – both utilising funding from the Towns Fund. The Bolton Institute of Medical Sciences, which will open in September 2024, will serve as a catalyst for further investment in the sector.

The Bolton Blueprint outlines a proposed £1bn investment pipeline to transform the town centre and drive growth. It outlines a number of proposed investment projects including the re-development of Crompton Place Shopping Centre and proposed

regeneration along the Wigan-Bolton Growth Corridor. The opportunities presented through the emerging Mayoral Development Corporation plans should provide future opportunities to realise regeneration ambitions for the place and to enhance the profile and communication regarding the regeneration opportunities in Bolton.

The Wigan-Bolton Growth Corridor aims to drive investment across the north of Greater Manchester. Peers understand that the council is working closely with the GMCA and Wigan Council to agree next steps including a delivery strategy and funding model. As schemes are bought forward, it will be important to continue to ensure capacity is in place to support robust business case development, financial modelling, and risk analysis.

Over the past year, work has been undertaken to review the planning function including the appointment a new Assistant Director of Highways to oversee the changes. Peers recommend that you continue to drive improvement in this area including workforce development activity to aid staff recruitment and retention.

Peers were impressed with the council's recent work, with partners, to build a place-based narrative and branding for Bolton called 'the Bolton Story'. This seeks to articulate the borough's story, what is unique about the place, why it is special, how it stands out and opportunities that exist in the borough. Peers recognise that it is still early days so there are mixed levels of understanding of this. However, the peer team were told of practical examples, from partners, about how this is already being used to inform funding bids and also to support recruitment.

The peer team recommend that the council should continue to use the 'Bolton Story' framework as an engagement tool with communities and to promote and champion the work the council does well. This should include the council's flagship Town of Culture initiatives including the Bolton Food Festival, Iron Man, Museum, Octagon Theatre events and the borough's location as a global stage for film locations and the Bolton Film Festival.

The council is developing its future locality working and community engagement models and approach. The peer team were asked to share their reflections and recommendations on this developing work.

Many of these initiatives are referenced in section 5.1. They include work in the Family Hubs, work through the borough's six neighbourhood footprints (focussed on health and wellbeing in communities), Bolton's Fund (referenced below), and Community Champions.

The council is developing 'Community Alliances' in seven wards which aim to work within communities to engage and enhance wellbeing. Peers heard how councillors play a key 'enabling' role at the heart of these alliances. Peers recognise that the Alliances are being 'tested' before they are rolled out across the borough. It is important for the council to agree a clear timeline to review them, working alongside communities and councillors to inform next steps. Ensuring that there is a focus on their role in bringing communities together to support improved outcomes for residents will be key.

An ongoing challenge for the council (as is the case for many other councils) is the different locality working initiatives in place and the footprints within which they operate. There is potential for confusion. We recommend that the council continues to map the initiatives in place to help build connections and strengthen joined up approaches. There are also opportunities to strengthen ways of working with Bolton's three Town Councils and one Parish Council. This includes the potential to explore delivery options and opportunities.

Building on the locality working initiatives in place, it is important for the council to consider opportunities to strengthen direct and effective resident consultation. Peers heard from some community representatives and residents that they would welcome this, including ensuring feedback loops are in place following consultation. Peers can see that this work has started through the development of a set of engagement principles which have been co-developed with the NHS and voluntary sector (as outlined in the latest Public Health Annual Report). Building on this good work, the peer team recommend that you develop a comprehensive consultation and engagement strategy for residents and town and parish council representatives.

A key element of the council's locality working approach involves joint work with the Voluntary sector. A consistent message throughout this report is that the council is well respected and valued by voluntary sector representatives and is genuinely

committed to developing and sustaining productive relationships. We heard how ways of working during the pandemic have helped to shift relationships from a paternal relationship to a more equal partnership and this ethos has continued.

Peers saw many examples of joint working focussed on enabling communities to flourish. These include Bolton's Fund - an investment programme for the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector which is managed by Bolton Council for Voluntary Service (CVS). This is supporting grassroots organisations across the borough. Since its launch in 2019, it has invested over £5 million to grassroots organisations.

Examples also include joint work with the voluntary and community sector in relation to homelessness, domestic violence, dementia support, carers support, information and advice services and independent living support. The council and voluntary sector representatives are working jointly on reviewing commissioning arrangements with a focus on prevention and enabling VCSE organisations to be 'commission ready'. In the past year, the council's wider leadership team, including the Chief Executive, have commenced quarterly meetings with the VCSE Leaders' Forum. It is clear to the peer team how voluntary sector representatives welcome this work. In particular, the joint meetings with the council's leadership team are seen as a step change in helping to cement an authentic relationship with the sector. The peer team encourage the council to continue with these approaches.

5.3   Governance and culture

The council is committed to open and transparent decision making. This is reflected within the system of decision making at the council. The Leader and his eight Executive Members have decision making sessions every month with published reports and minutes. These meetings are recorded and posted on Bolton Council's You Tube Channel. Opposition Members are invited to attend.

Wider Cabinet meetings are held on a monthly basis and again, opposition groups are invited to attend.

There are a number of other committees who conduct non-executive functions including Planning, Licensing/Environmental Regulations, Audit and the Active,

Connected and Prosperous Board (when conducting statutory Health and Wellbeing Board business as this strategic partnership was merged with the council's Health and Wellbeing Board). The council has four Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Again, all of these meetings are recorded using public-i.tv.

In addition to the above, the council has cross-party Policy Development Groups which are bought together, as required, to progress new ideas and inform strategic policy making. These meetings are not recorded as they are discussion forums to formulate thinking prior to more formal and transparent scrutiny and decision making.

The council's first Corporate Peer Challenge, undertaken in June 2018, had outlined capacity issues associated with this system of governance. In particular, frustrations that the complexity of arrangements (including the scheme of delegation) had the potential to create delays and drain officer capacity.

A governance review was undertaken by the LGA which made a number of recommendations including the need to build clarity on the functions of Policy Development Groups, an increase in the scheme of delegation for officers, recording of decisions for Executive Cabinet Member individual meetings (rather than full minutes) and a review of the (then) Area Forums.

Peers heard that, whilst the recommendations were considered at the time, there was a reluctance to fundamentally change the way things operate (other than a review of the Area Forums which peers were pleased to note was undertaken). Peers were told by both councillors and senior officers that the current governance system works for Bolton, is seen as transparent and is understood by all. There is no appetite for significant change.

Peers respect this view but believe that there are still opportunities to revisit some of the recommendations. In particular, the format of decision sessions is significantly above that required by the legislation. The peer team recommend that the decisions of individual cabinet member sessions are published as a record of the decision, rather than full minutes. This would reduce the demands on democratic service officers whilst still providing transparency as the sessions are recorded and streamed.

The governance review had also made some recommendations relating to the way in which Full Council operates including the use of questions and motions at Full Council. We believe that there are still opportunities to revisit the use of questions and motions at Full Council. The use of questions is extensive and takes up a significant proportion of the agenda, leaving limited time for motions. Although changes have been made which allow untabled motions to be carried forward to the next meeting, this does sometimes mean that motions are voted on without debate as they are current/time sensitive. The council could consider imposing a limit of the time permitted for questions with untabled questions receiving a written answer circulated to all councillors.

The council should consider how the council's Forward Plan can be strengthened to ensure that overview and scrutiny committees are still able to scrutinise new policies (even where Policy Development Groups have been involved).

Peers also found that some aspects of the council's current constitution require updating. For example, the constitution refers to Area Committees which are no longer in place. Peers recommend that this is undertaken through the council's Constitution Panel.

Peers understand that the council's Standards Committee has not met since 2012. It is important that the role of the council's Standards Committee, beyond dealing with councillor complaints, is better understood, and enhanced to promote high standards of conduct. There are opportunities to review the code of conduct in line with the LGA's model code (or similar) and to link this with Member development and further embedding of the Nolan Principles.

Given the frequency of meetings currently held, the peer team recommend that the council reviews current capacity within democratic services. Peers were told that, in the main, three officers are responsible for organising and minuting most of the meetings. The large number of meetings is placing significant demands on officers.

Peers also heard how the council has recently introduced a new on-line Committee Management System called ModernGov. This is designed to facilitate the effective management of committees and decisions across the council which is positive.

However, the roll out of the system is impacted by the capacity challenges in Democratic Services with key aspects such as the Forward Plan not yet operational at the time of the visit. The peer team recommend that the council continues to invest capacity in rolling this system out effectively and link this to webcasting of meetings to strengthen transparency and public engagement.

The council's 2023/2024 Annual Governance Statement (AGS) highlights challenges the council have experienced within the Planning Service. This includes a decision notice from the Planning Inspectorate (2022) relating to required improvements. It also relates to an issue regarding the non-payment of refunds and a major planning decision. It is positive that the AGS shows the on-going work taking place to address this (the AGS shows this as partially complete). This includes a review of the Planning Service led by the Assistant Director. This work needs to continue.

The AGS also refers to a loss of money in Adults Services Finance and a subsequent investigation which highlighted weaknesses in internal controls. The AGS shows the proactive work taking place to address this and it is important that this work continues, particularly in relation to fraud risk management referenced below.

Peers met with a range of officers and councillors involved in the Audit arrangements of the council. This includes representatives from both internal and external Audit. Peers learned about ongoing work taking place to ensure the council's framework of governance, risk management and control is strengthened. This includes work to build greater clarity on the accountability and responsibilities of all those involved in risk management and fraud risk assessments. It also includes a review of the Annual Governance Statement process including a proposal to establish a Corporate Governance Group to oversee this work.

This ongoing work is positive. However, it is not yet fully complete or corporately 'owned'. The council needs to continue to progress this at pace. This on-going work should aim to strengthen current Corporate Leadership Team ownership of the Annual Governance Statement and actions to address any identified weaknesses in governance. It should also include work to strengthen corporate level ownership of the internal audit plan. Directors should be able to drive the plan where they feel their service or a corporate matter needs attention. The council should continue to support

members of the Audit and Standards committee through training on internal audit, risk management and corporate governance.

The council's risk management approach involves each directorate developing and owning its respective risk register. They have responsibility for monitoring and managing risks with support from the Assurance and Risk Management Team. As part of the ongoing work to review the Council's Risk Management Strategy (outlined above), the peer team recommend that the council develops a Corporate Risk Management Register, owned by CLT and Cabinet and shared with/challenged by the Audit Committee. This needs to capture key corporate risks, impact, likelihood, mitigation, actions and a timeline for actions.

The ongoing work to strengthen the council's governance, risk management and control systems will require officer capacity. In addition to building capacity within the democratic services team (outlined above), the council will need to ensure that there is capacity within the council's respective internal audit arrangements, risk management arrangements and counter fraud. This is especially so as the current shared service model (with Manchester CC) moves towards a Lead Authority/Commissioned model.

The Corporate Leadership Team, who meet weekly, is made up of the Chief Executive and respective directors. Peers were pleased that this also includes the s151 officer (the council's chief financial officer) and Monitoring Officer. Building on this, we recommend that the council establishes formal meetings of the Chief Executive, s151 and Monitoring officer (the golden triangle). This will support joint working in support of strong and effective governance and decision making.

Peers heard from councillors about the current training and development opportunities available to them. This covers induction training for new councillors, specific training for councillors serving on planning or licensing committees and child sexual exploitation. Bolton council also has an e-learning system featuring modules on a range of topics including data protection, constitutional support, financial management and scrutiny. Bringing all this together, the peer team recommend that the council co-designs (with councillors) an overarching Councillor Development Plan. It should be used to further promote and strengthen a positive and inclusive

culture of learning, development, and continual improvement for councillors.

The current approach to councillor development is led from Democratic Services. Taking account of the capacity issues (outlined above), it will be important to ensure capacity within the team to oversee and develop a new Councillor Development Plan. Peers understand that, when the team are faced with meeting statutory requirements such as publication requirements for papers and school appeals, work on the councillor development plan may be given less prominence when capacity is a challenge. The Peer Team recommends this is taken into consideration when looking at building capacity within the Democratic Services Team.

5.4   Financial planning and management

As with many councils, Bolton Council faces on-going financial challenges. The council has set a budget for 2024/2025 which is dependent on £8.6m of savings being realised. The council's budget papers show a forecast gap of £20m in 2025/2026.

As outlined in section 5.2, peers were impressed with the council's joint work taking place with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). This is helping to harness opportunities for capital investment and growth. The council are also part of the GMCA business rates pilot, offering several benefits including increased revenue retention, ability to access funding towards local growth and infrastructure and encouraging greater economic growth.

The budget papers outline how the proposed £8.6m savings are allocated departmentally including £4m in Adults and Housing, £2m in Corporate Services and £1m in Children's for 2024/25. The savings proposals, included as part of the budget papers, include a focus on demand management, debt-remodelling, and the move to four weekly collections of pulpable waste.

The departmental savings are presented as targets with more detailed plans to be developed. An indicative future savings requirement of £20.6m has also been identified for 2025/26 although no detailed Medium-Term Financial Plan or Strategy has been set. Peers recommend that the council continue work, at pace, to develop detailed proposals and plans in support of the departmental savings required. The

council should engage more widely with councillors and officers on the financial challenges faced to ensure the position is owned and understood by all.

Bolton Council has a reasonable level of overall reserves which stand at £171.59m (excluding the Designated School Grant deficit). LG Inform Data[3] shows that Bolton's level of reserves as a percentage of service spend and net revenue expenditure is better than the average of their statistical nearest neighbours (2022/2023).

The information presented as part of the council's budget papers show how these reserves include a mixture of useable and non-usable reserves. There are several centrally held reserves with a lack of clarity on their purpose, e.g. general fund balance, corporate budget reserve, financial resilience reserve. Greater explanation or clarity for the purpose of holding these reserves should be provided in the year-end management accounts.

The council have been relying on reserves to balance previous years budgets. The budget for 2024/2025 also includes the use of £10m reserves to balance the budget. This reliance on reserves is unsustainable in the longer term. The council's future approach to transformation and demand management work, referenced elsewhere in this report, is an important part of meeting the council's future financial challenges.

LG inform data shows that the council compares favourably or around the average of its statistical nearest neighbours across a range of financial indicators. These include total spending power per dwelling, debt servicing as a percentage of core spending power and total debt as a percentage of core spending power. As outlined in section 5.1, social care spend also compares more favourably to that of its statistical neighbours (2022/2023).

The council's current approach to the production of financial data needs to be strengthened. The council should produce more regular, published quarterly budget monitoring reports as part of formal meetings of the Cabinet. The peer team encourage the council to produce monthly in-year financial monitoring for CLT and Cabinet to monitor the financial health of the council between published reports. This will help to increase transparency and senior leadership oversight of the budget. It is

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[3] LG Inform is the Local Government Associations benchmarking tool for councils

important to ensure that both Cabinet and CLT are sighted on issues and actions required on a regular basis.

Peers learned how the process of producing quarterly useable financial information relies on data manipulation outside of current financial ICT systems. This means it takes time and officer capacity to produce meaningful financial data. We recommend that you review your financial systems to ensure they are facilitating the production of financial information and reports.

This challenge is replicated in the final management accounts which shows the capital budget is re-set as revised budget and the spend matches the revised budget. The council should consider monitoring spend in relation to the capital programme against the original budget and reporting on significant variances.

Peers met with directors from across the council and were impressed with the strong ownership, understanding and grip they demonstrated in relation to their directorate budgets. There is an opportunity to build on this by strengthening the 'one council' corporate approach through the production of monthly financial monitoring information for both Cabinet and CLT. Directorates currently manage their own allocation reserves and see these as belonging to them. There are opportunities to centralise reserves, set a consistent approach to managing financial risk across the council and strengthen corporate oversight and alignment with corporate priorities.

The council needs to develop a longer term, four-year, MTFS. This will need to be aligned to the new Corporate Plan and agreed corporate priorities. The current financial plan is for the next two years when best practice indicates a four-year plan. It is recognised that planning into the future is always difficult with uncertainty surrounding future funding settlements and service demands. However, this should not prevent the council from establishing a clear 4-year plan based on assumptions within the model and how the Council will manage risk against these assumptions. As outlined in section 5.1 of this report, this will help to strengthen Bolton's 'one council' corporate approach in support of the council's priorities and future financial sustainability. Explanation of the assumptions over the four years should be provided. The council has taken a similarly short-term view on its capital programme, setting out detailed plans to 2025/26. The council is establishing a more longer-term

vision and strategic plans for the council and should consider establishing an affordable capital programme that matches these ambitions.

The External Auditor's report for 2022/2023 (issued to the Audit Committee in March 2024) is not yet complete. The report shows "*we are yet to complete our work in respect of the council's arrangements for the year ended 31 March".* However, the same report says that although work is still ongoing, they have identified a risk of significant weakness regarding Value for Money and arrangements for financial sustainability. In particular, the report references the issues outlined above, including the council's reliance on reserves and projected annual budget deficits. The auditor is planning to look at this further including further discussions with senior management before confirming this opinion.

5.5 Capacity for improvement

As outlined in section 5.1, Bolton Council has skilled, dedicated, and caring staff focussed on making a difference. Councillors who met with the peer team are knowledgeable ward members with a strong commitment and pride in delivering improved outcomes for people.

It is positive that the council has an agreed values and behaviours framework in place. These values and behaviours include 'making a difference', 'honesty and respect', 'determination', 'working together' and 'accountability'. The peer team found that these values and behaviours were demonstrated in conversations and interactions the peer team had with a range of officers. .

The peer team were also impressed with the strength of talent at Assistant Director and heads of service level. Peers understand that Assistant Directors come together bi-monthly with the CLT to form the wider leadership team. This is to support collaboration on joint projects. The peer team recommend that the council should continue to create opportunities for Assistant Directors and heads of service to come together in support of corporate projects and priorities. This will also contribute towards a one council ethos and a shared understanding of the new Council Plan and priorities.

The council's current approach to change and transformation was launched in 2022

through the recruitment of 'change managers'. Their role is to support corporate change and transformation projects. The council's position statement shows how there are six live projects and four projects have been completed.

A programme management office is led by the Deputy Director of Corporate Resources. We heard how an area of particular focus has included Corporate Property. There are some current staff vacancies and associated capacity issues within the service. However, it is positive that the council is seeking to address this through the appointment of a new Assistant Director (Corporate Property) and on-going recruitment to the vacant posts.

The work undertaken to date has provided strong foundations to build the council's transformation approach. The peer team recommend that the council undertakes further work to engage officers and councillors on a clearer vision and aims for transformation. In particular, how this is aligned to the new Corporate Plan and the council's Digital Strategy. It is also important that the council addresses and invests in capacity to enable the delivery of the future transformation priorities.

Peers were impressed to learn about the Bolton Research and Intelligence Network (BRAIN). This group is designed to facilitate cross directorate collaboration amongst data analysts. The council should build on this network and undertake work to ensure the council is more 'data led'. It is important that the Digital Strategy facilitates this through provision of the essential ICT and data tools required.

The opportunities to be more data led also relate to the council's corporate Human Resources team. It is important that corporate systems support the timely production of data and insight in relation the council's workforce. For example, in relation to attendance management data. Peers also picked up that, whilst there are good examples of workforce strategies within directorates, there are opportunities to develop a Corporate Workforce Strategy. This should cover staff recruitment, retention, succession planning and how to market the council as the 'employer of choice'.

The peer team understand that a councillor casework system has been implemented, but over time its profile has declined, and it isn't being used consistently across the

council. It is recommended that work is undertaken with councillors to review the current system and opportunities for strengthening this. A well-managed system can support councillors in receiving timely responses to their queries and deliver real insight into their work.

Peers found a strong commitment to supporting staff through the organisational development programme. The council's position statement shows how this has involved delivery of over 600 courses to over 7100 trainees over the past 12 months. Peers heard from a number of officers who spoke highly of the council's apprenticeship scheme with examples of how this is helping to grow talent across the workforce.

Throughout this report, peers have highlighted a need to ensure appropriate corporate capacity in core central areas. This is in support of council priorities and to deliver at pace. Essentially, this covers democratic services, Policy, Finance and Human Resources. It will also need to be considered in relation to audit and risk as part of the move to a hosted internal audit model for delivery with a neighbouring council.

6. Next steps

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

The progress review will provide space for a council's senior leadership to report to peers on the progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations, discuss early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC action plan. The progress review will usually be delivered on-site over one day.

The date for the progress review at Bolton Council will be agreed over the coming weeks.

In the meantime, Claire Hogan. Principal Adviser for the North West, is the main

contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Claire is available to discuss any further support the council requires and can be contacted via email: Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk

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[i] LG Inform is the Local Government Associations performance benchmarking tool