

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Gloucestershire County Council

14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> November 2023

Feedback report





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# 1. Executive summary

Gloucestershire has tremendous assets and advantages, along with significant future opportunities – all of which would be the envy of many. There is good partnership working across a range of priorities within the county and partners have shown they can be happy to look to Gloucestershire County Council for leadership on strategic issues and opportunities where appropriate. The council has been instrumental in the significant investment that is being secured to enhance the county's infrastructure. Important progress in children's services has been secured.

The key elements that will define the strategic direction of Gloucestershire, including its vision, core partnerships and the structures that will shape and drive delivery, are in transition. This is not unique to Gloucestershire. There is much to build on and positive progress has been made. 'Leadership Gloucestershire' is a valued forum whose primary role is to promote collaboration and joint working across Gloucestershire. The City Region Board concept has emerged and is largely viewed positively, with it crucially featuring all seven councils within Gloucestershire.

The council and partners jointly developed the 'Gloucestershire 2050 Vision' in 2018 through a 'county-wide conversation'. Whilst there are different levels of understanding as to where the Vision now sits, key elements of it have been drawn into the Council Strategy. Key aspects of the Vision still resonate with, and are valued by, many partners across the county. An engagement process has taken place around the devising of a five-year economic development strategy. The emerging strategy is coming to be seen both internally and externally as an alternative for the Vision but, by definition, is neither as broad nor as comprehensive. In this context, we would recommend the council build on its strategic leadership role to work with partners to shape the evolution of a refreshed vision for growth in Gloucestershire.



The style and approach of the council in how and where it engages forms strong perceptions amongst partners. Whilst there is much that is good in how they work together, tensions clearly exist between the county and the district and borough levels in Gloucestershire. These seem to be centred on the approach to Local Plans, Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 funding contributions. The approach the council took to partnership working in the recent bid for the nuclear fusion reactor represents a really good model and approach to follow in terms of place leadership and engagement with partners and should come to be consistently applied.

Generally constructive and co-operative relationships are seen to exist between officers and elected members. There are also felt to be constructive relationships between the different political groups on the council. Elected member induction following the elections in 2021 is seen to have been intense. This, combined with the fact that it was undertaken during the pandemic, means there is some refreshing that would be good to undertake.

Overview and Scrutiny is seen to deliver its best work through ‘task and finish’ activity. There is felt to be significant scope to develop its work though. Being able to focus more on what really matters in the county and the organisation is key and more co-ordinated work programming may have a role to play here with. We noted the way in which the Forward Plan for the Executive is seen to have a limited time horizon, with it not routinely exceeding the 28 days limit to publish decisions in advance. This impacts Overview and Scrutiny being able to work programme to maximum effect and limits the scope for undertaking pre-decision scrutiny and policy development.

The Cabinet and Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) are usefully carving out more time together. People reflected a marked and positive change in the managerial leadership culture within the council in recent years. CLT is seen to have become more collaborative, visible and engaging, both individually and collectively, and people are very welcoming of this. Some important ‘top team development’ has been taking place at CLT level supporting this and this should continue. At the senior managerial levels, there remains a sense of the leadership focus being on service and Directorate-based functional ‘domains’ rather than collective leadership. There is still a ‘journey to go on’ in developing cross-organisational dialogue, understanding and approaches.

External judgements are seen to have been the ‘catalyst’ for the council driving improvement in some spheres. The council has strengthened its assurance mechanisms subsequently, particularly around major improvement programmes. It was widely acknowledged during our discussions that there is a lack of clarity around what respectively represents ‘transformation’, ‘improvement’ and ‘business as usual’ within the council’s activity and the related monitoring and reporting arrangements. Senior leaders will want to assess the sustainability of the existing arrangements given the intense demands they place on meeting time; that there is sufficient cross-council assessment of interdependencies between the programmes; and that the right issues are highlighted, heard, focused on and overseen at the appropriate level. Adequate capacity needs to be dedicated to ensuring appropriate assurance around the driving of improvement in key ‘corporate enablers’ centred upon ICT, digital and data and intelligence.


Whilst facing the same challenging financial pressures as most councils, the authority reflects that “the financial standing of the council is sound”. The Statement of Accounts for 2021/22 was signed off by the External Auditors with no significant issues raised. The council has a track record of delivering balanced budgets overall and the latest forecast for 2023/24 shows a balanced end-of-year position. However,

within the overall balanced budgets over the years, significant underspends and overspends have been seen across different functions. The council demonstrates a track record of being able and willing to inject additional resource into priorities when they emerge. General Fund balances have fallen in recent years and the External Auditor has commented that they may be on the low side, although we understand a move has been made in the last couple of months in response to this.

Budget proposals for 2024-25 are emerging and the related process is seen to have been comprehensive and inclusive in recent years. The 'Star Chamber' process probing growth bids and savings proposals represents a valuable approach in terms of rigour but could usefully shift from having a Directorate by Directorate focus to one centred more on outcomes and cross-organisational working. The potential also exists to extend the horizon for thinking around addressing the financial challenge, enabling a shift from what is a largely year by year approach to considering the budget currently.

We met a large number of talented officers and councillors who are hugely committed, are delivering much good work and are passionate about delivering services for the people and communities of Gloucestershire. People spoke positively about the way they are supported by their managers and there seems to be good uptake of appraisals. The council is willing to invest in, grow and develop its existing staff. This links closely with a drive to generate employment opportunities for local people, including young people.

The ICT infrastructure across the organisation is impacting significantly on its effectiveness. Some staff reported that it is even impacting their health and well-being. It is recognised that things have improved in relation to ICT during the course of the last couple of years but even with the major investment that has been made, issues still exist. The necessary further improvement must be made a more demonstrable corporate priority and we recommend that the council prioritise



continued investment in ICT as an enabler to the council's operations. This includes ensuring the associated funding, expertise and leadership needed for the future are established and the driving forward of this is made an equal part of the council's overall transformation portfolio. There also needs to be a clearer narrative for staff and councillors about what has been delivered already in the way of ICT improvement and the roadmap for further progress.

Key corporate support functions generally enjoy good relationships with Directorates. However, there is a fundamental question as to how finite corporate support comes to be deployed. Currently it would seem to fall to individual support functions to determine for themselves how best to cope with the requests being made of them for support from across the wider organisation. This places them in a rather invidious position and there is a desire to see more collective endeavour and strategic thinking in determining the priorities.

A number of staff groups reported feeling very stretched and yet the pressures in Gloucestershire feel to be similar to elsewhere in terms of demand, complexity and workforce and the council is relatively well positioned in terms of its resource-base. This suggests that prioritisation should come to the fore as a key issue for the organisation, along with addressing the underlying ICT issues which are impacting capacity. In relation to workloads, people indicated that when they raise this they keep being told that they "are being heard". However, their experience is that little seems to change in relation to prioritisation and things stopping.

The equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda has made much important progress. There is a lot of work being delivered particularly at Staff Network level and the agenda has generated huge engagement. We recommend, however, an on-going demonstration of greater join up around EDI and it being 'lived and breathed'

by the entire cohort of leaders in order to help cement it as a priority in the organisation.

In conclusion, the council has huge potential to fly. Enabling this will require ongoing commitment to strong partnerships across the council, the county and beyond and providing the necessary corporate service enablers, including addressing the constraints in its core IT infrastructure.

## 2. Key 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:

### **Recommendation 1**

Build on the council's strategic leadership role to work with partners to shape the evolution of a refreshed vision for growth in Gloucestershire

### **Recommendation 2**

Prioritise the continued investment in IT as an enabler to the council's operations and make its improvement a demonstrable and equal part of the council's overall transformation portfolio, with associated funding, expertise and leadership

### **Recommendation 3**

Ensure the equalities, diversity and inclusion agenda is 'lived and breathed' by the entire cohort of leaders



#### **Recommendation 4**

Enable greater collective corporate leadership and the development of cross-organisational dialogue, understanding and approaches

#### **Recommendation 5**

Demonstrate to people within the organisation that they are being heard and responded to

#### **Recommendation 6**

Enable a greater focus on prioritised outcomes for communities through the more effective use of cross-cutting data and intelligence

### **3. Summary of the peer challenge approach**

#### **3.1 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 on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Owen Mapley (Chief Executive – Hertfordshire County Council)
- Councillor Keith Glazier (Leader – East Sussex County Council, Conservative)
- Councillor Sarah Butikofer (North Norfolk District Council, Liberal Democrat)
- Meredith Dixon-Teasdale (Director of Children’s Services – Sheffield City Council)
- Angela Jones (Director of Thriving Places – Westmorland and Furness Council)
- Paul Britton (on secondment to the LGA from Homes England and leading on

the One Public Estate programme in the South-West of England)

- Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

### 3.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all corporate peer challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
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?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

The council asked that, within this, the team explore:

- The council's effectiveness in leading partners towards achieving the vision for future growth in Gloucestershire
- How effectively the council is aligning its corporate resources to drive transformation and improvement organisationally whilst supporting improvement within specific areas such as Fire, Children's Services and Adults

### 3.3 The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team 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 its context, challenges and opportunities. The team then spent three and a half days onsite in the county of Gloucestershire, during which they:


- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
- Spoke to more than 150 people, including a range of council staff, 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.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1 Local priorities and outcomes

Gloucestershire has tremendous assets and advantages, along with significant future opportunities – all of which would be the envy of many. It includes the urban and rural mix and the beauty of the county, with just over half of the geography being made up of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The council indicates that most



local people enjoy a high standard of living and that levels of health and well-being are comfortably above the national average. There is also an exciting growth agenda.

The county has a diverse economy, not being overly reliant on any single large company or sector, being historically strong in the defence and aerospace sectors, having a significant manufacturing presence and hosting the head offices of a number of national and international companies. It is also a major centre for banking, finance, insurance and cyber and is home to a number of Government agencies. However, the greatest proportion of employment (at 15 per cent) is in the wholesale and retail trade. More than 83% of the working age population work within the county, establishing it as a strong functional economic area in its own right.

Potentially uniquely, Gloucestershire is coterminous in virtually all of the partnership structures within the county, including the single Integrated Care Board; one Police Constabulary and a Police and Crime Commissioner covering Gloucestershire; and a single Local Enterprise Partnership.

There is good partnership working across a range of priorities within Gloucestershire and partners have shown they can be happy to look to the council for leadership on strategic issues and opportunities where appropriate. People highlighted the approach taken during the pandemic, involving both the way partner organisations worked jointly and how communities pulled together, with innovation and creativity to the fore. Another example is the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme, which has seen more than 1,400 people being welcomed by around 600 hosts. The multi-agency partnership co-ordinating the response has involved district and borough councils; health bodies; the Department for Work and Pensions; police; and voluntary and community sector organisations as well as the county council. In response to the wider agenda around asylum seekers and refugees, the Gloucestershire


Strategic Migration Partnership has been established to consider issues across housing, health, safeguarding, employment and community integration.

Another example of good partnership working in a priority area is the work overseen by Gloucestershire's Strategic Housing Partnership, focused on responding to and addressing the issue of rough sleeping. This has seen the county and six district and borough councils, health partners and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner jointly investing in dedicated services to support rough sleepers. It entails close working with partners in the voluntary sector to ensure holistic support.

The 'Climate Leadership Gloucestershire' forum sees the seven councils and other strategic partners working jointly to raise the profile and level of action on climate change and develop solutions.

The council has been instrumental in the significant investment that is being secured to enhance the county's infrastructure, with a £1.5bn 'pipeline' of projects. This includes the A417 'Missing Link' to facilitate improved journeys in both the north and south of the county; the enhancement of junction 10 of the M5; and £20m investment in the Arle Court Transport Hub to enable more journeys by sustainable modes of travel. One thousand electric vehicle charging points are being installed across the county and a 26 mile £40m 'cycle spine' is being established linking urban centres including Gloucester and Cheltenham. Around £150m is being invested in new schools, including a carbon zero school in Leckhampton, and a new social, emotional and mental health needs school in Brockworth.

There is a rich supply of information on the place that the council and partners serve. This includes a clear understanding of the overall rate of population growth of over eight per cent during the last decade, which is higher than the national average, but also the differentiation that exists around this in terms of growth in Tewkesbury making it the eighth fastest growing district or unitary council area in England and



Wales. Projected population growth for Gloucestershire in the ten years to 2028 is substantially higher than the average for England, at 7.9 per cent compared to 5 per cent. The proportion of the population aged 65 years or over is higher than the national average, whilst the converse applies in relation to those below that age range. The older population is anticipated to grow by nearly 25 per cent in the ten years to 2028.

Whilst it is generally affluent, Gloucestershire has pockets of significant and persistent deprivation. Males living in the most deprived areas of the county have a life expectancy 7.6 years lower than those in the most affluent places, whilst for females it is 5.8 years. Gross Value Added (GVA) per head of population in the county is above the average for the South-West but below the UK average. Issues of rural isolation and accessibility – including both transport and mobile and broadband connectivity – are well recognised.

‘Inform Gloucestershire’ is the council’s central source for information about the county and its districts, communities and residents. A project is underway with the ICB to enhance the Joint Strategic Needs Analysis (JSNA), including the use of data visualisation tools.

The Council Strategy 2022 – 2026 ‘Building Back Better in Gloucestershire’ clearly states the Administration’s priorities under the umbrella of the vision:

- “To make the most of all that Gloucestershire has to offer, help improve the quality of life for every community, support businesses to be successful and make sure the county is a place where people want to live, work and visit”

The priorities are:

- Tackling climate change

- Improving our roads
- Sustainable growth
- Levelling up our communities
- Securing investment for Gloucestershire
- Transforming children's services
- Transforming adult social care
- Transforming Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service
- Improving [council] customer experience

Important progress in children's services has been secured, with the OFSTED judgement for children having moved from 'Inadequate' to 'Requires Improvement' in 2022. The council reports good progress against its climate change targets within the organisation and progress in the provision of adult social care packages has impacted positively on transfers of care from health settings. Investment in highways enabled the filling of 20,000 more potholes this summer than would otherwise have been achievable.

Elected members of the council can access a range of councillor-led grant schemes. One relates to highways whilst another is focused on boosting market towns and high streets. The 'Building Back Better Councillor Grant Scheme' was created to support communities in recovering, rebuilding and protecting themselves in relation to the pandemic and is now having its remit extended into supporting 'levelling up' within communities. Such schemes enable councillors to respond directly to priorities within their Divisions.

Children's services are seen to be well advanced in the way that they draw upon data and intelligence. Within adult services, we understand that a targeted approach, informed by data and intelligence, served to boost take-up of direct payments for social care. Such approaches can be built upon, with there being seen to be significant potential for greater use of data and intelligence at both the council and

partnership level. More widespread effective use of cross-cutting data and intelligence would help to drive different ways of working in the council, developing cross-organisational and targeted approaches focused on delivering prioritised outcomes for communities. A key element of achieving this seems to be around enabling people within the council to understand more “the art of the possible” in terms of what data and intelligence can offer. This is an element of the remit of the council’s Strategic Intelligence function that it would like to have the capacity to extend, providing insights to colleagues as to the potential that exists and helping to shift things from the council being “data busy to data-driven”. Crucial to this, though, is having the necessary ICT infrastructure in the council, with people highlighting a lack of confidence currently in the quality of the data available to them, in a context of system issues that we touch on in more detail later.

Drawing on the ‘LG Inform’ data and performance information system which the Local Government Association hosts on behalf of the sector, it is feasible to see the following for Gloucestershire when compared to the 14 other councils in its Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) ‘family’ grouping of similar authorities, using the most recently available data:

Where Gloucestershire is amongst the better performers:

- Average attainment 8 score
- Proportion of 16 and 17 year olds who were not in education, employment or training (NEET)
- Proportion of population aged 16-64 qualified to at least Level 2
- Social care-related quality of life
- Number of affordable homes delivered
- Access to employment by public transport

Where Gloucestershire is less high performing:

- Permanent exclusions from primary schools



- Percentage of children becoming the subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time
- Children looked after rate

Where performance in Gloucestershire is around the average:

- Percentage of child protection cases which were reviewed within required timescales
- Care leavers in suitable accommodation
- Care leavers in education, employment or training
- Overall satisfaction of people who use services with their care and support

The following is a link to the 'Headline Report' for Gloucestershire in the LG Inform system:

[Headline Report for Gloucestershire County Council - Bar Chart View | LG Inform \(local.gov.uk\)](https://www.local.gov.uk/headline-report-for-gloucestershire-county-council-bar-chart-view)

## **4.2 Organisational and place leadership**

The key elements that will define the strategic direction of Gloucestershire, including its vision, core partnerships and the structures that will shape and drive delivery, are in transition. This is not unique to Gloucestershire given, for example, changes around Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and the health and social care integration agenda set from the national level.

There is much to build on and positive progress has been made. The council are seen as active members of the 'Western Gateway' and the GFirst LEP and it has worked well supporting the Integrated Care Board (ICB) in the commissioning of work looking into the urgent and emergency care system in Gloucestershire. There is

strong alignment of funding and commissioning approaches between the ICB and the council.

The integration of the LEP into the council is seen to be progressing smoothly, with the Chief Executive seconded to the role of Director of Economy and Environment in the council. The transition from the LEP needs to continue to be carefully managed in order to ensure that the council maintains the strong links and relationships that GFirst has established with the business sector. There is a similar consideration in relation to the six Growth Hubs as the funding mechanisms around the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which has been integral to their creation, change. There is a Growth Hub in each of the district and borough council areas, focused on supporting local businesses to develop.

'Leadership Gloucestershire' is a joint board comprising the political and managerial leaders across the seven councils in the county; the ICB; GFirst; and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner. It is a valued forum whose primary role is to promote collaboration and joint working across Gloucestershire. The week we were in Gloucestershire saw a meeting specifically convened to consider issues around asylum seekers and the growth in demand for temporary accommodation. The City Region Board concept has emerged and is largely viewed positively, with it crucially featuring all seven councils within Gloucestershire.

The council and partners jointly developed the 'Gloucestershire 2050 Vision' in 2018 through a 'county-wide conversation', involving around 2,500 contributions, to explore ideas and shape future direction and focus. Whilst there are different levels of understanding as to where the Vision now sits, key elements of it have been drawn into the Council Strategy. This includes the 'Ambitions' element, reflecting a county that is innovative; skilled; prosperous; inclusive; healthy; connected; sustainable and low carbon; and a magnet to grow the working age population. These initial eight ambitions have been supplemented in the Council Strategy with Gloucestershire

being a resilient county.

What the Vision contained still resonates with, and is valued by, many partners across the county. This includes the 'Super City' concept (entailing the creation of a third urban centre connecting Cheltenham and Gloucester) which has developed into the 'City Region'.

An engagement process around the devising of a five-year economic development strategy ran through the summer this year and the aim is to see the final version adopted in early 2024. It will feature a set of actions to deliver a strong and inclusive economy for communities and businesses, along with a series of topics such as inward investment; business support; digital; zero carbon; inclusive growth; skills and employment; and sustainable growth. The emerging strategy, being led on by the council and GFirst, is coming to be seen as an alternative for the Vision but, by definition, is neither as broad nor as comprehensive. In this context, we would recommend the council build on its strategic leadership role to work with partners to shape the evolution of a refreshed vision for growth in Gloucestershire.

The style and approach of the council in how and where it engages forms strong perceptions amongst partners. Whilst, as we have outlined, there is much that is good in how they work together, tensions clearly exist between the county and the district and borough levels in Gloucestershire. These seem to be centred on the approach to Local Plans, Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 funding contributions.

The approach the council took to partnership working in the recent bid for the nuclear fusion reactor represents a really good model and approach to follow in terms of place leadership and engagement with partners and should come to be consistently applied.

The council is seeking to develop greater consistency and effectiveness in consultation and engagement. It has a consultation framework, endorsed by the Consultation Institute, which sets out the approach being sought from across the organisation. The council is also using the Local Government Association's 'New Conversations Guide' to aid consistency and effectiveness in consultation and engagement. There are good examples within Public Health of the desired approach. Importantly, the council also has a desire to shift to more in the way of 'inclusive co-production' with service users, partners and communities.

#### **4.3 Governance and culture**

Generally constructive and co-operative relationships are seen to exist between officers and elected members, whether that be amongst Cabinet members and senior managerial leaders; between the Opposition and the Chief Executive and Executive Directors; with Overview and Scrutiny Chairs and officers in that sphere; or between less senior officers and backbench councillors on a day-to-day basis. The only caveats here relate to officer responsiveness to casework from elected members being seen to be inconsistent and some elected members highlighting 'finding things out after the event' in relation to their Division, thus putting them on the 'back foot'. The Democratic Services function is held in high regard by elected members.

There are also felt to be constructive relationships between the different political groups on the council. This is reflected in the positive response that has been seen in relation to Motions at Full Council, including around enhanced support for veterans and an increased emphasis on 'local and healthy' in relation to the council's catering provision across a range of spheres. Cabinet is also seen to seek to respond positively to recommendations that are put forward by Overview and Scrutiny. Opposition budget amendments have been embraced, amounting to £1.2m of

revenue spending and £500,000 of capital allocations during the budget-setting process for the financial year 2023/24.

Positive progress has been made to better inform and engage Opposition councillors, both by officers and the Administration. As examples, the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer each meet regularly with each of the political group Leaders; the Chief Executive holds collective meetings of the group Leaders prior to each Full Council; and officers have supported Opposition groups in developing proposals for amendments to the budget.

There is a valuing and respecting of the statutory Monitoring Officer, S151 Officer and Head of Paid Service roles and those officers meet regularly to help shape good governance. The council has developed a 'Code of Conduct' that is common to all three tiers of local government, building on the Local Government Association's model Code.

The council places a strong emphasis and importance on corporate parenting, with this featuring on the agenda regularly at Full Council meetings. This often takes the form of a report on the work of the council's Corporate Parenting Group which comprises both elected members and officers and meets four times per annum. Elected members indicated that they are very aware of their responsibilities as corporate parents.

Time and effort are invested in elected member induction and on-going training and development. The latter combines both direct provision from the council and the facilitation of links to what is on offer from other bodies, including the Local Government Association. As well as what is provided and facilitated corporately, each of the political groups has a funding pot to enable it to commission training and development directly. Elected member induction following the elections in 2021 is seen to have been intense. This, combined with the fact that it was undertaken

during the pandemic, means there is some refreshing that would be good to undertake. In particular, elected members highlighted a desire to get to know senior officers more and to learn their way around Shire Hall better.

Overview and Scrutiny is seen to deliver its best work through 'task and finish' activity. Examples include the 'Restoring our Rivers' work and a review of the council's approach to its rural estate, which is due to report soon and is seen to be likely to be thought-provoking. As we reflected earlier, Cabinet is seen to seek to respond positively to recommendations that are put forward by Overview and Scrutiny. Also, Overview and Scrutiny members take the opportunity to develop their understanding and insight with this reflected, for example, in recent visits to the Coroners Service and a drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility.

There is, however, felt to be significant scope to develop the work of Overview and Scrutiny. Central to this is being able to focus more on what really matters in the county and the organisation. More co-ordinated work programming may have a role to play here with, as we understand it, each Committee currently determining its own activities. We also noted the way in which the Forward Plan for the Executive is seen to have a limited time horizon, with it not routinely exceeding the 28 days limit to publish decisions in advance. This does not lend itself to Overview and Scrutiny being able to work programme to maximum effect and limits the scope for undertaking pre-decision scrutiny and policy development.

The Cabinet and Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) are usefully carving out more time together. CLT is seen to have become more collaborative, visible and engaging, both individually and collectively, and people are very welcoming of this. Some important 'top team development' has been taking place at CLT level supporting this and this should continue.

People we spoke to reflected a marked and positive change in the managerial leadership culture within the council in recent years. They highlighted a more collegiate and supportive style, including the increasing amounts of work to promote and enable positive outcomes on equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Staff we met spoke of it becoming easier to talk and ask openly within the organisation, referencing a feeling of increased “psychological safety”.

At the senior managerial levels, there remains a sense of the leadership focus being on service and Directorate-based functional ‘domains’ rather than collective leadership. There is still a ‘journey to go on’ in developing cross-organisational dialogue, understanding and approaches. There was an appetite for seeing this and being involved in it amongst some of those we spoke to immediately below the senior-most managerial leadership levels. Aspects of this include developing more corporate approaches to addressing the council’s budget challenges and determining how the finite support available from key corporate functions, such as finance, communications, legal and HR, comes to be deployed to greatest effect.

Reporting and performance management arrangements have been strengthened and intensified and this is delivering benefits. The introduction of ‘Finance, Performance and Risk Meetings’, which are conducted quarterly by the Leader and Chief Executive with Portfolio Holders and respective Executive Directors and Directors, has been particularly welcomed. People reflected positively on the opportunities the approach provides to engage with the senior-most political and managerial leadership.

The council has a wide range of other assurance mechanisms, including publicly reporting in an annual plan its progress in delivery of the Council Strategy, with this founded upon a core dataset of around 100 indicators. CLT considers a quarterly strategic performance report and the same has been re-introduced for Cabinet

meetings after a gap of several years. A quarterly overview of performance is also reported to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

External judgements are seen to have been the 'catalyst' for the council driving improvement in some spheres, notably children's services and the Fire and Rescue Service. The council has strengthened its assurance mechanisms subsequently, particularly around major improvement programmes. This includes the Children's Improvement and Transformation (Ambitions) Board; Adults Transformation Board; Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service Improvement Board; and Highways Improvement Board, overseeing the respective improvement programmes in these areas. The Chief Executive chairs three of these four and the Leader is also involved in the same ones. They all feature the relevant Portfolio Holder/s.

The scale of monitoring and reporting around these boards and programmes, combined with on-going reporting of performance to the likes of Cabinet and CLT, is extensive and is absorbing significant capacity. It was widely acknowledged during our discussions that there is a lack of clarity around what respectively represents 'transformation', 'improvement' and 'business as usual' within all of this activity. Senior leaders will want to assess the sustainability of the existing arrangements given the intense demands this places on meeting time; that there is sufficient cross-council assessment of interdependencies between the programmes; and that the right issues are highlighted, heard, focused on and overseen at the appropriate level.

Adequate capacity needs to be dedicated to ensuring appropriate assurance around the driving of improvement in key 'corporate enablers' centred upon ICT, digital and data and intelligence. We noted, for example, that the 'One Programme' and similar initiatives seem to be subject to less scrutiny, although their successful delivery is key to the future success of the organisation. It is important for the council's assurance mechanisms to identify issues as they emerge and ahead of any



requirement for more major improvement being identified.

The council's organisational values and behaviours (accountable, integrity, empower, respect and excellence) have been developed through staff engagement. They are seen to be embedded in recruitment, induction and appraisal approaches. The 2021/22 employee engagement survey, which is the most recent one for which results are available, indicates that 99 per cent of respondents understand the values and behaviours and 92 per cent feel their line manager demonstrates them.

#### **4.4 Financial planning and management**

Whilst facing the same challenging financial pressures as most councils, the authority reflects in its Position Statement, produced to inform our work, that "the financial standing of the council is sound". The Statement of Accounts for 2021/22 was signed off by the External Auditors with no significant issues raised. The Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the Council Strategy are seen to link closely and the council's capital programme of £536m is fully funded.

The council has a track record of delivering balanced budgets overall and the latest forecast for 2023/24 shows a balanced end-of-year position against the revenue budget of £567m. Within the overall balanced budgets over the years, however, significant underspends and overspends have been seen across different functions, such as an £18m overspend in Children and Families in 2022/23. The current year is seeing £5m of due savings being reported as at risk, equating to 24 per cent of the council's target, which poses a risk to delivering balanced budgets going forward.

The council demonstrates a track record of being able and willing to inject additional resource into priorities when they emerge, such as £17m being added to the budget for children's services in setting the budget for the current year. There are flexible

reserves for key areas, including the 'Adult Care Reserve' and the 'Children Reserve' which were created this year. The council has also established a capital fund for investment and transformation projects. However, General Fund balances have fallen in recent years and the External Auditor has commented that they may be on the low side, although we understand a move has been made in the last couple of months in response to this. It should also be highlighted that the council has established a separate 'Pay and Prices' reserve in response to specific risks being faced.

Budget proposals for 2024-25 are emerging and the related process is seen to have been comprehensive and inclusive in recent years. This includes input from the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the opportunity that exists for them to make recommendations to Cabinet and Council. As we touched on earlier, the budget-setting process has also enabled amendments from Opposition groups to be incorporated. The 'Star Chamber' process probing growth bids and savings proposals represents a valuable approach in terms of rigour but could usefully shift from having a Directorate by Directorate focus to one centred more on outcomes and cross-organisational working.

The potential also exists to extend the horizon for thinking around addressing the financial challenge. This would see, under the auspices of a more detailed MTFs, more in the way of ideas and proposals that may take a few years to come into being but on which work could start now. It would also enable a shift from what is a largely year by year approach to considering the budget currently. In positing this, we recognise that determining the financial position and medium-term funding challenge in any degree of detail is difficult for any council currently. This shouldn't, however, curb the contributing and developing from across the organisation of longer-term ideas that would offer potential.

## 4.5 Capacity for improvement

We met a large number of talented officers and councillors who are hugely committed, are delivering much good work and are passionate about delivering services for the people and communities of Gloucestershire. The results from the employee engagement survey indicate that 90 per cent of respondents enjoy the work they do; 84 per cent are proud to tell people where they work; and 95 per cent know what is expected of them.

People spoke positively about the way they are supported by their managers and there seems to be good uptake of appraisals. There is a range of internal communications mechanisms in place, including 'Talksmart' (the staff E-newsletter), 'Managers Brief' (the E-newsletter for this level), live question and answer (Q & A) sessions in Directorates, Employee Voice Groups and quarterly Leadership Conferences for senior managers. There are some slight frustrations emerging around aspects relating to responsiveness where people are being invited to pose questions to senior leaders, including through Q & A sessions or dedicated e-mail facilities, but aren't consistently receiving a reply. Some staff also highlighted difficulties in accessing and navigating Staffnet, the council's Intranet facility.

The EDI agenda has made much important progress and this is hugely welcomed by staff. There is a lot of work being delivered particularly at Staff Network level and the agenda has generated huge engagement. The council undertook a self-assessment against the Equality Framework for Local Government last year. This has led to the development of an action plan with four objectives:

- Improve the quality and consistency of service user data and workforce equality characteristics
- Develop an infrastructure that enables the council to hear from communities and engage effectively with them

- Embed EDI within the council's culture and ways of working
- Strengthen leadership, oversight and governance of EDI across the council

Much of this links closely with our recommendation of there being an on-going demonstration of greater join up around EDI and it being 'lived and breathed' by the entire cohort of leaders in order to help cement it as a priority in the organisation.

The council has refreshed its approach to Equalities Impact Assessments. It has also adopted the 'Stepping Up' initiative that exists in the South-West region which seeks to provide a 'pipeline' of diverse leadership talent for a range of sectors from amongst disabled, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities and women. The authority has also established its own 'Flourish' positive action development programme and is proud of having secured 'White Ribbon' accreditation as it champions engagement with men and boys to end violence against women and girls.

The council has adopted a mature and pragmatic approach to 'agile' working in the post-pandemic period. An 'agile' toolkit is being used to support services in determining how, when and where each team will work, recognising the need to be able to tailor approaches.

The council is willing to invest in, grow and develop its existing staff. This links closely with a drive to generate employment opportunities for local people, including young people. It is using the Apprenticeship Levy to fund training and development for staff in areas that are proving difficult to recruit to. The authority's apprenticeships programme is fantastic, with 264 placements in the council currently. Aspects of the programme include specific routes into social work, teaching and firefighting and a more generic element supporting school leavers in entering the public sector. A 'Social Work Academy' for children's services has been established and the extension of this to adult services is being considered.

The council invests in leadership and management development. A joint Leadership Academy between the Fire and Rescue Service and the Police in Gloucestershire has been established. The council delivers programmes and activities such as 'Growing Great Managers', 'Leadership Insights' and the 'Manager's Framework'. People highlighted that accessing management training is difficult given the limited availability of places on the programmes. There is also recognition in the council's Position Statement that "our focus has been on developing strong leadership and that there have been fewer training opportunities for the wider workforce".

The ICT infrastructure across the organisation is impacting significantly on its effectiveness. Some staff reported that it is even impacting their health and well-being. It is recognised that things have improved in relation to ICT during the course of the last couple of years but even with the major investment that has been made, issues still exist. The necessary further improvement must be made a more demonstrable corporate priority and we recommend that the council prioritise continued investment in ICT as an enabler to the council's operations. This includes ensuring the associated funding, expertise and leadership needed for the future are established and the driving forward of this, including the 'One Programme' and work on the customer and digital, is made an equal part of the council's overall transformation portfolio along with children's services, Fire and Rescue and adults services. There also needs to be a clearer narrative for staff and councillors about what has been delivered already in the way of ICT improvement and the roadmap for further progress.

Key corporate support functions generally enjoy good relationships with Directorates. However, there is a fundamental question as to how finite corporate support comes to be deployed. Currently it would seem to fall to individual support functions to determine for themselves how best to cope with the requests being made of them for support from across the wider organisation. This places them in a rather invidious position and there is a desire to see more collective endeavour and strategic thinking

in determining the priorities. This is central to the question the council posed us in terms of probing how effectively it is aligning its corporate resources to drive transformation and improvement organisationally whilst supporting improvement within specific areas. Individual corporate support functions should not be left to have to determine for themselves how they allocate their resource. There are also considerations around how effectively the corporate support functions are being enabled to operate, in a context of the ICT issues already highlighted.

A good example of a corporate approach to key support activities was the collective determining of a council communications strategy at CLT level. This, however, was followed by Directorate-based discussions on their priorities under this umbrella, which served again to create a situation in which the corporate function was left to determine whose needs would be prioritised. Another example relates to the procurement function, which represents one of the council's strategic priorities for improvement. The authority has recently recruited expertise to lead in this area and this has been widely welcomed. However, a risk-based capacity review looking at determining the procurement needs of the wider organisation and how these could best be supported has again created a situation in which that function is left to determine the priority order of things. There is also a general frustration on the part of corporate support functions that their expertise is often sought 'late in the day' rather than being woven in at the outset of a service or Directorate's thinking.

A number of staff groups reported feeling very stretched and yet the pressures in Gloucestershire feel to be similar to elsewhere in terms of demand, complexity and workforce and the council is relatively well positioned in terms of its resource-base. This suggests that prioritisation should come to the fore as a key issue for the organisation, along with addressing the underlying ICT issues which are impacting capacity.


In relation to workloads, people indicated that when they raise this they keep being told that they “are being heard”. However, their experience is that little seems to change in relation to prioritisation and things stopping.

Eighty-one per cent of respondents to the employee engagement survey indicated they feel the council supports their health and well-being at work and there is seen to be a good range of welfare support. This includes the employee assistance programme, the in-house counselling service and a stakeholder group, plan and hub around health and well-being. The council also provides ‘managing resilient team’ workshops, mental health E-learning for managers, toolkits to support wellbeing conversations and a stress indicator tool. With anxiety, stress and depression acting, as we understand it, as the key causal factors in relation to sickness absence in the council, establishing a more preventative approach, centred on helping people prioritise workloads and ensuring they ‘have the tools to do the job’, would be preferable. Linked to this, the authority will wish to be mindful of the need to ensure identified and agreed ‘reasonable adjustments’ to people’s working arrangements and facilities are consistently delivered in a timely manner.

As we outlined earlier, we met a large number of talented officers and councillors who are hugely committed, are delivering much good work and are passionate about delivering services for the people and communities of Gloucestershire. In this context, it was surprising to glean that success doesn’t seem to be celebrated to any great extent in the organisation. There is much for the council and the people within it to be proud of and we would encourage the organisation to celebrate this more.

## 5. Next steps

It is recognised that the council’s senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.



Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The corporate peer challenge process includes a Progress Review, the findings from which need to be publicly reported within twelve months of the corporate peer challenge. The Progress Review provides space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on the authority's progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for the South-West region, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Paul is available to discuss any further support the council requires and can be reached via [paul.clarke@local.gov.uk](mailto:paul.clarke@local.gov.uk)