

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

North Somerset Council

23<sup>rd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> January 2024

Feedback report





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# 1. Executive summary

North Somerset Council is felt to be a very different organisation to that of a few years ago. The organisational culture is seen to have improved significantly and the council is much more engaged with local communities and partners. The council is clearly ambitious and striving hard to benefit the places and the people that it serves.

An 'open, fair and green' North Somerset has become firmly established in recent years as the council's Vision. The Corporate Plan will need to continue to evolve in order that it reflects the key tangible deliverables and the impacts and outcomes to be sought in line with shared political priorities across the Administration. 'Bold and brave' political leadership will be required going forward to respond effectively to the challenges North Somerset is facing.

The council is very well positioned. There is great potential to be fulfilled and the key ingredients are in place. It is a solid local authority with relative stability; a sound financial track record; a valued approach to partnership working; good delivery across a range of services; and a constructive and supportive environment internally for people to operate in. The key question that we would pose is how the council now takes the opportunity to evolve further in relation to its role, its influence and how it operates, with key considerations around:

- The key drivers for the organisation – essentially what it attaches importance to and where it focuses
- The nature of the council's relationships with communities and the approach to 'place' and 'localities' in North Somerset
- North Somerset's place in the region
- How to evolve strategic partnership working further

North Somerset's community is growing and changing and the council and its partners are responding to the related opportunities and challenges, with services increasingly reaching into and working with communities. This reflects the potential of community engagement and empowerment becoming more fully integrated into

the wider thinking about the council's role and how it operates. Overall, the approach in the council to community engagement can be seen to be developing, with pockets of good practice that need to be embedded and become more systematic.

The council's political and managerial leadership have demonstrated a robust focus on the importance of reducing emissions and adapting to climate change. A 'climate emergency' was declared in 2019 and an ambitious target has been set for North Somerset as a place to be carbon neutral by 2030. The council may wish to reflect on the current resource levels focused on its work in this area and consider how best to mainstream climate thinking and actions across the organisation. We would recommend that the council reviews its climate targets which are recognised internally and externally as being beyond what the organisation is currently geared to enabling and facilitating.

There are respectful and stronger relationships between officers and elected members at all levels of the council. This is a key element of the wider cultural change of recent years. The Leader is widely seen to have an inclusive style and approach and this is highly valued.

There is a mixed picture in terms of engagement on the part of councillors across the elected membership. As with any council, some councillors are seen to be more engaged in their communities than others and the take-up of elected member development activity is inconsistent. Things may, however, be more exaggerated than in other councils when it comes to participation in formal council meetings, with the authority having had to move recently to lower the threshold when certain bodies meet in order to ensure they are 'quorate'. Whilst many views were expressed as to why levels of engagement are so mixed, it is important for the causal factors to come to be understood and addressed rather than assumption and anecdotal evidence driving thinking and revised approaches.

There needs to be a clear understanding on the part of all elected members regarding the importance of engaging in their own development and a commitment to doing so. Also, we see a real need for the elected membership to be enabled to


come together much more in informal ways in order to build relationships and aid the exchange of learning.

Overview and Scrutiny offers real potential as a key element of the council's governance arrangements but is widely seen to not yet be operating to best effect. The Chairs of the Policy and Scrutiny Panels are absolutely committed to seeking to make a difference through the work of these forums. A key aspect of fulfilling the potential of Overview and Scrutiny will be seeking to balance the respective elements of the 'policy' and 'scrutiny' remits of the Panels. We see a need for more support on an on-going basis for the Chairs and the Panels. This support needs to be both internally and externally provided and enable the agenda and work programme of Panels to be fully owned by their members.

A 'mini-governance review' is being embarked upon by the council and there was a wide range of views and perspectives amongst people we spoke to regarding the focus of it. We see an urgent requirement for clarity and transparency to be established in relation to the scope and status of the review.

The council received an 'Unqualified' opinion on its 2021/22 and 2022/23 accounts and there is a good track record of delivering a balanced revenue out-turn. The 2022/23 budget responded to significant inflationary cost and demand pressures faced across a range of council services and this can be seen to have continued with the draft Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) that will inform budget-setting for 2024/25. The MTFP reflects a £13m gap in the council's budget across the four years to 2028. It is important for the council to identify how the remaining £4m of savings for next year (2024/25) will be secured and to consider the implications of any further use of the council's reserves, in order to ensure its financial sustainability does not come to be at risk.

North Somerset Council is an organisation that has good people working for it, demonstrating their commitment, passion and how invested they are in the place that they serve. In return, the council clearly demonstrates that it cares about its people. There is, though, a need to ensure that it balances the 'high support' that it provides



to its employees with the more consistent provision of 'high challenge' so that it exists across all directorates. We would also encourage the council to consider leadership development and the wider issue of succession planning.

The Chief Executive has been absolutely integral to the change in culture in the council. She has also been key to the council driving forward with partners locally and sub-regionally many of the issues and projects that are important in North Somerset. All of this has led to her being respected and held in high regard both internally and externally.

IT provision is seen as having progressed well in recent years and now to be good in terms of giving staff 'the kit to do the job' and aid remote and hybrid working. There is, though, less positivity around key systems that the council relies upon to manage the likes of finance, people and performance. In relation to this issue, the extent to which key internal support functions are contracted out, and the constraints and impacts of this way of working, should continue to be a key consideration for the council as it looks at how it is seeking to operate these services going forward.

There is a mature approach to hybrid working within the council. Staff reflected the benefits that they see being derived from it but they are also mindful of the aspects that are proving to be less positive. It feels timely to take stock of the hybrid working agenda in the council and identify any ways in which further adaptation might be beneficial. There is a key period of transition currently as the council seeks to reduce the level of office accommodation it occupies and the Town Hall in Weston-super-Mare is being reconfigured. Staff are keen to see both of these sets of changes being delivered smoothly and effectively, enhancing ways of working still further.

## 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

- Consider the opportunity for the council to evolve further in relation to its role, its influence and how it operates – with key considerations around the key drivers for the organisation (essentially what it attaches importance to and where it focuses); the nature of its relationships with communities and the approach to 'place' and 'localities'; North Somerset's place in the region; and how to evolve strategic partnership working further

### Recommendation 2

- Continue to work through the complex issues relating to North Somerset's place in the region and the 'devolution agenda' in order to ensure the council is positioned effectively to maximise benefits for the locality

### Recommendation 3

- Fully integrate community engagement into the wider thinking about the council's role and how it operates

### Recommendation 4

- Ensure that the Corporate Plan continues to evolve in order to reflect the key tangible deliverables and the impacts and outcomes to be sought in line with political priorities

### Recommendation 5

- Create the time and space for the strategic thinking and discussion necessary across the political and managerial leadership

### **Recommendation 6**

- Review North Somerset’s climate targets and refresh the related priorities to reflect the evidence base and available opportunities for working with partners

### **Recommendation 7**

- Develop clarity and transparency around the scope and status of the council’s ‘mini-governance review’ – which we suggest should focus on:
  - Engagement across the elected membership
  - Overview and Scrutiny
  - Elected member development

### **Recommendation 8**

- Progress development for the Executive and Corporate Leadership Team – for individuals, as two collectives and jointly

### **Recommendation 9**

- Identify how the remaining £4m of savings for 2024/25 will be secured and consider the implications of the council’s use of reserves, in order to ensure the authority’s financial sustainability does not come to be at risk

### **Recommendation 10**

- Take stock of the approach to hybrid working within the council in order to ensure the positive benefits are maintained and less positive aspects are effectively addressed



## 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:

- Alison McKenzie-Folan (Chief Executive – Wigan Council)
- Councillor Vikki Slade (Leader – Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, Liberal Democrat)
- Councillor Ian Gilbert (Southend on Sea City Council, Labour)
- Darren Crossley (Director of Place, Sustainable Growth and Transport – Cumberland Council)
- Sonia Khan (Assistant Director for Policy and Strategic Delivery – London Borough of Hackney)
- Seb Wright (Climate Change Officer – Bracknell Forest Council) – shadow
- 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 the team place an additional emphasis upon:

- Climate change
- Community engagement

### 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 North Somerset, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from 35 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
- Spoke to more than 120 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 Organisational and place leadership

North Somerset Council is felt both internally and externally to be a very different organisation to that of a few years ago. The organisational culture is seen to have improved significantly in recent years, enabled through changed leadership styles both politically and managerially. It was described as an organisation within which relationships are constructive; people can now ‘be themselves’; and people’s input and views are welcomed and valued. The council is now also seen to be much more engaged with local communities and partners locally, sub-regionally and regionally.

The context for North Somerset as a place and as a council is challenging. The financial context for the authority; the considerations generated by demographic change; the socio-economic challenges being experienced in communities; the increasing level and complexity of demand across a range of council services; and the impact and demands of climate change are little different to elsewhere but that doesn’t make them any easier to deal with.

The council is clearly ambitious and striving hard on a great many fronts to benefit the places and the people that it serves. ‘Bold and brave’ political leadership will be required going forward to respond effectively to the challenges North Somerset is facing. An example of this comes in the form of the place and community leadership required in ensuring the ‘North Somerset Bus Service Improvement Plan’ is able to deliver successfully on its objectives of providing a quicker and greener alternative to the car. The council bid successfully for £48m for capital improvements in North Somerset and has worked with the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) to secure a further £57.5m of revenue monies that are pooled across the wider geography of Bath and North-East Somerset, Bristol and South Gloucestershire as

well as North Somerset. The capital funding will be used, amongst other things, to upgrade 18 bus corridors in North Somerset so that buses receive priority at key congestion points. This is in line with enabling what communities consistently tell the council they want – buses to be more reliable – and with the ‘fair’ and ‘green’ objectives of the council and yet opposition is emerging in some parts of the community around what is planned and inconvenience that may be caused. Such challenges, and the need for leadership around them, will only increase in the coming months and years as decision-making becomes more complex and harder.

North Somerset’s place in the region and the ‘devolution agenda’ are clearly complex issues that need to be worked through in order to ensure the council is positioned effectively to maximise benefits for the locality it serves. Whilst the ‘bigger picture issues’ connected to this have been wrestled with in recent months and continue to play out, the council has got on working effectively with partners at the regional and sub-regional levels to take forward a range of projects and initiatives of major importance. This includes working with WECA on the Portishead rail project, as well as the Bus Improvement Plan; with Bristol City Council in relation to the Temple Quarter area of the city, with the benefits this offers to both council areas; with Homes England and their Housing Infrastructure Fund to expand the Winterstoke Hundred Academy, in line with green objectives, and develop a GP surgery in the same locality; and with partners locally, sub-regionally and nationally to take forward the ‘Super Weston’ Levelling-Up project. The latter will focus on several high-profile sites across Weston-super-Mare’s town centre and seafront, seeking to transform the cultural, leisure and retail experience and help to reinvent a number of heritage buildings; create jobs; and support local businesses.

The council is very well positioned. It is a solid local authority with relative stability; a sound financial track record; a valued approach to partnership working; good delivery across a range of services; and a constructive and supportive environment internally for people to operate in. The key question that we would pose is how the council now takes the opportunity to evolve further in relation to its role, its influence and how it operates, with key considerations around:

- The key drivers for the organisation – essentially what it attaches importance to and where it focuses
- The nature of the council's relationships with communities and the approach to 'place' and 'localities' in North Somerset
- North Somerset's place in the region
- How to evolve strategic partnership working further

These themes are all 'unpacked' through the course of this report.


## 4.2 Local priorities and outcomes

An 'open, fair and green' North Somerset has become firmly established in recent years as the council's Vision. This has formed a consistent 'narrative' of the current Administration since the change in political control in 2019, reflected in the Corporate Plan (2020 to 2024) and reinforced in the Plan set to be adopted covering the next four-year period. The refreshed version of the Corporate Plan also reflects what has emerged during the engagement activity that has taken place around it, both with communities and internally in recent months, in the form of four Ambitions underpinning the Vision:

- Our children and young people are cared for, safe, supported and are given equality of opportunity to thrive
- Our communities are caring, healthy and safe, where people help each other to live well
- Our towns and villages are thriving and sustainable places to live, work and visit
- Our council delivers consistently good services and value for money to support our community

A series of Commitments aimed at fulfilling the Ambitions indicate where the organisation is seeking to place its emphasis and focus.

Whilst the refreshed Corporate Plan is set for adoption in the coming weeks, it will need to continue to evolve further over the coming months and years in order that it



reflects the key tangible deliverables and the impacts and outcomes to be sought in line with shared political priorities across the Administration. At present, it is difficult to determine what many of the Commitments mean for communities in real terms. Examples include:

- Ensure families have access to the services they need for the first 1,001 critical days
- Support our residents to have access to, and the skills for, good quality jobs that provide a decent income
- Get better at how we inform, consult, engage and co-produce with our communities

Translating the Commitments into policies, projects, programmes and, wherever possible, outcomes will help people to understand better the vision and direction; galvanise the organisation, partners and communities; build a sense of progress and momentum as delivery takes place; and manage expectations where appropriate. Strategic political direction from the Administration will be crucial in shaping this translation.

The council can reflect with pride on the positive way it has impacted in a variety of areas in recent years, working with partners and communities. This includes leading the response to the pandemic; supporting communities in the cost of living crisis through the likes of ‘Community Living Rooms’, food support programmes and the provision of food parcels; demonstrating its commitment to corporate parenting; driving adult social care and health integration in a way that we see as being highly impressive in terms of what is being achieved; devising and implementing a range of key ‘place-shaping’ projects within North Somerset; and developing the latest version of the Local Plan.

Specific achievements and examples include significantly reducing delayed transfers of care through the development of ‘transfer of care hubs’; reducing anticipated levels of hospital admissions through technology-enabled care; a ‘Day of SEND’ celebration; the establishment of the ‘Thriving Parents – Thriving Children’ initiative and ‘Nurture Groups’; the Asylum Seeker Programme; and focusing on ‘healthy

settings' in early years amenities, schools and workplaces. Through such endeavours and the changed approach it has shown towards local communities and partners in recent years, North Somerset has become a council that is really highly valued as a partner.

The council has also secured improvement in children's services, reflected in progressing to an OFSTED judgement of 'Requires Improvement' under the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) and recently moving away from being subject to an Improvement Plan under the Local Area SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) inspection framework.

The council clearly has a wealth of data to help it understand the places and communities that it serves. This is reflected in the understanding of its population and demography and the way this is changing. This includes the population increase of nearly 15 per cent, to almost 217,000, in the twenty years to 2021 and its projected further rise to 244,000 people by 2040, including the way in which this will be attributable to migration given a projected negative natural population change i.e. more deaths than births. There is also a smaller proportion of 16-to-64-year-olds and a higher proportion of those aged over 65 in North Somerset than is the average for both the South-West and England. The North Somerset population is less ethnically diverse than the national average but became slightly more so between the Censuses conducted in 2011 and 2021.

Whilst North Somerset ranked 221<sup>st</sup> out of 317 local authority areas in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation in 2019 (where 317<sup>th</sup> is the least deprived), there is significant difference in levels of deprivation across the area's Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA) – with 10 per cent in the most deprived nationally. The most deprived LSOAs locally are concentrated in Weston-super-Mare. Eighty-six per cent of the population in North Somerset is economically active, which is higher than the national average. Just under 15 per cent of residents aged over 16 had no qualifications, compared to slightly over 18 per cent nationally. There is a life expectancy gap of 9.5 years for males and 12.9 years for females across North Somerset, with a strong correlation between the areas with a lower life expectancy and areas of deprivation. Eighty-three per cent of residents in North Somerset generally have good or very good

health compared to 81.7% nationally. However, over two thirds of adults are overweight or obese.

The way that the data available to the council translates into intelligence and insight needs to become more consistent. The best example of this working well that we came across is what the council, with partners, has undertaken in relation to using data to identify the communities where increasing the take-up of breastfeeding would have the greatest impact. The council indicated that the approach has yielded positive results. Ensuring this type of approach is more consistently applied and the council enhances its ability to translate what data means for place, people and public services will enable the organisation to prioritise and focus its use of resources and, through this, secure the greatest possible benefits and outcomes for local communities.

We outlined earlier the concept of the council evolving further in relation to its role, its influence and how it operates. An element of this concerns what the organisation's key drivers are or become – essentially what it attaches importance to and where it focuses as it seeks to secure maximum impact from diminishing resource and constrained capacity. Currently, the primary driver is often seen to be a financial one, linked to the budget challenge being faced. Whilst the council can be seen to be responding to other drivers, with good examples from around the organisation and in partnership working, they need to be considered more systematically and become much more embedded across the council. This includes engaging and empowering communities and developing the approach to 'place' and 'localities' in North Somerset; focusing on tackling inequalities and improving equality of outcomes; establishing early intervention and prevention approaches; enabling inclusive growth and community health and wealth-building; and focusing on outcomes.

The organisation feels ready to evolve further and has strong foundations for doing so. There is great potential to be fulfilled and the key ingredients are in place. There are good examples and an appetite around innovation and collaboration (in line with the organisational Values); drawing in learning (for example applying the Equalities Framework for Local Government and drawing on the Public Health Outcomes



Framework and Office for Local Government data set); and the translation of data into intelligence and insight. However, these, as with the wider range of drivers outlined above, need to be enabled to become much more embedded across the organisation.

The council's performance and risk management framework represents another key foundation stone. It is designed to monitor progress against the Corporate Plan and has the necessary key components in place. Information on the financial position, along with performance and risk, flows to the appropriate elements of the council's governance arrangements, including the Executive, Policy and Scrutiny Panels and Audit Committee as well as a range of internal management forums. The same information is also made available publicly.

As the council seeks to evolve further and the Corporate Plan develops further, the performance and risk management framework will need to be re-aligned accordingly. As an example, we noted the way in which, in the Quarter 2 performance and risk update to the Executive, performance on the time taken 'to process housing benefit change events' showed as 'red' and thus, based on the council's own measure, being off-track. In reality, the council's performance in this area is significantly better – at 4.9 days that quarter – than the average of eight days across councils in both the South-West region and nationally. At one level, this 'red' indicator reflects positively on the council in terms of setting demanding targets and securing value for money. At another level, it acts as a good example of the way in which what the authority is driven by and how it operates needs to evolve as it seeks to maximise benefits for local communities.

In this particular instance, it would suggest the focus currently is placed on efficiency and securing value for money from a contracted-out function, relative to what might be achieved by adopting the approach seen from a number of other councils which has involved their Revenues and Benefits functions being placed at the heart of approaches aimed at maximising income for residents impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. Adapting the focus of the performance and risk management framework and related business planning framework to reflect what is of greatest importance in

North Somerset will see it acting truly as an ‘enabler’ of the delivery of the council’s ambitions for its residents and, in so doing, come to be embraced fully across the organisation.

Time and space need to be created for the political and managerial leadership to undertake the strategic thinking and discussion necessary to wrestle with the key challenges facing North Somerset and the council. The strategic capacity necessary to support this, including developing the supporting information for consideration and related options analysis, also needs to be in place. Whilst the Executive and Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) meet on a regular basis, both as separate collectives and jointly, our understanding is that this tends to be undertaken remotely and is often focused on matters being considered in the more immediate or short term. We see value in the opportunity being created for the Executive and CLT to meet more on a basis that facilitates the horizon scanning and early consideration of emerging issues that is necessary in order to secure key political direction at the outset of issues and drive collective and corporate endeavour. Linked to this, we would encourage investment to be made in ‘top team development’ for the Executive and Corporate Leadership Team – for individuals, as two collectives and jointly.

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 North Somerset when compared to the fifteen other councils in its Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) ‘family’ grouping of similar authorities, using the most recently available data:

Where North Somerset is amongst the better performers:

- Council tax not collected as a percentage of council tax due
- Non-domestic rates not collected as a percentage of non-domestic rates due
- Children looked after rate
- Care leavers in suitable accommodation
- Social care-related quality of life
- Overall satisfaction of people who use services with their care and support

- Vacant dwellings
- Total households on the housing waiting list
- Time taken to process housing benefit new claims and change events
- Number of households living in temporary accommodations
- Processing of major planning applications
- Residual household waste per household
- Percentage of household waste sent for re-use, recycling and composting
- Percentage of adults 16+ who are active
- Percentage of children in Year 6 who are obese
- Percentage of children in Reception Year who are obese
- Percentage of people that received an NHS Health Check of those offered

Where North Somerset is less high performing:

- Proportion of 16-and-17 year olds who were not in education, employment or training (NEET)
- Percentage of children becoming the subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time
- Access to employment by public transport
- Care leavers in education, employment or training
- Processing of minor planning applications
- Percentage of adults (18+) classified as overweight or obese

Where performance in North Somerset is around the average:

- Average attainment 8 score
- Proportion of population aged 16-64 qualified to at least Level 2
- Number of affordable homes delivered
- Percentage of child protection cases which were reviewed within required timescales

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

[https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/view/lga-research/lga-research-report-headline-report-bar-charts?mod-area=E06000024&mod-group=CIPFA\\_Near\\_Neighbours&mod-type=comparisonGroupType](https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/view/lga-research/lga-research-report-headline-report-bar-charts?mod-area=E06000024&mod-group=CIPFA_Near_Neighbours&mod-type=comparisonGroupType)

### 4.3 Community engagement

What we outline in this section of the report should be considered within the context of our overall findings given the links to the wider themes explored during the corporate peer challenge.

As we outlined earlier, North Somerset's community is growing and changing and the council and its partners are responding to the related opportunities and challenges, with services in North Somerset increasingly reaching into and working with communities. The council is taking on a wider place-shaping role, to tackle inequality, respond to climate change, enhance the infrastructure and attract inward investment and, in so doing, is building trust in communities. This reflects the potential of community engagement and empowerment becoming more fully integrated into the wider thinking about the council's role and how it operates; considerations around the nature of its relationships with communities; thinking around the approach to 'place' and 'localities' in North Somerset; and the opportunity to evolve strategic partnership working further.

Overall, the approach in the council to community engagement can be seen to be developing, with pockets of good practice that need to be embedded and become more systematic. There is experience and insight amongst council staff and partners regarding community engagement approaches that can be shared and more widely adopted. Additionally, there is good knowledge amongst staff, partners and elected members of communities which can be capitalised upon more going forward.

As part of the 'bold and brave' leadership that is required from the council, it is important to be able and willing to 'cut through the noise' from vocal minorities and hear the widest possible range of views from residents on issues. This crucially includes those who councils typically find it 'harder to hear', such as those experiencing inequalities and those who do not trust the state. Building a greater shared understanding of communities, with stakeholder mapping to understand how best to reach and engage them, could usefully develop across the council and wider 'system' of partners.

It is important to develop a consistent understanding across the council of the different concepts represented by 'consultation', 'engagement' and 'empowerment'. There is an appetite to get the basics right on consultation and engagement. Embedding a consistent approach to statutory consultation across the council forms an important element of this. The council's Consultation and Research Strategy sets out the ambitions to improve the quality and consistency of consultation activity.

Community engagement is starting to be seen as a core part of communication, thus the fact that the council's draft communications strategy (due to replace the one that ran from 2021 to 2023) features 'engagement' and 'place-shaping' is a positive development. Enhancing understanding of the 'Ladder of Participation' and thus enabling people to identify the most pertinent approach (from 'educating' and 'informing' to 'co-designing' and 'co-producing') within it to suit any given context or set of objectives would be beneficial.

There is a desire across the council to create more on-going, purposeful and meaningful ways to connect with communities in a more open-ended way. This entails going beyond what is needed to fulfil consultation obligations on individual projects and requires the foundations for on-going engagement to come to be firmly established rather than necessitating starting from scratch each time. The move to form a Citizen's Panel, which the council recognises is in its 'infancy', is a step in this direction.

There is also an appetite to develop more empowering ways to deliver public services and develop solutions in communities, building on the Covid response and

existing good practice examples. This demonstrates a valuing of the strength and potential in communities and amongst councillors and of ambitions to develop more preventative approaches to tackle inequality.

What is required within all of this can't simply be added to the existing 'day job'. It needs to be about working differently – linked to what we have outlined regarding the council evolving further. Convening across services and partners to identify ways to develop and embed the opportunities to work differently with communities can start with the existing 'Empowering Communities Strategy' which we see as being good but is not embedded and needs to become more central. A systematic way of working with, and further developing the capacity of the voluntary and community sector in the long term, will also be needed in order to facilitate and support community engagement.

#### **4.4 Climate change**

The council's political and managerial leadership have demonstrated a robust focus on the importance of reducing emissions and adapting to climate change. A 'climate emergency' was declared in 2019 and a highly (and the council emphasises "rightly") ambitious target has been set for North Somerset as a place to be carbon neutral by 2030.

Both the Portfolio Holder for Climate, Waste and Sustainability and the small climate change team within the council are highly regarded by partners and community groups and have demonstrated leadership in the delivery of climate-related activities across the council. The council has been applauded for its work with businesses and communities on carbon literacy. This work was also seen by community partners as a good example of engagement and we detected an appetite to follow this exercise up with further projects. The 'Climate Emergency Strategy' sets out how North Somerset will seek to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve resilience in a context of a changing climate. A related and refreshed action plan was adopted in late 2022, focusing on such areas as becoming a net zero carbon council; decarbonising transport; developing low carbon business and skills; generating

renewable energy and replenishing carbon stores. A range of projects and initiatives have been implemented, including the first zero carbon school in North Somerset having been built and opened; 18,500 streetlights improved in order to reduce CO2 levels; 30,000 trees have been planted; and 40 hectares of land have been rewilded with tall grass. North Somerset now has 57 miles of dedicated cycle and shared use paths. Carbon literacy training has been delivered internally to around 350 elected members and officers and also externally within communities.

The council has embedded a culture of putting climate considerations into strategic thinking and planning. The primary example of this is in its approach to procurement, which partners indicated now sees very high expectations being placed upon businesses and organisations seeking to contract with the council.

The council may wish to reflect on the current resource levels focused on its climate change work and consider how best to mainstream climate thinking and actions across the organisation. We would also recommend that the council reviews its climate targets which, whilst rightly ambitious, are recognised internally and externally as being beyond what the organisation is currently geared to enabling and facilitating across the place it serves. It is important that its key priorities reflect the evidence base. Also, it is clear that the council has a range of willing partners at local, sub-regional, regional and even national level who are keen to play their part and have much that they can offer, including, in certain instances, access to resources such as the Net Zero Hub supported by WECA. The council reviewing its climate targets and aligning priorities with the evidence base would enable it to identify how to make the most appropriate use of such support.

#### **4.5 Governance and culture**

There has been significant change in the make-up of the council's elected membership at the last two elections, in 2019 and 2023, with around a 50% turnover in councillors on each occasion. Anecdotally, this has seen a change in the age profile in the elected membership and an increase in the proportion of councillors seeking to combine the role with being employed. There has also been considerable change in key political leadership positions in recent years. In addition to a change in

the political control of the council in 2019, there have been a number of changes in Leader, at Executive level and in the Chairs of committees, including Policy and Scrutiny Panels, during the intervening period.

There are respectful and stronger relationships between officers and elected members at all levels of the council. This is a key element of the wider cultural change of recent years.

The Leader is widely seen to have an inclusive style and approach and this is highly valued. A prime example of this is his move to establish the Strategic Political Leadership Group comprising, at elected member level, the members of the Executive and the Chairs of Policy and Scrutiny Panels and the meetings also being attended by the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer. Whilst there are different perspectives regarding the purpose of this informal body and it has yet to form fully, we see it as a positive opportunity for elected members in senior leadership positions to engage with one another informally and build shared understanding. Importantly, it also provides the opportunity for the focus of the Overview and Scrutiny function to be informed by the strategic direction of the council.

Another example of the Leader's inclusive approach is what we understand to have been an offer from the Administration to the Opposition in relation to the chairing of certain council committees and forums. This offer was seemingly not taken up, which forms part of a picture of what is widely seen as the political Opposition, as a collective, having become somewhat 'disengaged' from council activity. We noted, also, that unfortunately the group was not able to provide a representative for the interview slot provided to them during the corporate peer challenge, although it was positive that there was participation from them in the workshop with backbench councillors. Our overall reflection here is that the council and communities in North Somerset would benefit from greater engagement by the political Opposition, and its senior leadership in particular, given their important role in the governance of the council and democracy more generally.

Looking at the elected membership more widely, there is a mixed picture in terms of engagement on the part of councillors across the political groups. As with any



council, some councillors are seen to be more engaged in their communities than others and the take-up of elected member development activity is inconsistent. Things may, however, be more exaggerated than in other councils when it comes to participation in formal council meetings, with the authority having had to move recently to lower the threshold from one-third to one-quarter of councillors being present when certain bodies meet, including Policy and Scrutiny Panels, in order to ensure they are 'quorate'. Whilst many views were expressed as to why levels of engagement are so mixed, it is important for the causal factors to come to be understood and addressed rather than assumption and anecdotal evidence driving thinking and revised approaches.

Elected member induction following the last two elections is viewed positively, with specific elements valued particularly highly. These include the 'buddying' arrangements put in place for new councillors which linked them with senior officers and the 'How to Guides' to council services outlining their purpose and functions and how they can be reached. A cohort of councillors was integral to the devising of the induction programme for 2023 and this is seen to have delivered real benefit.

Looking at elected member development more generally, opportunities are clearly available to councillors, including Planning and Licensing training; training on corporate parenting; briefings on key issues facing the council, such as the budget; and attendance at LGA training events. However, levels of engagement are, at best, mixed and we would again encourage an approach from the council that seeks to understand the causal factors in this. It may be that there is merit in the development of an approach that is more proactive and tailored, founded upon seeking to identify individual councillors' training and development needs and the means of delivery being geared to their circumstances and preferred learning styles and approaches. There is also likely to be benefit in adopting the approach of a cohort of councillors being involved in shaping training and development, given the positives this delivered in the design of the elected member induction process.

Whilst the council can seek to adapt its approach to designing and delivering training and development for councillors, there needs to be a clear understanding on the part

of all elected members regarding the importance of engaging in their own development and a commitment to doing so.

Although it may not necessarily form a part of what might traditionally be classed as councillor training and development, we see a real need for the elected membership to be enabled to come together much more in informal ways in order to build relationships and aid the exchange of learning. With the shift that has been made both during and post the pandemic to remote and hybrid working, including for the conducting of a proportion of elected member forums that aren't decision-making bodies, there is a lot less face to face and informal engagement between councillors than would traditionally have been the case. This is an important consideration given the level of turnover in the council's elected membership since 2019.

Overview and Scrutiny offers real potential as a key element of the council's governance arrangements but is widely seen to not yet be operating to best effect. The Chairs of the Policy and Scrutiny Panels that we met are absolutely committed to seeking to make a difference through the work of these forums. We learnt of examples of them seeking to probe issues such as social worker recruitment and retention; young people's mental health and links to the use of social media; landlord licensing; and NHS dental provision. Some of these have come to pass and others haven't. There is even joint activity taking place across Panels, with a forthcoming briefing session on home to school transport for the members of the Children and Young People's Services Panel jointly with the Transport, Climate and Communities Panel.

As we touched on earlier, the Strategic Political Leadership Group provides the opportunity for the Policy and Scrutiny Panel Chairs to access thinking and understanding at the Executive level. This informal body can fulfil a useful role in appropriately informing the work of their Panels but there first needs to be a clearer shared understanding of the purpose of this forum in order to secure maximum benefit from it.

A key aspect of fulfilling the potential of Overview and Scrutiny will be seeking to balance the respective elements of the 'policy' and 'scrutiny' remits of the Panels.

Currently, the emphasis in formal meetings of the Panels seems to be placed on the scrutiny element. In addition to that, at present, the agendas for the Panel meetings seem to be a combination of items that officers inform the Chairs need to be brought to their meetings and matters that they as Chairs, in consultation with Panel members, feel are important. Councillors seek to engage with the issues under consideration as effectively as they can. We see a need for more support on an ongoing basis for the Chairs and the Panels as they seek to make a difference through their work. This support needs to be both internally and externally provided and enable the agenda and work programme of Panels to be fully owned by their members.

Internally, greater cross-organisational and strategic thinking would help to identify key matters for Overview and Scrutiny to consider. It would also enable support to be identified across the organisation that the Panels can call upon to aid them in their research and preparation for probing issues. This would supplement the support currently available to the Panels and Chairs from the Democratic Services function which is valued but limited in scope.

We would also encourage the council to seek to engage external support for the Panels. This could usefully come in the form of training on developing the effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny generally but also see subject-matter expertise being commissioned, for a defined period, to support Panels in being able to effectively probe issues that may be technical and complex in nature.

A 'mini-governance review' is being embarked upon by the council, operating informally and led by two elected members. There was a wide range of views and perspectives amongst people we spoke to regarding the focus of this review. Amongst other things, it is thought to be considering the council's future relationship and ways of working with Town and Parish Councils, with devolution at its heart, and also the governance model for the council. The former is an area that we understand is being considered elsewhere in the council already, whilst the latter seems to be being driven by recent developments in nearby Bristol City Council with its shift to the Committee system. We see an urgent requirement for clarity and transparency to be established in relation to the scope and status of the governance review. In working

this through, we would suggest, based on what we have outlined, that the council considers the following issues as part of any review of governance:

- Engagement across the elected membership
- Overview and Scrutiny
- Elected member development

#### **4.6 Financial planning and management**

The council received an 'Unqualified' opinion on its 2021/22 and 2022/23 accounts and there is a good track record of the council delivering a balanced revenue out-turn.

The 2022/23 budget responded to significant inflationary cost and demand pressures faced across a range of council services and this can be seen to have continued with the draft Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) that will inform budget-setting for 2024/25 and is currently out for consultation. This has been informed by a review of pressures on the current year's budget resulting from the likes of contractual inflationary increases and changes in demand for services. This has identified £27m of additional planned spending but also nearly £12m of savings in 2024/25. The MTFP also reflects a £13m gap in the council's budget across the four years to 2028. Around £4m of this amount is concerned with the next financial year and it is not yet clear how this will be addressed. There is good progress in delivering on savings plans for the current year, with 88% of the £10.5m target expected to be achieved.

The current projected net overspend for this financial year is significantly reduced from that in October. This has seen things shift from £2.2m then to a figure of just under £700,000 now, in a context of a net revenue budget of £211m. However, the overall budgetary position 'masks' overspends in certain services, with these being offset through additional interest income and the application of contingency and risk budgets. As an example, Children's Services and the Place Directorate are forecast to overspend by £3.8m and £2.5m respectively, whilst additional interest income of £3.1m is predicted and 'risk budgets' will offer £1.9m.

It is important for the council to identify how the remaining £4m of savings for next year will be secured and to consider the implications of any further use of the council's reserves, in order to ensure its financial sustainability does not come to be at risk. The council's general revenue reserve balance at the start of the financial year equated to 5% of the net revenue budget and thus, at that point, just within the parameters of its reserves strategy. The various earmarked reserves the council holds in addition are the subject of review.

The council has a significant capital programme which is fully funded but it is recognised that significant slippage has taken place. Much of the funding is to be received from external sources, as seen with the £97m from Homes England to deliver a secondary school in Weston-super-Mare and infrastructure projects around Banwell. Within the capital programme, a review has taken place to reprofile aspects of it, but there are large elements, such as the Portishead rail project, that are out-with the council's direct control.

The council has a track record of bidding successfully for external funding but it is increasingly recognising the need to undertake this on a more strategic basis, ensuring alignment with council priorities and taking resource implications into account. Securing additional monies can become a 'double-edged sword' when they place demands upon parts of the corporate centre, such as finance and legal, to help to administer them and divert organisational effort from greater priorities simply in order to ensure the money is spent in line with commitments given.

#### **4.7 Capacity for improvement**

North Somerset Council is an organisation that has good people working for it, demonstrating their commitment, passion and how invested they are in the place that they serve. In return, the council clearly demonstrates that it cares about its people. The staff survey in 2023 reflects very positive results overall, with 82 per cent of respondents indicating they were very or fairly satisfied with working for the council

compared to 59 per cent in 2014 and 67 per cent in 2018. A similar trend can be seen in relation to the measure around the way the council is run, with 74 per cent of respondents being very or fairly satisfied with this compared to 46 per cent in 2014 and 49 per cent in 2018.

There are pockets to focus in on though, in terms of both particular measures and specific parts of the organisation. The scores for the above measures in one directorate contrasted with the other parts of the organisation. Looking more generally, scores consistently above 80 per cent in the last three years for measures such as people being clear about what is expected of them; their line manager encouraging them; and feeling they have some say over the way they work was in contrast to scores of between 59 per cent and 66 per cent for measures such as people having achievable deadlines, being consulted upon changes that affect them and feeling able to cope with the amount of work they have.

It is important for the council to bear these results in mind given the level of goodwill that clearly exists in the organisation. This is a real positive and reflects an organisation that cares about its people, but goodwill is finite. The staff health and well-being offer in any council in the current climate is important and it is good that within North Somerset this is seen to have been greatly enhanced in recent years and it is clearly valued.

The Chief Executive has been absolutely integral to the change in culture in the council and it having become an organisation that demonstrates that it cares for its people. She has also been key to the council driving forward with partners locally and sub-regionally many of the issues and projects that we have touched on in this report. All of this has led to her being respected and held in high regard both internally and externally.

The council demonstrates a real commitment to communicating and engaging with staff. This includes a weekly staff message from the Chief Executive and a monthly webinar open to all. There is also a series of staff roadshows on an annual basis and an annual staff awards event.

Responsibility for internal communications sits with the council's communications function. It is positive that this function has representation at 'the top table' with both the managerial and political leadership and this has enabled them to be instrumental in shaping the authority's external communications activity as well as the approach internally. The council has a campaigns-based approach to its communications. It also offers an E-bulletin on a monthly basis to local residents and businesses, with 100,000 people having registered to receive it. The council also produces a magazine two times per year which goes to all households in North Somerset.

There are positive stories that the council is able to tell around key aspects of its approach to people management and wider equalities matters in relation to its workforce. The council declared a 0% median gender pay gap in 2022 – reduced from 12% in 2017 – although the mean gender pay gap is 5.81%. The council has introduced the Equality Framework for Local Government as a means of assessing progress against its equality commitments and duties. Five staff groups have also been established:

- Carers
- Disabled
- LGBTQ+
- Race, Ethnicity and Cultural Heritage (REACH)
- Young

The council has a commitment to encouraging and enabling local people into its employment and, as part of that, it has established a significant apprenticeships programme.

The anecdotal evidence is that there is good take up of staff appraisals. However, both the staff survey and the discussions we had indicates that there is a need for the council to ensure that it balances the 'high support' that it can be seen to provide to its employees with the more consistent provision of 'high challenge' so that it exists across all directorates. As an example, the staff survey showed some very positive results in relation to how individual line managers were seen, with eighty-one per cent of respondents indicating that their line manager communicates well; 80 per

cent feeling their line manager manages change well; 83 per cent experiencing recognition from their line manager when that person has done a good job; and 82 per cent feeling that their line manager manages them well on a day-to-day basis. This contrasted with 60 per cent of respondents believing their line manager manages poor performance well.

We would encourage the council to consider leadership development and the wider issue of succession planning. Currently, there is no programme around the former and this would fulfil a very valuable role in both enabling people in the organisation to grow and develop as the 'next generation' of leaders and address the gaps in the workforce that will inevitably emerge as a result, not least, of the age profile of the organisation. These, along with an organisational development (OD) function that the council currently seems to lack, are areas that will need to be invested in as the council seeks to evolve further.

IT provision is seen, by the staff that we spoke to, as having progressed well in recent years and now to be good in terms of giving them 'the kit to do the job' and aid remote and hybrid working. There is, though, less positivity around key systems that the council relies upon to manage the likes of finance, people and performance. People that we spoke to, particularly those with managerial responsibility, highlighted inefficiency and a lack of join up across systems that was leading to duplication of activity in data inputting and them questioning the reliability of the information emerging from them. In relation to this issue, the extent to which key internal support functions are contracted out, and the constraints and impacts of this way of working, should continue to be a key consideration for the council as it looks at how it is seeking to operate these services going forward.

The above formed part of a wider theme that people at managerial levels highlighted regarding the need for the council's processes, systems and governance arrangements to work in a more streamlined way in order to provide for greater efficiency. They were seeking proportionality in terms of controls and the effort required of them relative to the issue at hand and the level of risk. HR processes in relation to recruitment is a prime example.



The recent investment by the council in 'Power BI' is a very positive one and its usefulness and benefit for the organisation will continue to grow. There is an inevitable period of people settling into using the system and it being refined so that it comes to operate fully in line with their needs.

Investment is being made by the council in transformation capacity. This includes the creation of a Corporate Programme Management Office which has delivered training on project management fundamentals to around ten per cent of council staff. A key area of focus it has currently is on the auditing and evaluation of transformation activity, in order to ensure existing projects are fit for purpose. Also, each directorate has a Transformation Project Manager. Investment has also been made in an external transformation partner to develop a programme of improvement in children's social care and home to school transport.

There is a mature approach, founded upon trust, to hybrid working within the council. Staff reflected the positive benefits that they see being derived from it, including aiding recruitment and retention; helping with work/life balance; delivering environmental benefits; and people being more productive as a result of less time being spent travelling. There is a key period of transition currently, linked to the hybrid working agenda, with the Castlewood base in Clevedon being vacated as the council seeks to reduce the level of office accommodation it occupies. At the same time, the Town Hall in Weston-super-Mare is being reconfigured. Staff are keen to see both of these sets of changes being delivered smoothly and effectively, enhancing ways of working still further.

Staff are mindful of the aspects of hybrid working that are proving to be less positive. This includes a reduction in the 'social glue' of the organisation; colleagues within teams spending less time with one another; and limitations on space that would facilitate collaboration within and between teams across the organisation. The reconfiguration of the Town Hall can make a positive contribution here but there are wider considerations too. Given the extent and pace of change that has taken place in the way organisations work both during and post the pandemic, it feels timely to take stock of the hybrid working agenda in the council and identify any ways in which

further adaptation might be beneficial.

## 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)