

# Corporate Peer Challenge **Barnsley Council**

March 2019

Feedback Report

## 1. Executive Summary

Barnsley Council is a high performing council with clear and tangible ambitions for its residents, communities and stakeholders. It is well led, both politically and managerially, and the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive are widely respected for the improvement they have brought to the organisation and its services through their working partnership over the last seven years.

This change is evident across all levels of the council. Members and officers work well together and irrespective of seniority or role, there is a clear pride in working for Barnsley, both as an organisation and in serving communities and the town. Staff feel valued and enjoy working for the council, and also feel invested in. There is however some uncertainty and anxiety from some employees about what happens to the overall direction of the council after the current Chief Executive retires in May 2019.

The council is clearly delivering against its ambitions. The council has played a key role alongside a strong partnership with schools to bring about improvement. The Building Schools for the Future programme transformed school buildings across the borough and this has had a positive impact on educational achievement for children across Barnsley where performance on some measures has begun to exceed national averages. The regeneration of the town centre, including shopping and public realm improvements at a cost of £180m, is being underpinned by council funding, achieved through years of forward thinking and careful financial management, and a positive attitude towards risk. Delivery on phase one of the Glass Works site in central Barnsley is underway and this should deliver retail, leisure and the markets refurbishment of an overall value of over £120m, due to open in 2021, with the intention of creating a new town square and renewed focus for the town. At the same time, it has not neglected its neighbourhoods, having established an effective programme aimed at improving both the physical and social environment of the areas outside the town centre through devolved service delivery and smaller scale investment in its smaller towns through its Principal Towns initiative.

This has been achieved in the face of a degree of austerity which is greater than that which many other councils have had to confront. This achievement has been enabled because the council benefits from sound financial management and there is a willingness to take reasonable risks to bring about change.

A particular area of focus for the peer challenge was, at the council's request, on the council's approach to children with special educational need and disabilities (SEND). Although educational outcomes for this group are improving, there is much more to do with partners if the needs of these children and their families are to be fully met. A key area of improvement in the future, which the council is aware of, should be to overhaul the approach and develop a new and increased local offer. This is a systems issue needing the council and partners to work together to co-produce alongside children and parents, to improve timely early support. This needs to be a priority because the growing demand presents a risk to the council's finances, over and beyond the 2018-19 financial year.

Looking forward and based on its track record, it is highly likely that the council will continue to deliver. Adults and Children's social care shows good levels of performance and is well managed. There is enthusiasm from councillors and employees to bring about

ongoing improvement to the way the organisation is run and how services are delivered. There are further steps the council should consider including making ongoing refinements to communications with staff and residents; keeping an eye on approaches to corporate risk, given the size and scale of its ambitious delivery plans; continuing to modernise approaches; developing the digital offer; and developing new strategies and plans post 2020.

## 2. Key recommendations

There is a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report. These will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council. They are suggested in the context of a high performing council:

- a) **Continue to communicate with staff.** The retirement of the current Chief Executive is creating anxiety for some staff who have concerns that the council's overall direction and ethos will change
- b) **Clarify, simplify and reiterate the council's priorities and initiatives.** There is at times a lack of clarity from staff about how values, priorities, initiatives and outcomes relate to each other, and which are most important
- c) **Consider rationalising plans and initiatives post 2020.** The downside of the council's ambitions is that there are many initiatives to be delivered by a significantly reduced workforce, creating concerns from staff about overload. Many current plans come to an end in 2020 and this provides an opportunity to review and streamline strategies
- d) **Revisit the corporate risk register.** Currently the register contains a wide range of identified corporate risks: these need reconsidering in light of the council's priorities
- e) As the council's finances reduce further, **ensure steps are taken to maintain and grow the neighbourhood model**, and that need and gaps in provision are addressed in the more deprived areas
- f) **Work to make the local economy more inclusive.** Take stock regularly to ensure local people, including the most disadvantaged, can benefit as much as possible
- g) **Consider whether the pace of decision making is fast enough for the council's ambitions.** There are concerns from staff that the decision-making cycle, whilst inclusive, is also slow, with decisions not always being made at the right level
- h) **Take more steps to engage with parents on improving SEND outcomes for children.** There are significant risks around school exclusions, NHS waiting times for assessments and the cost of placements to the council. A co-production approach with parents and partners may lead to a better and more cost-effective services
- i) **The council can achieve more on digital transformation.** A new digital transformation strategy is in draft: it needs to articulate the benefits to customers and staff of different ways of working, so that these can be clearly understood, owned and measured, over and above IT improvements. It should also ensure that those without IT access are not excluded from services.

### **3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach**

#### **The peer team**

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Barnsley Council were:

- Kath O'Dwyer, Acting Chief Executive, Cheshire East Council
- Cllr Graham Chapman, Deputy Leader, Nottingham City Council
- Gail Hopper, Director of Children's Services, Rochdale Council
- Mike Poulter, Head of Transformation and Business Improvement, Sunderland City Council
- Stuart MacDonald, Centre for Local Economic Strategies
- Chris Savory, LGA Associate
- Judith Hurcombe, LGA peer challenge manager

#### **Scope and focus**

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges cover. These are the areas we believe are critical to councils' performance and improvement:

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of Place: does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?
4. Financial planning and viability: does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
5. Capacity to deliver: is Organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to consider/review/provide feedback on:

6. The council's plans for the future, which is incorporated into section 5 of this report
7. The council's approach to SEND

### **The peer challenge process**

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focused and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. 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 current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge every 4 to 5 years.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 4 days onsite at Barnsley, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 130 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 350 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 10 weeks in Barnsley
- Visited Cudworth, Goldthorpe, Grimethorpe, Mile End Farm and spoke to staff and a wide range of volunteers.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (26<sup>th</sup> February – 1<sup>st</sup> March 2019). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting

The council's strategic direction is clear and is widely understood and owned by stakeholders. The need to grow the local economy, and the council's role in bringing that about, is accepted and being acted upon through a variety of plans and initiatives, including considerable regeneration schemes in Barnsley town centre with a value of £180m.

For a number of years, the council has faced up to its challenges and has had to take politically difficult and hard decisions in the interests of the council's long-term future and its financial stability. The reconfiguration of SureStart children's centres into a hub model, as well as compulsory redundancies made across all council departments, are illustrative examples of this.

Partnership working is generally good and other agencies work well with the council and show enthusiasm in doing so, and look to the council to lead, which it does. Sometimes partners gave an indication that they feel the council takes too strong a lead in some initiatives, but this view needs to be balanced with the fact that partners often look to the council to lead and act, and often the council does so in the absence of others stepping forward to do so.

There is also evidence of Barnsley being a capable council which delivers on its plans. The Building Schools for the Future programme resulted in 14 existing schools being replaced by nine advanced learning centres across the borough at an overall investment of over £1bn. The development of the Glass Works programme is further evidence of this ability. The Glass Works is a regeneration scheme being built on a 3.8-hectare site in Barnsley town centre, next to the Transport Interchange. It will include 26 new retail units, a cinema and bowling alley, restaurants and the Lightbox, a new library and community facility.

The council has much to be proud of and received recognition for high performance across a wide range of its services:

- In the 2018 LGC awards:
  - Best community involvement award for the Dearne Valley Landscape Partnership
  - Commendations across three categories on its work on reducing fly tipping, the Make Smoking Invisible campaign, and a project to reuse bicycles in Penistone
- Children's Social Care being rated "good" by Ofsted in 2018
- Adult skills and Community Learning being rated "good" by Ofsted in January 2019
- For the first time, children achieving better than national average English and maths results at Key Stage 4
- Extensive refurbishment of Barnsley market which reopened in autumn 2018

The current corporate plan sets out an aspiration for the council to provide help only when it is most needed, rather than provide a high level of discretionary services. Departments are structured around a business unit approach which sets out how each department will achieve corporate plan priorities, outcomes and Town Spirit themes.

The approach to digital services includes a focus during 2019/20 on new data visualisation tools to improve how data is presented and underpinned by intelligence.

Although there are clearly defined local standards for homes through the Barnsley Homes Standard, there could be more of a focus on private rented standards, including tackling the appearance of some degraded properties and how to deal with voids. In one area this is being addressed through a partners' action day on one estate, where the public sector will come together to tackle a wide range of issues: however, the council could consider doing more on a day to day basis to encourage or enforce higher standards on estates.

The housing offer more broadly needs to expand to include a wider range of different types of dwellings, rather than focus on the more traditional approach of social housing. This is important because if the local economy is to grow and expand, then people looking to move to, or continue to live in Barnsley will want more choice about the type of housing they live in, including more affluent housing such as apartments and larger family homes. We note the ambition to bring in this mixture of housing to the town centre.

There is good quality further education provision in the borough and Barnsley College is rated as outstanding by Ofsted. However, there is more to do if young people are to continue to progress in their grades and achievements, building further on the outreach work by Sheffield Hallam University and Barnsley College.

## **4.2. Leadership of Place**

The council clearly leads the area and provides direction and forward thinking across a range of strategic issues, including the economy, housing and culture, and raising the profile of Barnsley beyond its boundaries. An example of this is that the council led the development of coterminous boundaries across its geography with health and police partners. Overall partners describe well developed, mature and open partnership arrangements across most areas. Building on this strength the council could further improve partnership working by considering how to take a more co-produced approach with partners, service users and communities to service design. This could address some partnership concerns that the council has a tendency to take the lead on initiatives and the Town Spirit campaign provides an opportunity to do this in a meaningful way.

The approach to neighbourhood working is innovative and exemplary, and the council is rightly proud of what it is achieving in this approach to local devolution. The creation in 2013 of six Area Councils and 21 Ward Alliances, supported by small teams of officers, has brought a new focus to locality working. It has enabled members to develop their community leadership roles whilst also supporting a longer-term ambition of helping local people become less dependent

on the council and become more community minded. Unusually the approach is backed by having a corporate focus through a dedicated communities directorate. The use of volunteer time to match-fund devolved budgets in localities is paying off and during the last year over fifty new volunteer groups were independently created across the borough. The priorities of each Ward Alliance are set locally through the creation of a community plan and are underpinned by individual Ward Alliance Funds.

There is a wide range of projects supported through these local budgets and some highlights include:

- Supporting local achievement awards
- Christmas lights in Cudworth village
- Using lunch and friendship clubs to help address social isolation, for example in Wombwell and Clough Fields Community Centre
- Funding Citizen's Advice in Barnsley to undertake outreach advice on fuel poverty
- A wide range of environmental improvements, for example at the Goldthorpe Railway Cutting
- Supporting the purchase of new football kit, matched by volunteer time for litter picking by the recipients

The thinking behind the neighbourhood strategy, and its range and reach is impressive, as is the degree of energy and enthusiasm it has created across the borough. A next step could be to consider how this approach addresses economic inclusion, with a role in promoting skills development and access to training and development opportunities, and whether stronger and more targeted interventions might be needed to tackle issues and areas where volunteering activity has not yet reached. The planned refresh of the Area Councils' plans could provide an opportunity to do this. There is, however, a need to ensure that the whole picture of services and initiatives across the borough as a whole is maintained, to ensure any gaps created via a model to meet local need are known and understood.

Town Spirit was launched in November 2018 and its purpose is to harness better understanding and engagement about the council's role in the future, bringing together existing plans and strategies and influencing behavioural change. It is underpinned by cross-sector collaboration and has eight themes which will in the long term be reported on through the council's performance management arrangements. It is early days for the initiative and our discussions with partners suggests that the narrative is not yet fully owned or understood externally. As it develops the council could consider how partners and communities can be integrated into the concept and influence and shape its overall direction and impact. There is scope within Town Spirit to harness the power of the public sector, building on the strong existing relationships and the well-established neighbourhood working model to build wealth locally.

Consultation with residents takes place through a variety of ways across the area, including through the Area Councils and Ward Alliances, and is underpinned by a corporate approach which includes a portal on the council's website where residents can comment on live issues. The approach includes consulting on a wide range of

themed or service specific issues, for example, on the future of library provision, and on smoke free play areas. The effectiveness and impact of media campaigns are reviewed by honest evaluation about how and where the approach could have been improved. Information on communications is clearly presented and again, clear links are made back to the corporate plan and outcomes that the council is trying to achieve, for example, the campaign on suicide awareness shows clear links to corporate priorities and directorate outcomes.

The last overarching residents' survey conducted in 2015 delivered a low response rate and such an exercise has not been conducted since then. More emphasis has since been placed on a self-service approach across the council, and there is an increasing focus on social media to inform, through over 50 dedicated service accounts. However, we heard of some concerns about an overall lack of a borough wide perspective of residents' views about the council and Barnsley overall as a place to live, particularly from and with those who do not use social media. There are also broader concerns about the use of social media as a primary means of communication and whether it is sufficiently inclusive.

Consideration is being given to how best to engage communities on the Town Spirit initiative, and a residents' survey could be an option within that approach. Undoubtedly the council provides a large amount of information to communities and consultation through a variety of means: however, care needs to be taken to ensure that possibilities for overlap and survey fatigue are addressed, as well as ensuring more consistency in communication to get the best out of such exercises. For example, because the responsibilities are devolved, the regularity and consistency of neighbourhood newsletters varies considerably to the point where a minority of areas do not have a newsletter at all.

Internal communications with staff include a weekly blog from the Chief Executive, the weekly email bulleting called Straight Talk, and through team meetings and briefings. However around 40% of the council's workforce does not have standardised access to its IT network and therefore communications with these employees is inevitably more difficult. Plans for the new extranet may support stronger engagement with non-networked staff.

#### **4.3. Organisational leadership and governance**

The council benefits from strong and visible member and officer leadership and the partnership between the Leader and Chief Executive is widely acknowledged as having transformed the council in recent years. The vast majority of members told us they feel appropriately supported by both the Leader and by officers, with strong joint working and relationships.

The Chief Executive and her Senior Management Team are approachable, accessible and engaging. The efforts that have gone into bringing about cultural change have clearly paid off and are reflected in a real commitment to Barnsley and to improving lives for local people.

On the whole, working relationships between members and officers are based on mutual respect for each other's roles and responsibilities. This is shown through

how both refer to each other but was also observed through the course of meetings. When inappropriate behaviour from councillors is witnessed, it is dealt with through political management and discourse.

The council's internal audit arrangements are well regarded and deliver good assurance for members and officers. The audit function is regarded as being genuinely independent and is trusted to do the right thing for the council.

The quarterly performance reports to councillors include information which is clearly presented and is easy to understand. It is linked to the council's strategic outcomes and makes good use of both data against performance, as well as engaging narrative which is clear about any shortcomings and actions required to bring about improvement. Underpinning these reports is a larger bank of performance indicator information, and an opportunity exists to review these and consider whether they are all needed as the council moves forward.

The council's governance arrangements were reviewed in 2015 with the purpose of streamlining the approach and making structures and processes more efficient, and coterminous with the corporate priorities. However, staff still raise some concerns that decision making, whilst inclusive of councillors, can also be slower than they would like, and there is some enthusiasm for more delegation of decision making to officers at the right level in the organisation. This would help to grow officer responsibility and accountability for their actions, although care would be needed to ensure that proper recording of such decisions takes place.

Significant investments in training and development for employees has been successful. Staff told us they are able to see the positive difference in themselves and their colleagues who have been through the Barnsley Leadership Programme.

Bi-annual Talkabout events are undertaken to bring staff and councillors together to share ideas and create solutions to address difficult problems. Staff have also been involved with the development of the corporate plan, and in the Organisational Improvement Strategy, and by being encouraged to suggest new ways of working, which often are trialed and adopted. Staff however, feel less able to influence the bigger organizational changes that are designed by the senior management team.

In the most recent staff survey conducted in 2017 staff showed some concern about how they were consulted when change is being made, and about how that change is undertaken.

The council has delivered a great deal of cultural change through the creation and development of values, priorities, outcomes and themed working, and there were high levels of awareness in the 2017 employee survey about the council's priorities (80.5%), the stated values (93.3%) and of the council's vision (88.2%). Yet during the peer challenge staff were not always able to distinguish between priorities, values and outcomes, nor how they relate to each other. This suggests that further communication and simplification is needed to ensure that a consistent understanding of the council's direction. Many strategies and plans run to 2020, for example the corporate plan, the organisational improvement plan, and the

commercial strategy. As new ones are being developed, this provides a good opportunity to revisit messages and reiterate the core of what the council is aiming to achieve.

The strategic risk register contains a large number of risks, not all of which appear to be the big strategic risks that are facing the council. Some of the entries are very large scale and quite difficult to measure. The risks could therefore be further refined to ensure that they truly reflect the key risks that relate to the council's business and future developments.

Within the Core area of the council's structure there are further opportunities to align related services. The current structure has different reporting requirements for Organisational development and human resources; communications and the web team; and scrutiny and governance. Forthcoming changes at the senior officer Leadership Team level provide an opportunity to reconfigure arrangements and group and align some responsibilities more closely together.

In delivering a more inclusive economy in Barnsley there are opportunities to forge stronger connections between the place and communities' directorates. There is currently some disconnect between the challenges of deprivation, poverty and economic growth, and increasing educational opportunity evident in the town centre. Closer working relationships between these directorates and strong linkages between strategies can begin to promote a more inclusive economy.

Bringing together the council's HR function with its organisational development approach may also help to address some staff frustrations we heard of in relation to the HR function, including developing a more modern approach which is able to flex as the council's role continues to change. Examples to illustrate this include some frustration with the length of time it can take to recruit new members of staff, a lack of flexibility in approach to gradings to respond to market pressures, and some inflexibility in relation to specific requirements for some roles. There is also a need to ensure ease of access to performance data in key HR delivery areas such as HR sanctions and casework.

Councillors, like officers, always need of keeping their skills and abilities up to date, despite the inevitable time pressures that they face. This is particularly important in organisations with ambitious plans and locally devolved decision making. As such, members should be encouraged or incentivised to attend both mandatory and optional training, so that they can keep pace of change.

The council's scrutiny function appears to work well. Members are knowledgeable about the areas they scrutinise and they are appropriately inquisitive about the subject matter, with good working relationships with officers. The work and impact of scrutiny could be further enhanced if members' activities and achievements in shaping and improving policy through overview and scrutiny were pulled together in an annual report, which is then reported to Full Council on an annual basis.

Although the council has a suite of appropriate policies and procedures, the implementation of core policies is not always consistent. This results in staff in different parts of the organisation getting a different experience in the frequency

and priority given to requirements. For example, 1:1's, team meetings, cascading of information and the process to apply for or be selected for training. The council could therefore use the range of organizational changes planned to review and re-communicate expectations and ways of working.

#### **4.4. Financial planning and viability**

The council has a strong financial grip on both its expenditure and performance against its planned savings programme, and testing has taken place against CIPFA's resilience indices. Like other councils it faces risks due to the size and scale of the future savings it needs to make, increases in service demand and other anticipated changes to local government finance, some of which bring uncertainty and are therefore harder to anticipate and plan for.

The current council tax collection rate is 96.15%, business rates collection is 96.6% and the achievement of £4.4m efficiency savings for the current year is on track. The revenue budget requirement for 2019-20 is £169m. The council took advantage of additional flexibility by raising an extra 4.5% of council tax through the adult social care precept for the last 2 years.

Since 2010 the revenue support grant for Barnsley Council has fallen by £95m and the savings programme is anticipated to deliver £107m of overall reductions by 2019-20. Although the funding reductions have been managed well with most targets being achieved as planned, the extent of the savings and the fragility of the local economy mean planning the council's finances is challenging due to the variables arising from the fair funding review, the comprehensive spending review and any future changes to adult social care funding and public health grant. There are concerns that the proposed increased business rates retention scheme to 75% will not provide any significant benefit to the council's finances due to the relatively low growth of the local economy. This prospect therefore creates a further degree of uncertainty for which the council must plan.

The Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) sets out a balanced budget for 2022. However, the council acknowledges that it is at a tipping point, and pressures on the revenue budget through the term of the current MTFP mean that it faces what the external auditors describe in their most recent report as "increasingly difficult financial challenges" each year going forwards.

The Corporate Plan quarterly performance information reported to councillors is set out across the council's twelve priority outcomes, including financial performance for each outcome. For the most recently available report of December 2018 ten of the twelve outcomes showed on-track or better performance. One, for planning fee income, was rated amber and one was rated red, for an increase in home to school transport costs of £440,000 during the current financial year.

The total capital programme value is £433.6m, including the Housing Revenue Account. During 2018 the council secured a 27-year low interest loan with Deutsche Pfandbriefbank to part fund regeneration capital investment for the

Glass Works town centre scheme. Barnsley is only the second council in the UK to have secured an arrangement with the lenders.

The Courthouse Campus is a regeneration scheme developed by the council to encourage modern high-tech businesses to expand and move to Barnsley. A mixed development, plans include college facilities, high quality office accommodation and housing in the town centre on the site of a former car park, and is based on a vision of 'green and sustainable living conditions with a cutting edge learning environment'.

Care has been taken to ensure that Barnsley town centre is not the only area of focus for investment and regeneration, and attention is given to high streets in other parts of the borough. The Principal Towns Investment Fund of £5m from 2017-2020 includes a wide range of support including grants of up to £5,000 for new businesses to support their initial start-up and promotion costs; and support for upgrading shop fronts; highways and public realm improvements. This fund would benefit from an injection of new ideas to promote economic vitality in local centres, and could be linked to the refresh of Area Council plans.

There is a £350,000 staff innovation fund which enables employees to bring forward new ideas for income generation. An example of this is the creation of a new pet cemetery in Barnsley which utilises existing capacity and creates income for the council.

The council currently benefits from early forward thinking and planning when austerity first began: the current period of political stability and relative financial stability could be used to begin to prepare for the council's budget post 2022.

Although there is much activity across all departments and all levels of the council, and ongoing transformation is clearly underway, there is also a need for greater acknowledgement that transformation will not provide all of the answers to the council's financial issues going forward, simply because the scale of the financial challenge is too great. Where other councils are still taking funding out of the areas of highest expenditure in children's and adults social care, this will be harder in Barnsley because it is already a low spending council, relative to its statistical neighbours, and one which has significant demand. This means that there will be further challenges ahead and more difficult decisions to make which will test the council further, and a possible increasing emphasis on the council's finance function.

In 2017 the council approved a 3-year budget proposal to 2020 and changed the way it communicated the budget to residents, in accordance with its community engagement strategy 2017-2020. This includes greater emphasis on the council's website and social media, as well as specific consultations on elements of service change. In doing so it has moved away from what would be regarded as the more usual good practice of annual budget consultation undertaken each year by most councils. A more extensive consultation process would be welcome.

## 4.5. Capacity to deliver

Looking forward the council continues to be well-placed to deliver for the future. The culture of the council is positive, and councillors and employees feel they belong to an organisation which is well-led, worthwhile and is making a difference, with clear pride in both Barnsley the council and Barnsley the place, and collectively what is being achieved. The council can point to a track record of innovation and forward thinking, both of which deliver a positive position for the future.

Work is ongoing to shape the next Organisational Improvement Strategy from 2020 onwards and consideration is being given to:

- More emphasis on added social value to the council's activities
- Further devolution to ward level to encourage communities to do more for themselves
- Investment in technology equipment through the Digital First programme

Sickness absence is low, continues to decrease and reflects high levels of motivation within the workforce. However, there are some signs of stress from staff who have a number of concerns, including that the workforce has reduced by around 40% in recent years, yet they feel that workloads are the same. Some told us they feel stressed by the sheer number of initiatives underway or planned and are not always clear about which are and are not priorities. Care needs to be taken therefore to continue the conversations and support for staff, so they feel as supported as possible and that initiatives and innovation is phased or streamlined to allow the organizational capacity to achieve the council's ambitions.

We also heard of concerns about how people feel valued relative to their working conditions, with a perception that those working in the council's large buildings at Westgate and Gateway Plaza had a better environment than those working elsewhere, particularly at the depot. Some small-scale improvements in some of the buildings would be helpful in improving how those staff feel engaged and valued by the council overall.

There is however some uncertainty about the future from staff, some of which relates to the general uncertainty that all councils face about future funding. In addition, the retirement of the Chief Executive in May 2019 is creating uncertainty for staff, who have concerns that the values, culture and direction may change with her replacement.

Councillors also feel that neighbourhood working has developed partnership working, led to tangible physical improvement in some areas and developed members' skills. There are clearly some excellent projects underway or completed since the initiative began and some of these are being showcased through newsletters. The organic development of neighbourhood working has given rise to a patchwork of service provision, where commissioned services may be available in some communities but not in others. This creates a dilemma, which the council is aware of: if the council steps in and fills any gaps in provision across the whole area, it goes against the principle of communities doing things for themselves.

Best practice could be evaluated more overtly so that learning can be shared more widely across the neighbourhoods. from both what has gone well but also what could have been done differently, with the benefit of hindsight.

Barnsley suffers from high levels of deprivation, being ranked the 39<sup>th</sup> worst in the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015, 18<sup>th</sup> on economic deprivation and 10<sup>th</sup> worst on education, skills and training. Between the 2010 and 2015 Indexes, Barnsley fell from 47<sup>th</sup> to 39<sup>th</sup> after a period of relative improvement from 2004 to 2010 Indexes. The town centre renewal offers a huge opportunity for the most excluded of Barnsley's residents through local procurement, local supply chains, social value commitments and coordinated approaches to local workforce development. The area working approach could also be utilised to drive this economic growth at local level and reach the most disadvantaged and support their skills development, employment potential and work opportunities. Moreover, even in adopting this approach, it is also important to ensure those areas of greatest deprivation where it is harder to motivate the self-sufficiency that the Council is encouraging, do not lose out to other more developed neighbourhoods.

Using the library network as a means to digitally enable and upskill communities through a programme of ICT investment is a particularly good example of the intention to grow community capacity in terms of digital expertise. This strategy is aligned with the delivery of the digital campus site in the town centre and is a clear indicator of the aspiration to grow the digital economy. The recent investment in the council's back office ICT capability has been well received particularly by the extended leadership team. Key staff have been digitally enabled through the roll out of personal lap tops which not only allows a greater level of digital interaction with internal systems, but also supports the drive to extend flexible working leading to increased productivity. In both cases the ICT investment has created a sound platform for the next phase of digital transformation, as outlined in the aspirational draft digital Barnsley Strategy.

The current digital first strategy with its emphasis on equipment and the council's IT requirements reads to the outsider as more like an IT strategy rather than a demand management, digital or transformational strategy. Whilst the council was a relatively early adopter of agile working, especially in cleansing and street scene services, this in some areas appears to have stalled, for example, in keeping pace with equipment and technological capacity.

The draft Digital Barnsley Strategy sets out a sound and wide-ranging action plan to deliver the desired aspirational improvements for both the town and the council as an organisation. The challenge initially is to develop and adopt the strategy whilst also, in tandem, putting in place the necessary underpinning plans and resources to deliver the actions. An important part of this exercise will be to ensure that the action plan is properly sequenced and orchestrated to achieve the desired outcomes. Plans should also and properly recognise all sectors of the community and their differing abilities/desires to engage digitally including giving consideration to non-networked employees and the delivery of the extranet.

A council can only truly digitally interact with customers and communities if its customer facing and back office processes have been subject to end to end digital

remodeling. The council is in the early stages of this metamorphosis and needs to remain focused on achieving digital by default to secure the desired return on the investment in digital infrastructure.

Strong progress has been made to date using a distributed model of transformation resources where project and change management capacity has remained seated in directorate structures. To deliver the next, more challenging phase of transformation, a centralised model is recommended where resources are pooled into a single unit to drive change and consistently apply sound project management standards.

The council has a great deal of data and information at its disposal, and the neighbourhood working model adds to this rich source of intelligence. A whole borough overview could be developed to evaluate where there are gaps in service provision and support for the most vulnerable.

The council works well with partners within its boundaries, and it plays a strong role within the sub-region, which has the potential to bring in further investment to the area. Clearly defining its role within the sub region and using regional economic planning to focus on its strengths could be used to develop inclusive economic growth and helping to fulfil a key ambition of supporting local people to do more for themselves.

#### **4.6 The council's approach to Special Educational Need and Disabilities (SEND)**

There are good levels of self-awareness about SEND service development issues including concerns about high and growing costs, and the risks that these bring to the council. There is evidence of good relationships between the council and schools, supported by a Schools Alliance that has strengthened collaborative working. The drive to achieve improvement by council leaders and senior staff is recognised by head teachers. Schools and the council collaborate well and have developed peer review approaches to drive improvement across the borough.

Educational achievement is improving in Barnsley albeit from a low base, and some indicators now exceed the statistical neighbour and national averages. Progress and attainment for children with EHCPs is improving at all levels. The gap between children with SEND and other pupils is also closing in some key stages. This level of performance demonstrates significant improvement for children in Barnsley and reflects the prioritisation and investment by the council over the last decade.

The SEND transport policy has been reviewed following a detailed analysis of the reasons for high levels of expenditure. A range of approaches to reduce transport costs, improve support levels and widen approaches to build independence have been implemented. A pilot programme for personal transport budgets started in September 2018, and greater take up is anticipated in the coming year.

There is a range of other successes:

- Take up of post 16 education provision for young people with SEND exceeds national levels.

- The apprenticeship route for 10% of 16 – 18-year old's in Barnsley is seen as a developing success with a corporate apprenticeship programme that protects two places for young people with SEND
- The single speech and language service is an example of partnership working between the council and CCG, providing a timely service and avoiding duplication.

However, the challenges facing SEND services will only be effectively addressed through a partnership owned approach which focusses on the lives of children and their families, co-production, both strategically and operationally, and the equity of offer across the system. A significant change in approach is needed if financial pressures are to be tackled as the issues cannot be successfully addressed or sustained by a single partner.

Several strategies aimed at improving the quality and range of provision for children with SEND are in place. Some strategies, such as those to address educational attainment in schools, have been delivered and now demonstrate improvement. In the other areas of health and care, initial progress appears to have lost traction or stalled, and it is unclear which parts of the system are accountable for driving progress and addressing delay. Although there is activity, more ownership is needed so that key partners can work together strategically and operationally to drive transformational change across the whole system.

There are high numbers of children with education, health and care plans (EHCPs), in comparison with statistical neighbours and regionally. The council currently maintains over 2000 plans – an increase of 700 in the last five years. Whilst this is a pressure felt nationally, as responsibilities have extended to age 25, wider issues affecting demand have been identified in Barnsley. The council has undertaken detailed analysis, highlighting some concerns about the reduction in the identification of SEND in the early years, combined with a significant increase in needs identified in key stages 1 and 2, which reflects a substantial change in the SEND population in the last 5 years. There are lower than expected numbers of children requiring SEN support in the borough and higher numbers of EHCP plans suggesting that the early intervention support arrangements are not effective in meeting need or preventing the escalation of need.

A SEN support threshold document has been developed and shared with schools, but has not yet been accepted, owned by all members of the partnership, or implemented. Addressing this gap needs to be a priority so that everyone is working towards the same levels of support.

There appears to be variable understanding of SEND and SEND support in schools. There is a large number of individual academy trusts across the borough, and no single approach to workforce skills development across the school system or a shared understanding of the impact of SEND and how children's needs are met. A partnership approach to skills development should be a key contributor in addressing the poor progress of those pupils with SEN support needs. Forthcoming changes to Ofsted inspection frameworks also mean that in the near future, all schools will be tested on how they can demonstrate inclusion.

There are low numbers of children receiving SEND support yet there are high numbers of referrals for EHC assessments: this suggests that some children are not offered early intervention but are escalated to EHCP processes unnecessarily.

Concerns were shared, but not evidenced, about perceptions of a growing number of children, including children with SEND, being off-rolled. The council is aware of this and of the broader concern about increasing numbers of children who are electively home educated. They are taking this matter seriously and have arrangements in place to address both issues.

The proportion of children with SEND and those with EHCPs who are subject to fixed term or permanent exclusions in Barnsley is too high and is much higher than those of statistical neighbours and nationally. This raises concerns about inclusivity in Barnsley schools. When considered alongside high numbers of EHE children, it is an area that affects many other children who do not have SEND. The problem requires further examination and analysis by the Schools Alliance to understand and address the root causes. This will allow a focused integrated approach to identifying the best solutions.

Children with SEND are reported as struggling in the transition phase between primary and secondary education with reports of some children (who were successfully supported and performed well in KS2), being excluded within weeks of arriving in secondary school. Examples were shared of children who were not considered to have complex needs that would justify such provision, quickly being placed in high cost external provision following exclusion.

Waiting lists for children for ASD / ADHD assessments and OT provision are too long. Multi-disciplinary assessment pathways have been in place for a number of years, but do not appear to meet children's needs effectively. This continues to be a serious problem with no apparent solution and most efforts appear to be focused on waiting list management, which have not worked. We were told that children aged over eleven will not be offered an appointment for ASD assessment until at least May 2020, against a national target of 18 weeks. As only one assessment a week is currently completed against an average demand of 10 referrals a month, this means waiting lists are continuing to grow.

A recent report to the CCG governing body proposed significant additional investment to improve children and young people's access to diagnostic pathways and support. The Children and Young People's Partnership will need to assess the impact of this additional support and the CCG governing body will need to review it on a regular basis to ensure that the investment is having the desired outcomes.

Children's mental health needs are addressed through implementation of the local transformation plan. Information provided suggests that children are responded to more quickly at a referral stage, but this can be followed by delays in treatment, resulting in escalating need. The role of Mindspace, as a schools based therapeutic service is positively viewed, although the number of young people accessing the service over a period of more than two years is low, at 306.

The council acknowledges that the approach and quality of EHCP planning and processes, require modernisation. This is an area of work already underway, with a

planned service redesign. Completion of this work will assist in recruitment of permanent staff, which will be welcomed by partners who find the frequent changes of staff in the service difficult to manage and navigate.

Consistent parental engagement is a challenge in Barnsley. The council has struggled to develop an effective parent/carer forum following the previous one ending, after a series of problems. If it is to contribute to changing culture and approach, co-production with parents needs to apply across all services where there is any responsibility for children with SEND and their parents. This means that all services, need to consider how they can adapt to achieve more person-centred and co-production approaches, to strategic and operational planning and delivery.

Some of the performance data provided to us was out of date and out of kilter with the strength of corporate performance reporting. Managers not having easy access to accurate and timely data presents a risk that managers and leaders are unable to rely on timely information about activity, performance, cost and demand levels and as such hampers service improvement prospects.

### **Recommendations for SEND:**

- Responsibility for addressing the overall pressures in SEND needs to be shared collectively and collaboratively by the whole partnership. A good starting point would be the development of a single vision for SEND
- Clarify where lead responsibilities sit so that partners can hold each other to account
- Similarly, the partnership needs to work together to agree how children in Barnsley can be provided with more effective SEND support that is inclusive, avoids unnecessary escalation and sets the reduction in exclusion and EHE as key success measures. It should then be implemented without delay
- Children's health needs should be assessed and met in a more timely manner
- Develop an integrated approach to workforce development across the partnership.
- Develop co-production and engagement with parents in the SEND arrangements across the partnership

## **5. Next steps**

### **Immediate next steps**

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this.

Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). His contact details are: [mark.edgell@local.gov.uk](mailto:mark.edgell@local.gov.uk)

In the meantime, we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

### **Follow up visit**

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the Council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the Council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 2 years.

### **Next Corporate Peer Challenge**

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the Council will commission their next Peer Challenge before 2024.