

# Corporate Peer Challenge

## **Chorley Council**

8 – 10 October 2019

### Feedback Report

## 1. Executive Summary:

The borough of Chorley is well served by the services provided and commissioned by Chorley Council. The council has worked proactively with partners to support a breadth of services and has **developed positive relationships in the interest of residents and communities through several project and initiatives**. The borough has a unique geography, and is situated in central Lancashire, covering approximately 80 square miles, and contains a population of 116,800 residents in 48,800 households. The largest proportion of residents live in the Chorley and Clayton-le-Woods areas.

The borough also includes a number of rural wards, particularly on the western and eastern borders with West Lancashire and Blackburn with Darwen respectively. It is well connected to several major cities in the North West, such as; Manchester and Preston by both rail and road networks, including the M6, M61 and A6 which run through the centre of the borough.

The Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) Team spent three days on site in Chorley. During this time, the CPC Team spoke to a number of stakeholders, including: staff, elected-members, public sector partners, and voluntary and community sector organisations. The team heard a breadth of feedback but were particularly struck by the pride of staff working for the organisation, and their clear commitment to best serving the residents of Chorley. This commitment has been illustrated by the Council's efforts to support town centre regeneration, with the Market Walk extension offering an improved retail, leisure and culture offer through a mixture of cinema, food-hall and other facilities.

The CPC team was asked to consider the specific issues of place leadership and partnership working in the borough. Members of the team noted the complexity of the local partnership footprint, with many partner organisations working across differing geographies and areas. One consequence of this complexity is that Chorley Council works on a unique geographic footprint and is the only organisation which works solely for the geography of the borough. This contributes towards a sense of identity and purpose within the Council, and the concept of a "*Chorley way*".

Despite the complex geographic context in which the Council operates there is a clear ambition to best support and improve the lives of residents of Chorley. The Council recognises the financial context that many partner organisations are operating within, and understands the financial challenges facing Chorley Council. They have often extended their services and influence to support their residents, working beyond the scope of a typical District Council to address issues of early intervention, prevention and wider wellbeing. This has included success through the sharing of information via a multi-agency teams, and work with Primary Care Partners to support the non-clinical needs of residents when addressing population health. This pro-active approach to partnerships has delivered positive outcomes for residents and provides strong foundations to future work.

The Leader and Chief Executive were praised by external partners as being 'pragmatic' and 'open'. This was reflected in the feedback received from the staff we met at the Council. Whilst it is clear that there is a shared understanding of goals and ambitions across the

Leadership of the organisation, the opportunity should be taken disseminate this information wider across the Council and empower staff throughout the organisation. Chorley Council has many outstanding members of staff who show a clear commitment and loyalty to Chorley. These members of staff should be supported through the delegation of decision making, to both empower staff and create more strategic capacity at a senior level.

The timing of the CPC coincided with the implementation of a new approach to shared services across Chorley Council and their neighbouring authority to the north, South Ribble. This model of shared services will include: Human Resources, Legal, Democratic Services, Policy, Communications and the Visitor Economy, and is due to be operational by February 2020. A second phase of shared services will be presented to both authorities in the autumn of 2020, including proposals for I.C.T and Customer Services.

These proposals are built on the foundation of existing shared financial and assurance functions that have been in-place for 10 years. It was made clear to members of the Peer Team that, this ambition for shared-services is underpinned by a commitment that both authorities will remain independent and sovereign organisations. Given the breadth of staff impacted by these proposals, it is important that regular communication takes place regarding progress and developments to ensure staff are fully briefed and that their support for this process is secured and maintained.

Chorley Council has a net revenue expenditure of approximately £10.4 million (2018) and has maintained a strong financial base during a period of austerity. The Council has addressed budget pressures of £5 million since 2014-2015 through a mixture of savings and income generation. The Council has robust finance management processes and reporting in place, and expenditure for 2018/2019 is currently under budget. They have developed a medium-term financial plan that outlines their approach to addressing their cumulative budget deficit of £3.9m by 2021-2022, which must be delivered in order to balance the budget.

The Council has 'all-out' elections in May 2020, following a Boundary Commission review of the Borough, which resulted in Chorley moving from 47 to 42 Councillors. The Council is returning to the electoral-thirds model once the new ward boundaries are in-place.

As the Council moves beyond the 2020 elections, there is opportunity to make further progress. This will involve building on the foundations that are already in-place locally, such as the Council's workforce, strong local partnerships and **delivery of digital improvements**, in order to articulate their vision for the place of Chorley and set-out the supporting strategies that will support and **enable future transformation**. It is hoped that the recommendations within this report will help to support this journey.

## **2. Key Recommendations:**

There are a range of suggestions and observations that are included within the main body of this report, that will help to inform potential 'quick wins' and practical actions. The

following notes represent the key recommendations from the CPC Peer Team to Chorley Council, and reflect the feedback delivered on Thursday 10 October:

- 1. Identify and communicate a clear vision of Place for Chorley which is underpinned by an agreed set of principles and priorities:** The Council has previously worked with partners through the 2015 Commission on the Future of Public Services. This work was well regarded but focused primarily on models of services. A significant opportunity therefore exists to co-design with citizens, business and partners the long-term vision of place, that sets out clearly the contribution that can be made by the Council, local partners and residents to achieve these goals. This vision will provide a framework and a set of principles within which decisions can be taken and more detailed plans can be developed.
- 2. Consider Partnership arrangements to reflect your vision for Chorley:** Following the development of a vision for place, the Council should revisit the terms of reference, membership and scope of the Public Services Reform Executive to ensure that all partners can contribute as appropriate, and to coordinate this work in one-place. This refresh will also enable the partnership to reflect the changed context of public services in 2019.
- 3. Set out the commercial appetite and principles of the Council in an Investment Strategy:** The Council has made a number of commercial investments to generate income and support their financial base. It would aid decision making and support the understanding of staff and partners if the parameters for future commercial investments were set out in a clear strategy to ensure that investment decisions consistently support the council's overriding vision.
- 4. Review the Council's approach to communication on major change programmes and key decisions:** This should include frequent communication and engagement through a range of channels and methods. This will support service managers and staff to shape potential changes, and increase awareness and understanding of reforms, including the Council's approach to shared services.
- 5. Refresh the Council's approach to Workforce Planning and Organisational Development:** The Council's appetite for shared services and digital innovation will need to be underpinned through revised and updated workforce strategies, reflecting the skills and training required by the organisation. This work will also help to influence culture change and communicate the benefits that these new approaches will bring to staff.
- 6. Empower service managers to contribute to strategic issues:** The Peer team recognised the committed and talented staff working at Chorley. The potential within this workforce should be unlocked through greater sharing of leadership and decision making across the organisation, and consideration for how this capability can be applied to corporate priorities.

7. **Review how information is shared with members following the boundary review and subsequent local elections:** The 2020 all-out elections creates the possibility of significant changes of Councillors in Chorley. Following the election, there is an opportunity to improve briefing and communication with the whole Council on a regular basis, including written and verbal briefings, and the development and publication of formal papers.
8. **Review and refresh the digital ambition of the Council and identify the required resources to support this work:** The Council's Digital Strategy currently runs to 2020. This presents the opportunity to build on the progress of the council to date through the previous strategy and develop a successor document that sets out the actions and activities that will be taken to support further transformation. The updated strategy will need to communicate the benefits to residents in accessing and experiencing services, as well as the benefits to the council.
9. **Develop and define approaches to track benefits when working in partnership:** The Council has delivered a number of initiatives with local partners, and often moves swiftly to ask, 'what's next?' The organisation would benefit by better measuring and monitoring the impact of reforms, to build an improved evidence base for change, and support future engagement with partners.

### 3. Summary of the Peer Challenge Approach:

#### 3.1 The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers from across the sector. 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 prior to arriving on site. The peers who delivered the Chorley corporate peer challenge were:

- **Jason Gooding:** (Lead Peer) Chief Executive of Carlisle District Council;
- **Jane Eaton:** Director of Corporate Services / S151 at Horsham District Council;
- **Councillor Peter Fleming:** Leader of Sevenoaks District Council / Chair of the LGA Improvement Board;
- **Councillor Simon Greaves:** Leader of Bassetlaw District Council;
- **Kathy Nixon:** Strategic Director at Babergh & Mid-Suffolk Councils;
- **Matthew Dodd** – LGA Challenge Manager.

#### 3.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges that the LGA undertakes. These are the areas that 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:** Do 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?

Additionally, Chorley Council asked for members of the Peer Team to provide feedback on the role of the Council as a Leader of Place and convenor of local services, as well as reflecting on the Council's progress to-date and future ambition regarding digital services.

### **3.3 The Peer Challenge Process:**

It is important to stress that the corporate peer challenge process is not an inspection. Peer challenges are designed to focus on improvement, and each is tailored to meet individual councils' needs and operating context. 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 four to five years. Chorley Council last had a Corporate Peer Challenge in January 2014. Where relevant and appropriate to do so, findings from that previous peer challenge have been referenced in this report to support continuity.

Prior to arriving on site, the peer team were provided with a Position Statement developed by the Council. This document is designed to highlight good practice and support the peer team to identify emerging questions and themes. Moreover, this document provides an important opportunity for Chorley Council to reflect on their

achievements and progress to-date and consider their ambition for future years. In addition to this Position Statement, the peer team prepared for this challenge by reviewing a wider range of supporting documents and information, in order to ensure that they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days onsite at Chorley, during which they:

- Spoke to **more than 60 people** including a range of council staff, Councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from **more than 30 meetings**, this included visits to key sites, as well as a mixture of one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and telephone calls.
- **Attended and observed** a number of business meetings of the Council, including; Senior Leadership Team, Policy Exchange, and the Opposition Group Meeting.
- Collectively spent **over 180 hours to determine their findings** – the equivalent of one person spending more than five weeks in Chorley.

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 (10 October 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, and we appreciate that some of the feedback may be about issues that you are already addressing and progressing.

## 4. Feedback:

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

As the only statutory organisation that works on the geography of “Chorley” the Council has a thorough knowledge and understanding of the needs of the area and play a clear and strong role in communicating and advocating for these interests. The Council has information available regarding the nature and needs of the local population and has used this to inform local priorities.

The information regarding the needs of the borough, helped the Peer Team to better understand the borough:

- **Population profile:** 17% of the population is under 15, and 17% are 65 and over, with the remaining 66% aged 16-64. The percentage of the population that is a black and minority ethnic is 3.1%. It is estimated that the total population of Chorley will increase by 18.1% from 2014-2039.
- **Deprivation:** According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation Chorley is the ninth most deprived district in Lancashire (out of 12 District Councils). Whilst the Council has made

progress against these issues since 2010, there remain eight Lower Super Output Areas in the bottom 20% for multiple deprivation (with three in the bottom 10%).

- **Life Expectancy:** Whilst the life expectancy within the borough is in-line with national averages, there is a gap of life expectancy between the most affluent and most deprived wards of 7.8 years for men and 6.8 years for women.
- **Jobs, Skills and the Economy:** 89% of the population of Chorley are economically active, this is above both the North West and national average. However, there remains 7,800 residents who are qualified as 'economically inactive'.

Beyond the assessment of local needs, the Council has a strong approach to understanding the local place. This includes a commitment to consulting with residents to understand qualitative information alongside this quantitative context, and the utilisation of intelligence from members regarding the issues arising in their Wards.

A strong contributor to the Council's understanding of the local place is the resident survey which they have conducted on a bi-annual basis (last held in 2017). The last survey received over 2,600 responses and provided a wealth of information from residents regarding the local area, their community and the services that the Council provides. This survey identified that 84% of respondents are happy with their local area. The 2017 result showed that 19.1% of respondents identified as 'dissatisfied' with the Council. This resulted in the Council making a concerted effort to address dissatisfaction, and this figure has reduced in recent years. Given the information that this survey contains, and how it has been used and applied it would be beneficial to the Council to maintain regular resident surveys in future.

Based upon the needs of the borough and the views of residents, the Council has identified four priorities and a series of strategic objectives which support the Council in planning how it is going to achieve its vision. The priorities are:

- Involving residents in their communities and equality of access for all
- Clean safe and healthy homes and communities
- An ambitious council
- A strong local economy

These priorities have been broadly consistent to the Council since their last CPC in 2014 and were first introduced in 2012. The previous CPC in 2014 included the recommendation that the Council: *Fundamentally review your corporate plan and the type of council you want to be in line with your financial challenges. You may want to develop and agree a clear operating model to guide future priorities and focus.*

This recommendation has been taken forward with the Council developing more focused Corporate Plan beneath these priorities including 31 performance target measures and 12 strategic projects. This is a significant reduction in the number that the Plan contained in 2014 and is a more proportionate figure to report progress on a quarterly basis. The Peer Review Team also found that some elements of the Corporate Plan were better understood than others. Given the length of time that the Council has worked



towards the four priorities above, the organisation may benefit from increased visibility to these priorities similar to the current approach towards the communication of staff values.

The Peer Review Team noted that the Council would benefit from a more pro-active approach to measuring the impact of their activities and interventions. Whilst the Council is keen to work with a breadth of partners on a range of initiatives, it is important that the effectiveness of previous work is fully understood and communicated. The Council has made progress in this area, and to date has effectively used case studies and other readily available data. However, this could be enhanced by external evaluation of some programmes, particularly in the progressive partnership and health and well-being work that the Council is involved in. This would help to support future decision making and contribute towards the required evidence base to underpin the next stage of partnership working.

## **4.2 Leadership of Place:**

The Council has an appetite for change and reform and has invested time with local partners to make progress. The Council was praised by neighbouring Councils and colleagues at a County level, and other partners for their approach towards partnership working, their openness of their relationships, and the visibility of the Leader and Chief Executive.

Despite working in a complex geographic and organisational context, the Council has made commendable progress in its multi-disciplinary work in community safety and health and wellbeing services, and the approach to early intervention. This strong collaborative approach is highly valued by partners, including the NHS, Police and the County Council. The leadership, drive, vision and collaboration of the Deputy Chief Executive was regularly commented upon by partners as a key success factor.

The outcomes from this work have been captured in part but would benefit from further evaluation to support future strategic direction, planning, investment and progress. The CPC Team suggests that this work may benefit from external evaluation, which would also aid wider best practice learning in the sector.

When the previous CPC took place in 2014 recommended that the Council: *Review and define the purpose of the authority leading to the development of a framework to consider options for future service delivery models, to translate the excellent progress in delivery into long term sustainable plans.* The Council invested time, resource and efforts to take this work forward through the establishment of a Commission for the Future of Public Services in 2015, which has supported the Council's progress over the past five-years. However, given the changes that have affected public services during this period, as with other authorities, this challenge remains.

The work of the Commission helped to bring partners together and consider new ways of working across organisations. Whilst this work is still referenced by several partner organisations, the opportunity exists to revisit some of these issues, with a dedicated focus on the place of Chorley. This will provide the chance for the Council and its

partners to consider the vision of place and to jointly develop these proposals and agree their respective contributions towards these goals. This will also enable the Council to further consider the role that it now wants to play in the future. Over the course of the Peer Challenge the team was presented with several mixed descriptions about the Council's role in the Partnership, ranging from driving force, to enabler, to agitator.

This clarity of the vision for Chorley as a place, and the contribution of partner organisations will support partnership working in the borough. This will also enable the Council to consider their involvement in additional areas against a clear vision of place, rather than responding to individual issues and instances as they arise.

This consideration of the vision of place for the borough, should run alongside a review of the borough's current partnership arrangements through the Public Services Reform Executive. This forum was developed from the previous Public Service Reform Board which was operational since 2015. There should also be consideration to the communication and promotion of the work of group, using this forum as a platform for promoting joint initiatives, encouraging participation and engagement, and providing greater transparency to decisions affecting partnership working.

Members of the Council are proud of their democratically elected community leadership roles and the connection they have with their local communities. The team spoke with members about their role in the community in gathering insight, building capacity and helping residents and community groups to both find solutions and solve issues. The knowledge and insight of members is well recognised locally. The Council has also provided resources to best utilise this local knowledge through a £50,000 fund to support preferred priorities at a neighbourhood level. This approach has also enabled the Council to consider the support and contributions that can be made of other partners at a local level.

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

Chorley Council operates through the Leader and Cabinet model, with the Cabinet (known locally as the Executive Cabinet) chaired by the Leader of the Council and assigning portfolio responsibilities. The members and officers that the Peer Team engaged with believe that the Leader and Cabinet model is fit for purpose and helps to support timely decision making. This also fits with the ethos of the Council internally with regards to being able to respond swiftly to emerging opportunities and issues.

The Peer Team recognised that there is a positive working relationship between members and officers which exhibit characteristics of trust and openness at a senior level. There are regular meetings between the Leader and Deputy Leader, and there were common priorities and principles identified across senior politicians and officers within the Council. The Council also operates regular "Portfolio Exchange Meetings", these meetings provide an informal setting to share information and discuss emerging issues. However, further work could be done to share information with senior councillors consistently and ensure that they are informed on developments through recognised channels.

The decisions of the Executive Cabinet are held to account through Overview and Scrutiny arrangements. This includes a dedicated Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel which meets on a quarterly basis to review performance across the Council. These arrangements ensure that Scrutiny is member-led and underpinned by performance information and intelligence. It was acknowledged that the use of task-and-finish groups supports members to play an active role in policy development. -

Subject to parliamentary approval, Chorley Council is due to implement a Boundary Review in May 2020, which is expected to reduce the number of elected members from 47 to 42. Following this review and the subsequent election results, the Council should consider the methods which are used to provide regular briefings and updates to all members as part of their wider approach to communications. The Council has fortnightly “*intheboro*” and the “*intheknow*” briefings which are shared with members. The Peer Review Team heard of some instances when briefings took place verbally ‘by-chance’, or of occasions when formal papers were distributed ‘to follow’. It would generate increased member support if formal communication arrangements were in-place beyond the current briefings.

Member development arrangements are in place and are co-ordinated by Democratic Services. The Council has used a mixture of internal, external and partner organisations to deliver training sessions. The Council conducts a two-yearly review of all Councillors personal development plans to support progress. This approach was praised by the Councillors that the Peer Team engaged.

The Chief Executive of the Council was praised by external partners and staff for being visible and approachable. The standing of the Chief Executive has also been recognised by the interim support that he has provided in recent months to South Ribble Council. The Peer Team noted however, that the combination of being Chief Executive, Section 151 Officer, and working across two Councils created risks regarding capacity, as well as statutory roles being brought together. With this in-mind, it is suggested that the Council consider what actions could be taken to support dispersed leadership to unlock the potential of Service Managers and ‘free-up’ the strategic capacity at a senior level. This should include reviewing the levels of delegations for officer decisions and financial delegation to reduce the concentration of decision making at a senior level.

The Leadership of the Council is committed to ambitious reforms over the coming years. It is important that the Council considers their approach to communicating change. The issue of communications came-up during a number of meetings throughout the CPC, with particular focus on the approach to shared services. The Council should consider their approach to strategic communications that engages with those most affected first, and provides information on any delays or slippage. This approach to communications should include a renewed effort to engage with Trade Unions.

#### **4.4 Financial planning and viability:**

Reduced public spending has continued to have a significant impact on the Council. Since the Council’s previous CPC in 2014, the organisation has achieved efficiency savings /

increased income to address a £5m pressure within the budget. At the time of the peer challenge a further £3.9 million (cumulative gross budget deficit) was forecast to be required over the next three years, phased as: £1.4m, £3.4 and £3.9m over the next three years. This has brought challenges for the Council in maintaining service delivery. Despite these budget challenges the Council was within their budget in 2018/19 and is forecast to be within budget for 2019/20. These short-term underspends create an opportunity to consider further planning and mitigation for the risks and issues that may affect the Council.

The Council has developed a Medium-term Financial Strategy to address the financial challenge over the coming three-years. This includes saving proposals which will deliver £2.2m of savings by year three. These proposals include issues such as reviewing fees and charges, and the recommissioning of contracts. Whilst the Council has a historic record of delivering savings through these means, they should give careful consideration to the phasing, communication, and management of these approaches. On top of the £2.2m savings, the Council has identified £1.7m of income to be delivered through their transformation programme. Given the narrow margins that exist within this strategy, the Council may wish to consider further proposals to inform choices for members should any initiative slip, or the scale of financial challenges facing the Council increase.

The Council has taken a pro-active approach to Budget Consultation. This helps to communicate to residents the financial context that the organisation is working in and increase understanding regarding the decisions of the Council. This approach to budget consultation has included a mix of methods and approaches and should be maintained in future years.

The Council should also consider the challenges associated with some of the savings/income proposals currently included within the MTFS. For example, the Market Walk Extension, is currently forecast to generate £725,000 over the next three years, but there has already experienced a shortfall of £50,000 due to empty units, this proposal also remains vulnerable to the wider economic and market forces, whilst the Council. The Council has been pro-active in addressing any reductions in income to-date by reducing the operational expenditure budget, the management of vacant units and increased efficiencies across staffing responsibilities. However, like other authorities will need to continue to closely monitor this budget over coming years. The Council holds a £4m general fund to manage budgetary risks and also has £6.1m in earmarked reserves, and £14m in unapplied Capital Grants, and may wish to consider how these reserves could be aligned to emerging issues and risks.

The Council has successfully delivered a number of significant capital projects in recent years. This has included the completion of the Market Walk extension in (£15.6m) supporting the town centre's offer at a time when many town centres are struggling, the Digital Office Park (£8.1m) to support local business growth, and the completion of the Council's Extra Care Facility (£10m) to address the needs of the town's ageing population. The Council has increasingly begun to take a commercial approach to investment and has a large portfolio of investments that generates an income to support their wider approach to financial planning. This approach towards investment is a new skill-set for the Council and requires input from across a number of Council departments. The Council would benefit by

capturing and communicating the principles and framework for decision making that guides their approach to investment (through an Investment Strategy). The Council should also take a more pro-active approach to communicating their investment decisions to residents, and rationale for them.

The investment decisions that the Council has taken to date have been informed through businesses cases. However, the Council should give consideration to how the process of developing these businesses cases can be best used to further support constructive challenge in the decision making process. This could include increased engagement with Councillors through Scrutiny or alternative forums, as well as peer-to-peer challenge at an officer level. Furthermore, the development of a clear investment strategy will reduce the exposure and risk of the Council by articulating links and interdependencies between schemes. This will act as a strong foundation to create future plans, and draw-in appropriate expertise.

#### **4.5 Capacity to deliver:**

The Council has approximately 330 full time staff. During the time spent on-site, the Peer Review Team met with approximately 60 individuals and it was apparent that the large majority are loyal and committed to the organisation. This included a clear commitment to serving the residents of the borough, and a flexibility towards approaches.

This flexibility has resulted in the Council taking on an increased role in a number of areas, with one participant in the CPC saying: *"We try to catch the ball if others are going to drop it"*. This approach, undertaken in the interests of residents has impacted on the capacity of the organisation, with staff working across a broader range of services and areas, many of which would not be found at other District Councils. This has created additional financial demands on the organisation and capacity demands on officers, and the Council should be mindful of this when considering additional responsibilities, and future priorities.

The Council's ambition to share services with South Ribble has been taken in-part to support capacity across both organisations, increasing the resilience of the authorities whilst also contributing towards addressing budget challenges. When speaking to staff it was clear that there was an understanding for the principles and rationale that underpin this approach, but that they would welcome more information and regular communication on this issue. However, many staff stated that they had taken active decisions to join Chorley and felt pride in working for the Council, ~~and were concerned about the transfer to a new organisation.~~ Therefore, there is a need to ensure that this pride is reflected in the development of a new culture and environment for shared services teams, and that any concerns which staff may raise are responded to promptly.

The Council will need to consider how to balance the competing interests of sharing services with a neighbouring authority and protecting the culture and enthusiasm that exists for serving the residents of Chorley and the concept of a "Chorley Way". The Council should consider the Organisational Development Strategy and Wider Workforce Plan in-light of this challenge, and the opportunity that they present to engage with staff

on these issues. The new approaches to these documents should also consider the new skills and values that will be needed for shared roles, and the culture that the Council wants to contribute towards within shared services.

The Council has made progress in recent years with regards to Digital Innovation and has committed to future improvements through infrastructure investments and an ambitious ICT strategy. This has included the training of over 1,000 residents in digital skills through, the extension of Council Digital Hubs, and a 37% increase in the number of service requests received online. **The council has also made progress with becoming a paperless organisation and reducing their printing footprint, including reductions in printers and electronically enabled committees. This use of ICT has also supported the council's approach to agile working, including the use of mobile devices, and supporting practice regarding clear desks and information management.**

However, few of the respondents engaged in the CPC process identified digital innovation as contributing factor in managing demand or addressing capacity within the organisation, and there was a mixed understanding regarding the scale of the Council's ambition on this topic. **The council's Digital Strategy expires in 2020, and this presents an opportunity to build on the digital foundations that are in-place, and articulate future ambition, including approaches to issues such as open data and predictive analytics.**

The Council should consider their approach to revising and relaunching their Digital Strategy, including information on how this approach will support staff and new ways of working across the organisation. This approach to digital ways of working should also be reflected in the updated Workforce Plans and OD Strategies alongside the approach to shared services, to consider necessary skills, training and expertise required in coming years, and the cultural changes that may be required to support this approach (such as flexible mobile working arrangements). There will be a need for these strategies to consider the skills required for staff to work flexibly and effectively, including technical skills and consideration of their home working environment. This approach will also need to consider how managers will be empowered to trust staff when working with less oversight, and the supporting policies for this approach.

A significant contributor to Chorley's management of staff capacity is their bi-annual staff survey and continuing this in future years will continue to be beneficial to the Council in-light of the changes they are undertaking. This survey was completed by 276 respondents (83%) when it was last issued in 2017 and contains a number of reassuring messages regarding the workforce's relationship with management, their ongoing capacity, and the health of their psychological contract with their employer. These results illustrate the visibility of senior leaders at the Council and confidence with the Senior Management Team. The staff survey also showed that over half of respondents felt that their skills, knowledge and experience was not fully utilised, illustrating a potential appetite for members of staff to address new issues, or take on new challenges.

There is a concentration of decision making at the senior levels within the organisation, and whilst good relationships exist across the Senior Leadership Team and with political Leaders it would benefit the Council if more decisions were delegated. This would create

shared ownership of issues and would help the flow of information whilst also providing increased capacity at a senior level. The Peer Team were struck by the ability and aptitude of service managers that engaged with the CPC process, and believe that it would be empowering and rewarding to place appropriate decisions at this level of the organisation. This could be supported by reviewing the delegated decisions process, as well as the scheme of financial delegation to prevent small decisions escalating to senior staff.

## **5 Next steps**

### **5.1 Immediate Next Steps:**

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership of Chorley Council will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order 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 work. 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 offer. Claire Hogan, (North West Principal Adviser) is the main contact between your authority and the LGA, and her email address is: [Claire.hogan@local.gov.uk](mailto:Claire.hogan@local.gov.uk).

Claire will arrange to meet with the Chief Executive in the weeks following the peer challenge to discuss this final report, and any support needs that the LGA or those elsewhere in the sector may be able help with.

The LGA are also keen to continue the relationship that has been formed with Chorley Council through the peer challenge, building on the openness, transparency and principles of improvement. This will include signposting to examples of best practice in the sector, identifying opportunities, and communicating policy changes in-line with the issues raised within this report. This approach may also include instances when the practice of Chorley is communicated to other Councils in the sector to support their improvement journey.

### **5.2 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 18-24 months

### **5.3 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 four to five years. It is therefore anticipated that Chorley Council will commission their next Peer Challenge to take place from 2023-2024.

Finally, the Peer Team would like to thank colleagues and members at Chorley Council for making us feel so welcome and contributing towards this process.