


LGA Governance Peer Challenge

Horsham District Council

February 2024

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

Horsham District Council benefits from having cohesive and collaborative leadership in place. It also has a strong and passionate workforce, invested in supporting members to deliver good services and positive outcomes for every part of the community.

Following a long period of Conservative control, the Liberal Democrats became the majority in the council in May 2023. The new Leader of the council championed the need for strengthened and improved relationships between councillors and staff, and amongst the wider group of members. The political leadership also set clear expectations that the council, during this administration, must move to being more open and inclusive in its decision-making and remove unnecessary bureaucracy.

Consultation, engagement, and collaborative working between members and officers and amongst members is clearly a strong aspiration for the senior leaders in the council. The peer team was pleased to observe excellent levels of respect and collaboration across the council and heard positive examples from external partners and from officers of how it feels to work in and with the district. Members and officers were described as positive, professional, friendly, and open to the community.

Changes in political leadership, especially after a long period under the control of a different political party require the implementation of a good induction and support system and a significant amount of time and energy. Whilst we observed that a comprehensive induction and support system had been delivered, given the scale of change in members, this needs further ongoing investment and member engagement. During this time, the council also experienced changes in the senior officer group. The peer team praise the work done in the council to get new members, existing members, and new staff quickly in a good position; set an ambitious new agenda; and work to deliver good services. The peer team believe there is more still to be done in this area, recommending a refresh and expansion of the member development programme, deepening understanding and skills in delivering their roles and providing effective challenge and scrutiny, alongside the collaborative and consultative culture embraced in the council.

The local needs in the district are understood by members and officers, with members having established a clear direction of travel for the council, through the speedy



adoption and agreement, early into the new administration, of a four-year Council Plan establishing a vision and the council's key priorities. The peer team recognised the need for early focus to be given to completing the new regulation 19 local plan and were pleased to see how this had been driven to a conclusion in a timely manner. The longer-term plan is supplemented with a published annual plan providing a 12-month outcome and project focus, the creation of which is an activity that is member-led and officer-supported.

The peer team also recognises that much has been done in the last year to realign portfolio areas and departments and map more closely against the council's priorities and desired outcomes as set out in the council plan.

The council is currently in a relatively strong financial position compared with many district councils, with the team having seen good financial monitoring and management processes. However, it is entering a phase where it is recognised that the pace of change, with several large, planned projects on the horizon, and the volatility within construction, due to supply and costs and an unstable provider market in outsourced provisions (leisure services) nationally, requires the council to manage change, risk, and new pressures at a larger scale than appears to have been needed before.

Overall, the council is performing well against targets on the services it delivers, notwithstanding the increased demand for services. The peer team observed that the council has a performance management framework in place but concluded that this needs to be updated to better reflect and embed the current Council Plan priorities, and the outputs expected in the large projects being delivered. This includes recommending a review of Key Performance Indicators reporting as a matter of priority.

The council's self-assessment through their position statement was helpful and accurate in identifying some of the areas that require rethinking or reviewing. There is a clear desire from the council to develop and strengthen governance in the organisation with a particular focus on needing to ensure the scrutiny function is fit for purpose and operating to the benefit of residents. Other areas identified by Horsham for review and improvement include the council's constitution, the planning committee system, and the council's property services functions.

The council has clear organisational priorities, excellent working relationships, and a culture of respect and trust between members and officers. The peer team found the current constitution clunky and disjointed, recommending a review led by the Monitoring Officer as a priority. Within this review, careful consideration should be given to the role of Policy Development Advisory Groups' (PDAG) meetings and their place in the constitution and frameworks within the council.

There is also a sense, expressed by some officers and members, that there is an excess of council meetings to support— both statutory and non-statutory – including on occasion multiple coverage of the same issues. The peer team did observe that there was some duplication of effort certainly where each and every decision needed to go through a cross party PDAG process, which at times did not result in meaningful engagement. Work to explore reducing the number of meetings has started in the council. The peer team felt that the role of scrutiny was not well understood or properly focused. This position was not helped by the unclear position of PDAGs within the decision-making process. The peer team has highlighted opportunities to consider as part of a review and has suggested that the council also adjust the sequencing of meetings to enable the best opportunity for the members to digest papers and formulate responses, including in proactive and planned scrutiny. The peer team concluded that overall, scrutiny activity in the council does require further development.

On engagement, the council has many good examples of how their drive to engage more extensively has been taken forward. This includes good engagement on the Local Plan and recent consultation with the community on how to address climate change and accelerate the council's carbon reduction plans. However, the council also recognises the discord and conflict planning issues can cause within communities and for councillors and is keen for members to play an active role in decisions that affect their communities.

The council now needs to formalise and capture the examples of good community consultation and engagement work; holding centralised resources of good practice for others to use. It is also recommended that the council look at how they can better publicise within the district their work in this area. A challenge for Horsham will be how to engage with communities successfully on their big projects, including the major refurbishment project of the council-owned Capitol Theatre and other challenging sites

/ service issues such as the forthcoming reletting of the leisure centre contract.

Regarding engagement with parishes and the neighbourhood councils, there is much for the council to be proud of. Areas that could be improved from the conversations the peer team held include strengthening the feedback loop — once issues have been raised with the district, what the outcome is, and creating a clear, distributed guide for parishes and neighbourhood councils of what activities are in the remit of the council and those that are not. Finally, Horsham District Council is aware of the issue regarding the position of the unparished Horsham town centre area, the result of which means that they are less connected to the council, and the council is less accountable to the community on how funds paid by the community are spent and distributed in council spending. It is recommended that a review to consider options for this area be conducted.

2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations for the council:

- 2.1. Review the current scrutiny arrangements, to create a more robust scrutiny process including reviewing the constitutional basis of Policy Development Advisory Groups (PDAG).**
- 2.2. Consider a more planned approach to scrutiny within the decision-making process ensuring that scrutiny members take control of the agenda and fully understand their role in challenging rather than noting.**
- 2.3. Review the current planning committee arrangement.**
- 2.4. Review current Key Performance Indicators to better reflect the council's priorities and the process of tracking implementation and outcomes.**

- 2.5. **Develop clear guides for decision-making and delegation.**
- 2.6. **Expand your Member Development Framework to include a continuous training programme for new and existing members, cabinet members, chairs of committees, scrutiny, operations of committees and decision-making.**
- 2.7. **Conduct a Monitoring Officer (MO)-led review of the council's Constitution in consultation with members.**
- 2.8. **Consider the operation and organisation of your unparished areas.**
- 2.9. **Formalise and capture the excellent work done in community consultation and engagement.**

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1. The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member peers and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers for Horsham were:

- Lead Member Peer — Martin Tod, Leader, Winchester City Council
- Chief Senior Officer Peer — Mark Maidment, Former Chief Executive, LB Richmond and LB Wandsworth
- Member Peer — Cllr Pauline Helliard-Symons, Wokingham Borough Council
- Senior Officer Peer — Shiraz Sheikh, Monitoring Officer and AD of Law & Governance - Cherwell District Council
- Senior Officer Peer — Chris Traill, Strategic Director of Community & Place Delivery St Alban's City and District Council
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager — Rebecca Ireland, Senior Regional Adviser at LGA

3.2. Scope and focus

The peer review explored the following five high-level themes, building on the framework of the Corporate Governance Peer Challenge:

1. **Local priorities and outcomes:** Are the council's priorities clear, informed by the local context and engagement with citizens? Does the council assure itself appropriately and transparently about delivery of these priorities?
2. **Leadership and culture:** How well does the council's political and managerial leadership display effective leadership of good governance? Is there a culture of respect, challenge and scrutiny? Is there appropriate understanding of respective roles and responsibilities? How does the council ensure it is a learning organisation, open to challenge?
3. **Policies, procedures and standards:** Does the council have appropriate constitutional arrangements, statutory and good practice policies, standards, controls and procedures in place? Does it have a good awareness of the effectiveness of its governance and take appropriate steps to address any areas for improvement?
4. **Decision making and scrutiny:** Does the council have appropriate frameworks and support in place to support members and officers to make decisions in an accountable and transparent way? Does scrutiny provide effective challenge to the Executive, in a way that improves policy and decision making?
5. **Community engagement:** How does the council ensure that it is engaging constructively with all voices in the community? How effectively does it connect with residents, businesses and partners in its decision making and accountability?

3.3. The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement-focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw, and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order

to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent four days onsite at Horsham District Council during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 27 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 65 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

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

4. Feedback

4.1. Local priorities and outcomes

Horsham District Council provides district council services in an area in West Sussex, to a population of around 147,500 people by the 2021 census. The district includes the main town of Horsham, where the council is based, and surrounding rural areas and villages, as well as part of the South Downs National Park and part of the designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty of High Weald.

The vision and priorities for Horsham District Council are set out within their Council Plan 2023-27, *A fresh vision for Horsham district*, published in 2023 following the success of the Liberal Democrats in the 2023 local elections. The plan is based on four overarching priorities:

- Supporting people and communities
- Inspiring greener futures
- Building a thriving local economy
- Always listening, learning and improving

The four-year plan sits alongside an annual plan renewed each year. This approach, heralded as a new way of planning at the Council, aims to both address the needs and desires of residents, whilst also maintaining the ability to change priorities as the world changes around the council. The plan was delivered quickly after the administration change, with the senior leadership at the council providing important clarity on

priorities and the future direction of the council. The peer team found that the council's drive to complete Regulation 19 Local Plan, which has now been published, was impressive given the difficulties many authorities nationally are facing on this issue. The team also felt that the effort given to finalising this plan, had allowed the Council to now focus on a wider range of its priorities. The peer team felt that the attention given to completing this work was the correct decision for the administration, enabling them to move forward with the council's vision for the district.

The peer team observed that the priorities and vision of the council seem clear and well accepted amongst the officers and members spoken to as part of the peer challenge. The vision and messaging on working together in a respectful, collegiate, and transparent way has been heard and many people that the peer team spoke to highlighted that the relationships within the council had improved in the last 12 months under the new political leadership.

Horsham shared with the peer team examples of the successful delivery of projects to support the council's priorities. In particular, the work on climate action following the Council's declaration of a climate emergency in summer 2023 is impressive, as is the work on bringing partners together to tackle the cost-of-living crisis. The climate strategy is an example where members led the policy development, seeking to achieve carbon neutrality for its direct emissions by 2030 and indirect emissions by 2050. Work on a strategy to achieve this was completed at pace, with both members and officers committed to a proactive and detailed engagement plan with the community and partners, helping to fulfil their objective to be an open and transparent council.

Horsham has a number of big projects on the horizon, including the Capitol Theatre refurbishment and the leisure services contract changes, including the review of the climate implications of the council's asset base. This will require the council to have a strong focus on resources, performance, and financial risk from external factors. These big projects require close and careful oversight and monitoring particularly where a procurement strategy needs to be implemented in a relatively short period of time for example the leisure procurement needs a long run-in due to market conditions and investment needs.

In addition to the delivery of the specific projects that support the delivery of priorities

and the Council Plan, Horsham performs well in several service areas, including strong outcomes in terms of recycling, reuse and waste levels benchmarked against other South East (SE) authorities. The council achieves a household waste recycling rate of 51.64% compared to the SE median of 44.31%. The kg per household residual household waste is only 386.5kg compared to the SE median of 421.51kg. This is supported by data; for example, the Office for Local Government (OFLOG) reports show that Horsham performs above average for household waste recycling rates and for residual household waste kg per household when compared to SE councils. In recycling contamination rates, Horsham is below the median in England but above for SE councils.

Performance in revenue and benefits is mostly good with low levels of council tax not collected, and time taken to process housing benefit new claims and change events, the average for the SE.

Performance in planning is mixed. Horsham is aware of the issues and asked the Planning Advisory Service at the LGA to carry out a review. That review has taken place and a series of recommendations were made for the council to consider. The peer team did not look at that review in detail given that the work happened after the team's time with the council; however, the peer team has recommended a review of the planning committee meeting membership, looking at how to reduce the number of meetings members must attend overall.

The council has a performance management framework in place where Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are gathered and reported on. It was felt that although its structure has the visibility of members and staff, it needs to be better aligned with the new council priorities. It is recommended that the framework be refreshed to align with the 2023-27 vision annual plan's priorities and outcomes. This is also an opportunity for Horsham to look at how it performs compared to others in the sector, benchmarking data and intelligence information in its performance management framework. Benchmarking datasets allows councils to compare performance against other councils and identify gaps in performance, uncovering opportunities for improvement. It is also recommended that councils look to other authorities for ideas, innovation and examples of how smart and emerging technologies are utilised to reduce manual data entry. Horsham may wish to look at resources available in the [LGA](#) on performance management, including case studies collected from across the

sector.

Performance of service areas in Horsham benchmarked against SE councils can be found in the [LG Inform Headline Report](#) for Horsham.

During the review, the peer team was shown several examples of successful projects meeting local priorities and needs, including the extensive work to manage COVID-19 alongside partners in the community, a recent and highly praised project on tackling cost-of-living issues faced by many in the community, and work to engage with younger people and seek their views on the provision of outdoor facilities and space for the community.

Horsham is not immune to the workforce challenges seen in the sector, forcing them to look at how they operate and work to maintain service levels. An example of this for the council is the difficulties they have experienced in recruiting and keeping staff within the legal team. They have been unable to match the pay applicants can attract in other, often London-based roles, that are within easy commute from Horsham. Horsham is working with staff to review the demand on legal services with the aim of providing further clarification, guidance and support to staff on when legal advice is necessary/required and when it is not. This work, if carefully managed, should drive down the demand and help those existing staff to focus on the most relevant and required pieces of work.

4.2. Leadership and culture

Horsham has an engaged and dedicated political and executive leadership team, supported by a committed and knowledgeable workforce. The council benefits from recognised and visible leadership from both the Leader and the Chief Executive. The peer team observed a model of working that appeared respectful and collaborative.

The political leadership at Horsham is ambitious for the district and keen to deliver positive outcomes for the community. The cabinet was observed to function well individually and together as a group, and they have embraced their role as political and place leaders for the district. Many members were new to the role and responsibilities of being a councillor in 2023 and those that had councillor experience did not necessarily have experience of holding key leadership roles within a council. The learning curve has been steep for many, with members being admired by officers

and councillors in the wider political groups for their determination and ability to quickly achieve a level of knowledge to operate in their respective roles. Furthermore, they came together as a group to agree on the priorities and outcomes for the district for the coming years, providing a clear sense of direction in the council.

Horsham has positive examples of the frequent and productive interaction between members and officers. The cabinet and officer Senior Leadership Team meet fortnightly with papers and reports to review and consider. They discuss the issues at the meeting and the right way to proceed, with the cabinet making the final decision. The peer team heard that the agendas for the meetings are mainly officer-led and a development should be that cabinet members put their own ideas into the agenda to create a more balanced agenda with members and officers.

A suite of induction briefings and training sessions were quickly mobilised and completed by members. Training since the induction has been ad hoc and there is the opportunity for sessions to be recorded for those who are unable to attend to catch up on what has been missed. There is an opportunity for the council to extend member development further by creating and championing a strengthened Member Development Framework. This should include a continuous training programme, mentoring opportunities, and specialised training for committee chairs, all-member scrutiny training, and refreshed equalities training. There are examples across the sector of good Member Development Frameworks and the [LGA](#) can also support with member development planning.

The peer team observed the council to be strong on respect and openness with good member and officer relationships. It was also very open and transparent during the peer team's time on-site with peers noting an informal culture within the organisation.

Officer-to-officer relationships are also strong with formal and informal networks enabling a culture of collaboration, with officers noting an improved relationship with members. This is important as an authority with an open culture, comprised of supportive and honest relationships between officers and members, will facilitate frank and candid conversations about governance risks and how they can be addressed. It is important that principal statutory officers can assure themselves that they are leading and owning the development of such a culture, enabling candid conversations and promoting the benefits and need for healthy questioning and

challenge.

With the exception of scrutiny, overall, the peer team found that members understood the role and the responsibilities they held. It was felt that all scrutiny members would benefit from further training on what good scrutiny looks like and how effective scrutiny can benefit the council and improve policymaking. It is also the role of those on scrutiny committee to devise its programme of work and ensure that it is also seen to be conducting its business by asking most pertinent and relevant questions that have been worked through. This will also ensure the principle of being an open and transparent council is being achieved.

Collaboration is important but cabinet members should also be confident in the knowledge that they are in charge and have the mandate to lead the council. The peer team heard examples of members not wanting to ask officers questions or make certain requests for fear of overwhelming them or being a burden. The team reflected that this can be common in the initial stages of establishing and fostering new relationships between new members and officers in a new administration and that it can take time to identify what to ask for and ways to ask for it. It is recommended that the council look at ways it can empower and support members to question and challenge when appropriate and in a constructive way.

4.3. Policies, procedures, and standards

The council clearly has a strong appetite for improvement, with significant attention directed to how to ensure effective governance, scrutiny, and challenge within the cabinet system and statutory committees. There is also senior leadership commitment to involve all members in the policy development and decision-making process.

The peer team found that the council has a good approach to governance in the work it does to manage and address standards issues, hearing challenging examples, taken through the formal standards procedure and well-managed by the Monitoring Officer (MO).

The council reports that the constitution was written primarily by members during the previous administration and is in need of reviewing. The peer team found elements of the document to be confusing/unclear and poorly set out especially regarding the status of PDAGs; recommending a review and subsequent re-draft to be project-

managed and led by the council's MO with input from members. A clear and up-to-date constitution, including consideration of how scrutiny works in decision making, will enable the council to ensure that their operations are conducted in an efficient and accountable manner and are aligned with the needs and aspirations of the community.

Demand upon member time is high in the council, partly due to the arrangements in place for meetings, both statutory and non-statutory. The peer team heard from one member that "it can be a challenge to manage our lives".

The number and frequency of meetings was observed to create a sense of overwhelm for many, with others noting the scheduling does not allow for the time needed for papers to be adequately reviewed or make the required committee for actions to be considered: for example, insufficient time for scrutiny recommendations to go to the next Cabinet meeting.

The council has eight committees: Overview and Scrutiny Audit, Employment, Governance, Licensing, Planning North, Planning South and Standards. Each committee comprises approximately 7 to 15 members who convene at regular intervals to discuss pertinent matters. The number of members on the planning committees is 29 and 22 respectively. The situation has led to instances where members have reported having a meeting almost every day in a given month, highlighting the strain on their capacity. There may be opportunities to merge committees, and this could streamline processes and improve efficiency in the council.

In addition to this, the council has a set of meetings, Policy and Development Advisory Groups (PDAGs) that are cross-party and meet six times a year with the aim of developing council policy. They are not statutory meetings. From the conversations had while onsite for the peer challenge members, some staff are unclear as to the purpose of PDAGs and how they fit into the constitution. However, many people spoke of their benefit and the valuable opportunity they provide for meeting informally with officers and other members to talk through policy and any other issues. PDAGs are seen as a way to get all members, including backbenchers, involved, with concerns noted that any changes need to consider how to not lose this aspect completely from the governance structure. What was more difficult to gauge was the effectiveness of the forums to formulate policy and the transparency in doing so in these forums that are not public or minuted. Their standing within the formal governance process is

somewhat unclear and the peer team, as a result, recommend that they be reviewed alongside reviewing and bolstering scrutiny and the review of the constitution.

To enhance the effectiveness of scrutiny and further develop the council's approach, there is an opportunity to empower the members with greater ownership of the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme. By granting more autonomy to the members to set the agenda, the council can foster a sense of additional responsibility and accountability while ensuring alignment with broader organisational goals.

The current arrangements concerning the operation of planning committees would benefit from a review, with the possibility of enabling a reduction in membership to enable an enhanced level of training on the strong statutory framework that surrounds planning to be focussed on a smaller pool of members. This is particularly so as concerns were heard that not all members attend the mandatory training and understand the guidelines. Given the quasi-judicial nature of planning it is particularly important that the training tests the level of understanding.

Such a change could also reduce the number of meetings some members need to attend. Members would still have the opportunity to attend committees where there is an issue relevant to their ward and have the opportunity to speak on the issue. Should changes be made to the current approach, it would be worth accompanying the proposal with a clear explanation of how members can still ensure active engagement to be seen to represent their local communities.

Already noted in this report is the speed at which members and officers have reached the position they are in now with an agreed Council Plan, Annual Plan, and Regulation 19 Local Plan published as well as members and officers having delivered and attended a suite of induction activities. An area that would benefit from further work is ensuring clarity around delegated authority in decision-making. The peer team saw some evidence of uncertainty in the member and officer groups about delegation and decision-making responsibilities. The council should ensure the council scheme of delegation is up to date and conduct a briefing to clarify and refresh knowledge. The council could look to produce simple guides to decision-making with easy-to-follow flowcharts. These would support members and officers and help avoid any ambiguity.

By adhering to good decision-making and delegation practices, the council will continue to strengthen its governance structure, foster transparent decision-making

processes, and ultimately serve the best interests of the community it represents.

4.4. Decision-making and scrutiny

There is a good level of internal consultation at both the officer and the member levels, with examples of individual departments working well with each other to identify issues. Members report that in most cases officers respond quickly to ward members on issues and questions they bring to them relating to their residents.

Members and officers describe decision-making reports as good quality, and the peer team observed the Forward Plan being used and in place as a tool for the community to view the business of the council. Utilisation of the Forward Plan provides a route of community access to decision-making alongside the council's public meeting arrangements and formal consultation mechanisms.

The peer team noted the positive and harmonious culture observed within the council. Equally when further questioning is needed and purposeful direction is required, this is evidently delivered cordially. Work to provide a good and open culture in the organisation in the last year has delivered observable positive outcomes and strong working relationships.

Views on the council's scrutiny function are mixed; however, there is a perceived lack of power and impact when it comes to the Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) committee, with members citing that it "doesn't have much bite". Others commented that O&S has become a 'report shop' more recently, indicating a perception of being primarily focused on generating reports rather than fulfilling its broader oversight role. This suggests the need for a re-evaluation of the O&S committee's authority and effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate.

The operation of the current O&S committee would benefit from further guidance and support in providing effective challenge in a constructive way that constitutes the desired and required amount of scrutiny. The peer team recommend a more planned approach to scrutiny with opportunities for external membership to help with bringing forward more opportunities. It was apparent to the peer group that PDAGs have added to the confusion of the role of scrutiny and the feeling that some issues get taken repeatedly to different places. It is important that the role of scrutiny as the formal place where decisions and issues can be reviewed and discussed, in public, is

enhanced and this may require a change to the use or existence of PDAGs in their current form.

In addition to bolstering formal scrutiny, the peer team felt the organisation could benefit from working with members and officers to promote the role of challenge and scrutiny within the council more generally. Challenge delivered well can lead to growth, improvement, and increased resilience. An element of tension in decision-making is healthy, and it is possible to challenge in a way that is delivered constructively without losing the positives the council has achieved and the relationships it has built. The council should look at how it can showcase the value and influence scrutiny can have on policy development.

Horsham might also wish to consider creating a scrutiny protocol and explore having independent membership to O&S to bring in skills and best practice from elsewhere.

In good scrutiny, members should be more involved in policies that are going forward. Given the equalities challenges previously surfaced in the council, it might be prudent for the Equality Diversity and Inclusion plan to be added to the scrutiny work plan — to provide an additional layer of review.

Good scrutiny also requires the opposition to play an active role in questioning and exploring differing opportunities. The opposition members report they are now beginning to settle into their role as effective opposition members and this should help develop scrutiny and challenge.

The Leader has expressed that he believes the current arrangement and decision framework in the unparished area is poor. These areas do not have access in the way parish areas do to be part of the decision-making process about how the special charge is allocated and spent. They are voiceless in a way that other areas in Horsham are not and for a council wishing to operate in a more transparent and collaborative model of local government, the unparished area lacking a voice is rightly a concern. The council should look to explore how this arrangement can be improved.

It is important that the council ensures there is the right level of scrutiny and effective governance arrangements in place for delivering projects. Council assets like the Drill Hall and the decisions made on the future purpose and benefit gained by the council must include detailed business cases, alongside decision-making reports. It is important to future-proof assets with harder financial times on the horizon.

4.5. Community engagement

The peer team feel that members and officers understand the communities they are serving and were able to appreciate the different needs of communities in town and rural areas.

The peer team were left with the impression that on most issues the parish and neighbourhood councils did feel included and consulted, with their issues explored in generally satisfactory ways other than in planning. There continues to be a high level of concern raised by members and parish councillors regarding the impact of development targets and planning decisions upon their communities. At the time of writing this report, Horsham has commissioned the LGA to complete a planning peer review.

The council has prioritised engagement with residents, businesses, and partners, aiming to foster positive relationships and gather feedback; a priority area for the council and pillar of their Council Plan is prioritising “listening, learning and improving”. The feedback from businesses to the council’s work is positive. The peer team also received encouraging feedback from parish and neighbourhood councils, despite challenges posed by the Local Plan and planning decisions. Neighbourhood councils, were noted to effectively communicate concerns to the district council from their area and have the ability to request funding for local issues, maintaining strong relationships with the district through this mechanism. It was noted that occasionally the ‘feedback loop’ on how an issue raised had been dealt with or concluded, failed causing some frustration. The peer team suggests that Horsham could look at ways to streamline communication channels and reduce demand on council time by correctly filtering requests to only deal with those within the remit of the district. Technology may be able to help in this area, with the overall aim of enhancing operational efficiency.

Positive examples of engagement were observed in the council's collaborative efforts with the community and partners on addressing the climate emergency, the subsequent policy development, and in the associated consultation. Moreover, the council's work on addressing the cost-of-living crisis and the recent partner conference were positively viewed. However, again feedback from partners indicated a need for clarity on the next steps and outcomes of collaborative efforts.

A noteworthy consultation was demonstrated through the task and finish group's

engagement with young people regarding access to outdoor space and facilities. Part of the council's equality and diversity agenda is to ensure that they seek the views of those underrepresented in the existing formal consultation mechanisms. There is an opportunity for the council to have a more explicit focus on equality within community engagement.

It is the peer team's view that, in addition to these examples, there will be more great examples of the council engaging with the community and partners. The council now needs to formalise and capture examples holding centralised resources of good practice for others to use.

It is also recommended that the council look at how they can better publicise the good work on engagement happening in their district. A challenge for Horsham will be how to engage with communities successfully on their big projects, including the major refurbishment project of the council-owned Capitol Theatre and the reletting of the leisure centre contract. The council should also look at how it stores information on its website around engagement that is not a formal consultation, signposting to partners and the community for updates.

5. Next steps

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

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The peer challenge process includes a progress review session approximately 8-10 months after the review, which provides space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, Will Brooks, Principal Adviser for the South East of England, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Will is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

William.Brooks@local.gov.uk.

