

Corporate Peer Challenge

Rutland County Council

26th – 29th November 2019

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Rutland County Council is an ambitious and customer responsive council delivering good quality services with high performance levels. The peer team found the Council to be a friendly and a welcoming organisation with strong and maturing organisational leadership at political and managerial levels. There is financial stability in the organisation and the Council has a proven track record of mitigating budget deficits while maintaining front-line services. The size of the organisation is being used well to exploit opportunities and to secure external funding for strategic projects, for example Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF).

There are some good innovations coming forward at the service levels such as prevention and early intervention in adults and children's services supported by a collective commitment to prevention, early intervention and integration across the health and social care partnership. At the practical level there is evidence of services joined up and integrated at both the strategic and operational levels for example; Fix My Street/My Account referrals and the programmes on health and social care are starting to make a real impact on the ground and in the community. The Council has a good reputation as an early adopter of innovative schemes and new initiatives – *“Rutland is at the heart of everything the Council does”*.

There are also examples of strong partnership working with the Ministry of Defence, the Army, Schools, and CSP. The Council is well respected by local and sub-regional partners and has influence beyond its administrative and physical footprint, for example its championing of the A1 Upgrade from Peterborough to Blyth and being a founder member of the 'Britain's Leading Edge' Group of local authorities. The peer team feel that the time is right to build this confidence and exploit the opportunities that are being presented for more collaborative working across the sub-region to boost the local economy through, for example, the LEPs and the growth opportunities emerging from projects such as the proposed St George's Business Zone and Oakham Enterprise Park, etc. These could open a whole raft of possibilities for the future of Rutland and the leadership of the Council should continue its involvement and influence in this space.

The Council is at the initial stages of facilitating the development of a '50 Year Vision for Rutland' that will identify and articulate local ambitions for the future of the County. This looks to be a positive initiative as it will develop a strong narrative for the area and can help to bring the community and partners together around a single agreed vision and priorities for the long-term future of the County.

Community consultation is in place, but mechanisms need to be developed to facilitate continuous community engagement that is more than consulting on options and instead engages residents in co-designing and co-producing solutions at all levels. The Council recognises the need to further strengthen its wider community consultation, engagement, and communication arrangements with the public. A clear strategy that distinguishes between communications, consultation and engagement is needed. This will facilitate the building of trust within communities and pro-actively seek to win hearts and minds around

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the Council's long-term ambitions. There is a real opportunity for the Council to work across the County and devise something that is pioneering and moves it to the next stage of development. Putting in place meaningful community engagement, communication and public consultation arrangements across the piece is a 'tough nut to crack' but Rutland County Council has the depth of insight into its communities, emerging support from partners and the ability to do this. This could mean, for instance working with Town and Parish councils to co-design and co-produce a framework for future engagement which may mean reviewing the current format of the Parish Council Forum and strengthening its role and remit so that it operates as a partnership.

The peer team met enthusiastic, committed and loyal staff working for the Council who are passionate about Rutland. Nevertheless, organisational stability now and in the future is critical, particularly in areas driving the Council's ambitions and key objectives. It is important to put in place effective succession planning arrangements so that safeguards are in place to ensure the momentum is continued and that there is resilience across the organisation.

Both capacity and resilience are risk areas for the Council to think through and address. One of the areas to consider is accelerating the work on building capacity and resilience among partners so that they can help the Council to achieve its ambitions and deliver better outcomes for residents. For example, there is huge potential for the Council to develop 'Team Rutland' and its brand into a more strategic partnership to help own and deliver the future vision for Rutland.

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that 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:

- 1. *Develop mechanisms to facilitate continuous community engagement that is more than consulting on options, builds assurance and transparency around future plans to win hearts and minds*** - this is essential if the Council is to secure community buy-in to its ambitions for future growth of the economy and sustainability of the local populations.
- 2. *Work with stakeholders to help build trust and buy-in to the ambitious '50 year vision for Rutland'*** - This will help in producing a compelling narrative to 'future-proof' Rutland as a place backed up with shared ambitions among all strategic partners and communities. It will also secure buy-in and commitment to the delivery of those ambitions by bringing partners and communities together.
- 3. *Working with Town and Parish councils co-design and co-produce a framework for future engagement to help build a stronger conduit to communities and***

residents - This will help to reset relationships with Town and Parish councils, facilitate better engagement and promote shared ownership of ambitions for Rutland and develop the Parish Forum into a strategic partnership.

- 4. Further develop 'Team Rutland' and its brand into a structured strategic partnership to help articulate and communicate/promote the future vision for Rutland** – 'Team Rutland' is an impressive partnership with huge potential to help the Council in its leadership of place role and its involvement in the future shaping of Rutland can be secured through a more structured set-up.
- 5. Address issues of capacity, resilience and succession planning to ensure stability and long-term sustainability for the Council** – This is critical for an organization the size of Rutland where its capacity is vested in a small workforce and losing key skills at critical points can set it off course. More distributed leadership, contingency planning and sharing skills with neighbouring councils might help with this.
- 6. Use the Council's Corporate Plan to contribute to the delivery of the '50 year vision for Rutland', once developed** - This will ensure that there is alignment between the Corporate Plan and the '50 Year Vision for Rutland' and should help to establish and firm up the Council's role as convener of place.

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 the Council's 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 Rutland County Council were:

- **Dorcas Buntton** (Former Chief Executive - Derbyshire Dales District Council)
- **Councillor Peter Nutting** (Leader - Shropshire Council)
- **Patsy Dell** (Assistant Director Strategic Planning, Infrastructure and Economy - Hertfordshire County Council)
- **Lysanne Eddy** (Head of Corporate Strategy - Southend on Sea Borough Council)
- **Andrew Hughes** (Head of Care and Health Improvement Programme - LGA)
- **Satvinder Rana** (Programme Manager - LGA)

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components that all Corporate Peer Challenges cover. These are the areas the peer challenge process 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, the Council also asked the peer team to support its thinking in the following areas:

Community engagement – how the Council can continue to learn from its previous experience and find a formula that will work for it and its community

Reputation of the Council - how the Council can improve its reputation to ensure that its wider community understand what it does and to assist to shift the perception of negativity

Corporate Plan - a reality check against the Council's Corporate Plan and plans for creating a '50 year vision for Rutland' and how it might tackle 'resistance' to change more positively

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed 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 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 Rutland County Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 100 people including a range of Council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 47 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 230 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 6 weeks in Rutland County Council.

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 (26th – 29th November 2019). In presenting feedback to the Council, 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. The peer team appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things the Council is already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

There is developing knowledge and understanding of the local place and context which has been used to set objectives and priorities in the emerging Corporate Plan, much of this gained through information gathering exercises carried out by the Council. However, more active engagement with communities would enrich this understanding of the local place and help to develop and articulate a strong vision and narrative for Rutland that can be used to win hearts and minds.

The Council is in the process of strengthening its community consultation, engagement and communication approaches which will help to share its ambitions and priorities and secure greater buy-in to its strategic projects from residents. This should also include involving citizens in evaluating the effectiveness of Council services and strategies and feeding the information back into the system.

Nevertheless, in order to develop robust methods for community consultation, engagement and communication it will be important to clarify and differentiate what

each term means for Rutland and its various communities. For example, consultation is the process of dialogue with residents and community groups based on a genuine exchange of views with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action but they do not have the final say. Engagement is looser and is about developing and sustaining productive working relationships between the Council and its communities to help them to both understand and act on the needs or issues that the community experiences. It can include residents and groups working jointly with the Council in co-designing and co-producing solutions. Communication is information-giving where residents are informed but have no influence on decision making. All these increasingly involve using digital technologies and seek to make services more responsive to a broad range of residents' needs.

The intention and drive to develop a '50 Year Vision for Rutland' is positive and will enable Rutland to set out its vision for the County and explain how they will deal with the challenges and seize opportunities that face rural communities and economies. However, ownership and buy-in to this vision by the whole community and stakeholders will be essential. The development of this vision through a series of visioning exercises with communities, partners and, particularly, young people will provide opportunities to develop a continuous and a much broader conversation with residents to enable them to articulate their needs and wants. Aligned to this the Council should also explore new and creative ways of engaging with residents, including the use of modern technologies and online communication platforms.

The Corporate Plan provides a sense of direction for the Council, however it currently stands in isolation from the vision and the outcomes that are being sought. The peer team's most prominent recommendation for the Council is to develop a strong vision and a compelling shared narrative for Rutland as a place with clear ambitions for its economy and infrastructure as well as its people. The primary aim of this should be to continue replenishing the demography of the County and to attract inward investment so that ambitions around jobs and housing can be delivered. It should also be about helping to set the destination, while engaging, involving and inspiring staff, partners and communities to be part of that journey. Communication and marketing should be focused on ensuring that the right messages are sent out to all the stakeholders locally and to the outside world about where Rutland is heading. This will inevitably require the Council to continue to work with the Town and Parish councils, community groups and its strategic partners to get them to own and help deliver, not just the messages but also, the ambitions.

Furthermore, the Corporate Plan should be driving the agreed outcomes and quantifying the impacts, not just delivering outputs. This means there should a highly visible 'golden thread' from strategy to action to impact; and that monitoring, evaluating and managing performance across the Council should clearly show the outcomes that are being achieved, not just the outputs.

4.2 Leadership of Place

There is effective and well respected political and managerial leadership in the Council and it is providing leadership of place which can be evidenced by the way Rutland County Council is represented and listened to on the various regional and sub-regional bodies, for example it straddles two LEPs, is a full member of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, a founder member of the 'Britain's Leading Edge' Group of local authorities, and plays an active role in the 'Midlands Engine', 'Midlands Connect' and 'East Midlands Councils'. Furthermore, the Council's plans for the future of Rutland and its ability to successfully attract external funding for large development projects, for example, the successful HIF bid is also demonstrable of its leadership of place. The development of a former prison site into the Oakham Enterprise Park and the joined up and seamless services provided by the Library and the Children's Centre in Oakham were very good examples of the Council delivering on its place leadership role.

The Council has good relationships with its strategic partners and has delivered some impressive projects as early adopters of new ways of working. The peer team came across many examples of partnership working, such as, working with the Ministry of Defence and neighbouring councils to provide support to the Armed Forces Community and the proposed creation of a Garden Community at St George's – the soon to be vacated Army Barracks; and setting up the innovative integrated hospital discharge team with Health partners which operates a 'pull model' to bring residents home to Rutland as soon as they are medically fit for discharge.

Going forward, a widely owned and bought into '50 Year Vision for Rutland' backed up with a clear and strong narrative will focus strategic capacity and enable the continuation of successful leadership of place. Although key operational partnerships are in place and are effective, there are opportunities to work together to visibly strengthen relationships with Town and Parish councils and a huge opportunity to further develop and use 'Team Rutland' more strategically, for example it could help to own and front the development of the '50 Year Vision for Rutland'.

As the Council moves to the next level of its development it will need more pro-active and coordinated communications and engagement to share the Council's priorities and work programme. In addition, the work of the Council needs to be more visible so that projects and programmes on the ground can be easily aligned with the priorities of the Council. The Council's communications, consultation and engagement strategy should be further developed to communicate key messages internally and externally with other partners and the public.

There is recognition of the importance and usefulness of deploying appropriate channels, including social media, to get key messages to the public at village and neighbourhood level. Different people and different groups will respond differently

to how the Council engages with them. There is already a very strong “*sense of belonging to the place*”.

4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

Strong and effective leadership provided by the Leader, Deputy Leader and supported by the Cabinet is maturing. Ownership of the Corporate Plan by the Leader and the Deputy Leader is a real strength and gives weight to what the Council is trying to achieve. This now needs to be finalised and communicated widely both internally and externally so that Council resources and capacity can be aligned to delivering the key priorities and people becoming more aware about what the Council is trying to achieve.

The Chief Executive is held in high regard internally and externally and carries immense corporate memory and capacity. Whilst this is a major strength it also poses a risk to the Council. This was recognised and succession plans are being put in place to ensure more distributed leadership, particularly at senior level and in key single posts, to ensure longer-term stability, delivery of outcomes and maintaining key relationships.

There are good Member development opportunities, but Members could benefit from more ongoing training and development, particularly given the extent of new Members elected at each electoral cycle. The peer team also heard from some Members that valuable Induction training, for example, was concentrated in the first few weeks of them being elected and some Members could not free up their diaries at such short notice. They would value further training opportunities, particularly around planning issues etc. In addition, a more formalised mechanism to process Member enquiries will help to bring more transparency and efficiency into the system. The current ad-hoc way Members approach individual officers to resolve issues is diverting effort and capacity from delivering the strategic agenda.

The peer team found all the necessary governance and decision-making structures to be in place and working. However, there is an opportunity to make better use of scrutiny to support policy/decision making through focused commissions and deep-dives into strategic challenges facing the Council. Scrutiny generally has a role in both engaging with citizens and demonstrating accountability back to the public. A significant proportion of the work of scrutiny should be externally focussed so that its purpose is to make local public services more accountable to residents. The peer team would encourage the Council to further develop this approach and use scrutiny to support policy/decision making and to demonstrate accountability to the public. In doing this the Council will need to ensure that the scrutiny committee is supported with the necessary data and performance information for it to scrutinise effectively, and this may call for additional resources.

The peer team heard from staff about tension between delivering the priorities in the Corporate Plan and ad-hoc service requests that suddenly appear to be a priority including the desired focus on exceeding expectations of customers. So, whilst staff members felt compelled to respond to each and every request that comes their way either from members of the public or via elected Members, they found it hard to link these with the strategic objectives of the Corporate Plan. This tends to divert effort and create undue pressure on staff and resources.

The Council is strong in individual service areas but has capacity to be more corporate and cross-cutting to deliver on its corporate and strategic priorities. At present initiatives and projects are presented on a service specific basis and not in the context of corporate priorities and ambitions and this gives the impression of an organisation that is service and initiative driven in approach rather than strategic, ambitious and in control of the wider strategic agenda across the local area.

There is evidence of good internal communication across the organization through regular team meetings, all staff briefings, etc. The 'One Council' approach is clearly a strength and the Council's size facilitates this very well. There is a "*one family feel*" about the organisation and staff were able to work across service boundaries in a supportive and collegiate way.

4.4 Financial planning and viability

The Council is financially robust with a strong non-earmarked reserves position. It has been able to balance the books by finding savings and through raising Council tax. Over the last 7 years it has delivered over £11m of savings/income across all aspects of the Council. This has helped mitigate pressures and funding losses.

Currently the Council is in a healthy financial position. It has £8.963m General reserves (24% of net revenue expenditure) and over the last three years has built-up, from underspends, earmarked reserves of £4.966m to help manage pressures in areas like social care. Its approach to financial management and financial planning is therefore robust and includes budget monitoring reports that clearly identify the areas of budget pressure.

Risks are identified in budget reports and how they are to be managed and there is a five-year medium-term financial plan (MTFP) where assumptions made are explicit and regularly updated. Funding for Capital projects is clearly identified.

However, like much of local government financial uncertainty beyond 2024 is a risk and the Council recognises this and is articulating its approach to deficit mitigation. Its MTFP identifies a likely financial gap of up to £1m - £2m over the next few years. Nevertheless, the peer team would encourage the Council to continue to be in a position where it is relatively comfortable with any uncertainty resulting from increases in demand for services and the short-term nature of central

government funding. This should include developing a range of alternative approaches to transformation, savings and demand management.

Furthermore, the peer team would recommend that the Council should ensure that robust resourcing of major projects both in terms of finances and personnel is in place so that outcomes are to be achieved e.g. St George's Business Zone proposal, the future development of Oakham Enterprise Park, and business access to Ultrafast Broadband, etc; and that there is always a pipeline of place-based projects ready to implement as and when funding opportunities arise.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

The Council has fantastic people who love working for Rutland County Council and are highly motivated and supported to develop themselves and their roles - "*there is a family atmosphere here*". The Council is a good employer and has a very enthusiastic and committed workforce that is focused on the needs of residents. Employees enjoy opportunities for personal and professional development, and they expressed pride in working for the Council and felt valued and supported in their roles.

New and existing staff are very positive about how it feels to work for Rutland CC and see it as an opportunity to develop their careers and experiences. However, there has been high staff turn-over in some areas (particularly at senior level) and this can destabilise the organisation and undermine momentum on key projects, particularly those aligned to priorities. The high turnover of staff is testament to the Council being able to provide unique opportunities for ambitious local government employees to 'cut their teeth' in roles with a good breadth of responsibilities. But in a small unitary council where progression opportunities can be limited this can pose a risk to ensuring consistency and momentum and avoiding single person dependency. This potential risk should be kept under review.

Although the Council manages its capacity to deliver very well, the peer team found that staff tended to "*wear many hats*" which allows for interesting jobs but there are risks in spreading staffing resources thinly – "*there is a lot of good will from staff*". There is a fine balance to be achieved in being 'fleet of foot' and maximising resources to deliver what needs to be delivered and at the same time demarcating roles and responsibilities. This may be part of a conscious approach but, nevertheless, should be kept under review and staff should be listened to if they feel they are taking on too much.

The Council is making some headway in seeking new ways of delivering services, for example through a 'Digital First' approach and Fix My Street/My Account referrals to make access to services quicker, easier and more cost effective for residents. Nevertheless, further options in terms of service delivery in key areas should be explored to improve resilience. This could include, for example, opportunities for shared services, further integration of services with strategic

partners, managing demand and building community resilience for continued self-help.

5. Next steps

Immediate next steps

The peer team appreciate that 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 it would be happy to discuss this. Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser is the main contact between Rutland County Council and the Local Government Association (LGA). His contact details are: Tel: 07747 636 910 and email: mark.edgell@local.gov.uk

In the meantime, peer team is keen to continue the relationship it has formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. It will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues it has 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. The LGA's 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 2025.



Satvinder Rana
Programme Manager

(On behalf of the peer challenge team)