

Corporate Peer Challenge **Coventry City Council**

9th to 12th October 2018

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

There is tremendous pride in Coventry. A huge buzz and excitement exists – centred on both the here and now and the potential that has been created through the work of the council and its partners in recent years. Key aspects of this include the city centre regeneration and public realm improvements, the international events being hosted over the coming years, the inward investment taking place and the digital infrastructure that is being established. The council has been integral to what is being achieved and can be very proud of the role it has played.

The council recognises the social and economic challenges that exist for Coventry, including the number of children in the care of the local authority, the very significant housing and homelessness challenge and variations in life expectancy across different parts of the city. As the city faces up to these challenges it does so on solid foundations of good partnership working. The council is held in high regard by those it works with.

Relationships within the council are founded upon mutual respect and there are comprehensive formal and informal working arrangements between officers and elected members. Whilst this set of arrangements can be seen to be resource intensive, they provide for an inclusive and thorough approach that engages councillors at all levels and facilitates smooth decision-making.

The council is proud of having successfully met the financial challenge to date. There is recognition that work remains to ensure the planning for this year and next translates into successfully concluded savings and reductions. There is much less certainty for the council regarding the financial position in 2020/21, although the authority is currently projecting a gap of £20m. This gap, combined with the cumulative impact of the savings required to date, is starting to inform thinking that the status quo, in terms of what the council delivers and how it operates, cannot be maintained.

The council is combining its traditional values – centred on delivering for local people – with a growing track record of innovation and managed risk-taking. This is reflected in the emergence of new ways of working and an increasing appetite around investment opportunities and commercial ventures.

‘One Coventry’ – the narrative that outlines the council’s objectives, key strategies and approaches – is seen as new and the start of something although there is actually a long ‘back story’ to it. Making it clearer that ‘One Coventry’ has this history would be useful in helping people to see it as an amalgam of things long-established rather than a new concept which has suddenly emerged. It is important for the council to determine what ‘One Coventry’ is and where it goes from here. With it having been set in train, time is of the essence.

Coventry has a strong reputation as an evidence-led organisation. The importance of the residents’ voice is recognised within the council and there are good examples of the way it has engaged local people. There is an opportunity for the council to enhance the way it communicates with residents and delivers customer service. Whilst there has been something of a shift towards using social media more, there is a lot of potential that has not yet been fulfilled. A similar situation exists in relation to customer service, with an

emphasis continuing to be placed on people contacting the council by telephone or visiting in person. The creation of the Customer Service Centre has created a more streamlined approach but there is a great deal of frustration for both customers and council staff with the fragility of the authority's telephony system.

Staff that we met from across the organisation both feel and contribute to the sense of pride that exists in Coventry and the buzz and excitement that exists. They are passionate about their work, embody what the city stands for and are responding positively to changing ways of working. The council's move to Friargate and the complementary introduction of 'agile working' has generated significant benefits. The organisation is working increasingly corporately and staff reflected to us just how highly they value the flexibility they now have in terms of where and how they work.

Staff are also welcoming the increasing two-way engagement with the council's leadership which is being seen. There is a thirst there for knowledge and input, with them being keen to play an increasing role in informing the council's thinking and helping to find solutions. We would encourage the council to be very mindful though of those staff who have not yet benefited from the changes that have been made and the need to ensure all staff across the organisation can contribute and be involved.

Capacity pressures are being felt within the organisation and careful thought is required about how to address them. This is as much an issue of prioritisation as it is one of investment, with a recognition that the financial challenge is on-going. The demands facing the organisation require it to be able to get the best out of its people by being able to operate flexibly. To facilitate this, we would encourage the council to learn from other public sector best practice on industrial relations, pay and reward models and HR policy and practice.

Coventry has been awarded the title of 'UK City of Culture 2021'. The approach to winning the bid was impressive and what is being done is brave and bold. The potential of being the host city is enormous, in the lead up to 2021, during the year itself and, crucially, long after the year has concluded. There stands to be a place legacy and there is total commitment to securing a legacy for the people of the city too. 'Hard-wiring' the people legacy and inclusive growth is crucial if the City of Culture is to be deemed to have been successful. Getting the regional dynamic of the City of Culture right will be important too, with Coventry, as the host city, being the hub of a wider cultural geography.

The housing and homelessness challenge being faced in the city is very significant. There is a need for over 42,000 homes to be built in the twenty years to 2031, including 12,000 'affordable' homes. Homelessness continues to represent a rapidly growing policy and financial pressure for the council. Although increasing rough-sleeping is the high profile manifestation of this, the biggest challenge remains the number of homeless families in temporary accommodation. A new housing and homelessness strategy and action plan are being developed.

The prevention of homelessness is now being seen as a corporate priority, there is more understanding of the situation and investment is clearly being made. There is recognition that commissioning around homelessness services needs to be more clearly focused and joined up. Council staff demonstrated huge commitment to addressing the issue and

people across the organisation are clearly working together much more now. Staff do, however, have a desire for clearer strategic leadership of the homelessness agenda and greater clarity of priorities.

The actions being taken are not yet sufficient to address the scale of the homelessness problem being faced. The council should prioritise action to replace expensive bed and breakfast with cheaper temporary accommodation options and increase the supply of social rented and affordable private rented accommodation so it exceeds projected temporary accommodation demand. This needs to be achieved in the short term. However, the overall housing and homelessness strategy needs to be progressed at the same time.

The council is seen as one of the most pro-active local authorities to work with in terms of promoting social value. Our discussions identified opportunities to enhance things further by building on the good practice that already exists, including the opportunity to link social value contributions to council priorities more clearly.

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of this report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations on-site – many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

- Prioritising action to tackle homelessness by:

- Replacing expensive bed and breakfast with cheaper temporary accommodation options
- Increasing the supply of social rented and affordable private rented accommodation so it exceeds projected temporary accommodation demand
- Making greater use of peer or external challenge to continue to develop our response

- Ensuring the work to deliver against the projected balanced budget position for 2019/20 is successfully concluded
- Learning from other public sector best practice on industrial relations, pay and reward models and HR policy and practice
- Taking the opportunity to enhance the way the council communicates with residents and delivers customer service
- Driving the digital agenda harder and faster
- Being very mindful of those staff who have not yet benefited from the changes to ways of working and accommodation and responding to the thirst amongst staff for knowledge and input

- Hard-wiring the legacy and inclusive growth potential of the City of Culture and the cultural strategy
- Determining what 'One Coventry' is and the role it can play helping the city and the council respond to the challenges being faced
- Taking forward the recognised need for a shared vision for working in partnership across the council and the city
- Strengthening delivery of the change programme to support the transformation agenda

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

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

- Alison McKenzie-Folan, Deputy Chief Executive, Wigan Metropolitan Council
- Councillor Jon Collins, Leader, Nottingham City Council
- Mark Lloyd, Chief Executive, Local Government Association
- Kate Waterhouse, Head of Performance, Research and Intelligence, Manchester City Council
- Terrie Alafat, Chief Executive, Chartered Institute of Housing
- Dan Korski, Co-founder, PUBLIC
- Chris Bowron, Programme Manager, Local Government Association

Scope and focus

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

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?

- Leadership of place: Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
- 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?
- 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?
- Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

Alongside these questions, the council asked the peer team to:

1. Consider the potential for the 'One Coventry' approach to enable the delivery of the council plan, the Cultural Strategy and other major council projects and programmes
2. Test how well the 'One Coventry' approach is shared and owned by council officers and elected members
3. Challenge the social value of the council's capital works programme
4. Reflect on the readiness of the council, with partners, to deliver the city of culture
5. Use best practice from elsewhere to inform the development of Coventry in addressing housing and homelessness issues

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focused and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The 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 four days on-site in Coventry, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 150 people, including a range of council staff, councillors and external partners and stakeholders

- Gathered information and views from more than 35 different interviews and focus groups, a tour of the city centre and additional research and reading
- Collectively spent more than 225 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than six weeks in Coventry

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team on Friday 12th October at the end of their visit. In presenting feedback to the council, they have done so as fellow local government officers and elected members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things the council is already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority-setting

Coventry has a strong reputation as an evidence-led organisation. This has been demonstrated through the development and use of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), which provides a shared collective understanding of Coventry's communities. To supplement this, the council is seeking to use Public Health intelligence more widely to inform thinking and planning around key programmes and cross-cutting themes, such as social value. As an example, evidence-based policy is informing some of the decisions on the planning and reforming of public spaces to deliver clean air and promote opportunities for physical activity.

Insight has also been used with transformation activity, including the conducting of Equalities Impact Assessments and work to model the impact of early years, youth services and libraries re-design work based on asset-based approaches to community engagement such as deliberative consultation events. Insight and engagement is also embedded in the approach to place-based commissioning via the Local Public Service Board. The approach will be strengthened further through the council's newly formed Community Resilience Team.

The importance of the residents' voice is recognised within the council and there are good examples of the way they have engaged local people. This includes the 'Connecting Communities' programme, which has involved engaging individual residents, groups and organisations in looking at how services can be provided differently. Eight Family Hubs, alternative forms of nursery provision and the revised library service have all been established as a result. Work re-designing aspects of adult social care provides another example, with the council and Coventry and Rugby Clinical Commissioning Group creating a £2.5m Preventative Support Grant to facilitate the establishment of networks of support for people with physical impairments or dementia, mental health conditions or learning disabilities, and those caring for them, in order to enhance both personal and community resilience.

A lot of emphasis is placed by the council on its resident's survey, further demonstrating their commitment to hearing the voice of the resident. The council has continued to undertake this bi-annual survey when many authorities have ceased doing so, utilising it to supplement the anecdotal evidence provided by elected members. There is an opportunity to review the methodology behind the survey in order to ensure that it is representative of all of Coventry's communities and there would be benefit in agreeing a core set of questions that can be used to base-line residents' perceptions of the council and Coventry and see how they evolve.

There are ambitions to make the use of intelligence and insight – both within the council and on a cross-partner basis – even more integral to policy formulation and service planning, including change and transformation. An example of this, on which work is already underway with health and care partners, is the development of a data profiling tool to host and share information for the JSNA. The potential presented around intelligence and insight through the city's digital agenda is huge, as seen with the work with National Health Service colleagues, the police, the two universities, West Midlands Public Health

Intelligence Group and the West Midlands Open Data Forum to share knowledge and maximise information sharing through open data.

The council's performance management framework is embedded across the organisation and there is strong service-led ownership of performance. A centralised performance information hub has been established recently, with this sitting at the heart of a growing emphasis on staff in the council 'self-serving' in relation to performance data and information. This system is also key to the setting and driving of standards around evidence-based action – to which performance information is central.

There is an opportunity for the council to enhance the way it communicates with residents and delivers customer service. Currently, the council seems to place an emphasis on traditional forms of communication to get messages out, including its 'Citivision' magazine and the issuing of press releases to the media. Whilst there has been something of a shift towards using social media more, there is a lot of potential there that has not yet been fulfilled.

A similar situation exists in relation to customer service, with an emphasis continuing to be placed on people contacting the council by telephone or visiting in person. The creation of the Customer Service Centre has created a more streamlined approach, rationalising the avenues in to the organisation, although there is a great deal of frustration for both customers and council staff with the fragility of the authority's telephony system. There has been some exploration of the digital opportunities available to enhance the customer experience but only 35% of services have been subject to 'channel shift' and there is scope to build on both the level of sign-up to, and usage of, the MyAccount platform. There is widespread acknowledgement that the council needs to be making more of its on-line opportunities, including ensuring its web presence is fully meeting citizens' needs.

4.2 Leadership of Place

There is tremendous pride in Coventry, reflected in the people we met during the course of the peer challenge process. It is a city that is very clear about its history and what it stands for – a place of sanctuary and welcome, migration, peace and reconciliation, diversity, youthfulness and reinvention. A huge buzz and excitement exists about the city – centred on both the here and now and the potential that has been created through the work of the council and its partners in recent years. Key facets of this include the city centre regeneration and public realm improvements taking place, the international events being hosted in the city over the next three years, inward investment, the digital infrastructure that is being established and the investment that has been attracted to boost innovation and technology, as seen with the UK Battery Industrialisation Centre. The council has been integral to generating the vibrancy that has resulted from all of this and it can be very proud of the role it has played.

As the city moves forward, it does so on solid foundations of good partnership working. The council played a highly influential and valued role in the setting up of the West Midlands Combined Authority and partners at that level are keen for this leading role to be built upon, with Coventry firmly established as an integral element of the West Midlands. The Place Board for Coventry and Warwickshire with its cross-sector collaboration, involving leaders of some of the global companies with an interest in the area, and the

Coventry and Warwickshire Local Enterprise Partnership are just two examples of the solid foundations of partnership working that are in place. The two universities, with their 56,000 students and the myriad benefits that these institutions bring, are key partners in the city. The Place Forum, comprising the members of the Health and Wellbeing Boards for Coventry and Warwickshire, other health and social care forums and partnerships, joint working with police and the vibrant and diverse third sector all stand the city in good stead for the future. The council is held in high regard by those it works with.

The council recognises the social and economic challenges that exist for Coventry. Over 700 children are in the care of the local authority, the population growth rate – which has seen an increase in the number of residents of around a fifth since 2007 – is the seventh highest out of all local authority areas (bringing challenges as well as advantages) and there is a very significant housing and homelessness challenge. Life expectancy in the city is below the national average, with variations between different parts of the city being quite profound.

There is a strong sense of this being a ‘point of step change’ for both the city and the council. As we have outlined, there is a buzz, an excitement and a vibrancy about Coventry, with everything that is happening serving to boost local pride still further and changing perceptions of the city nationally and internationally. The authority is fully aware that much still needs to be done and, at the same time, recognises that it neither can, nor should, seek to do everything itself. The solid foundations of partnership working can be both capitalised upon and enhanced as the challenges in the city are responded to, with the ‘traditional’ role of the local authority potentially replaced by that of one of being central to what is happening and what needs to be delivered but by shaping and influencing rather than doing.

4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

The council is combining its traditional values – centred on delivering for local people – with a growing track record of innovation and managed risk-taking. This is reflected in the emergence of new ways of working and an increasing appetite around investment opportunities and commercial ventures. The authority’s move to new council offices at Friargate, the city’s emerging business district, is the prime example of this – simultaneously securing financial savings through the rationalisation of existing office accommodation, establishing a working environment appropriate for a modern and forward-looking organisation, anchoring a key development site in the city and creating commercial opportunity.

Other examples of new ways of working include working with partners and volunteers to revise the way in which libraries and youth services are delivered. Investment opportunities and commercial initiatives include the purchasing by the council of commercial property on an unprecedented, yet still modest, level, a variety of traded services including its Payroll and commercial waste functions and a number of Joint Ventures, such as the Solihull Waste Disposal Company.

Relationships within the council, both within the elected membership and between councillors and officers, are founded upon mutual respect. There are comprehensive formal and informal working arrangements between officers and elected members,

including Political Cabinet meetings which bring Cabinet members, Deputy Cabinet members, Committee Chairs and Strategic Management Board together for informal discussion of key issues. Officers are regularly invited to attend meetings of the political groups in order to brief them on matters they have identified. The Chief Executive meets frequently with the Leader and Deputy Leader and has a regular dialogue with the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Opposition. All-member briefings are held to inform councillors about topical matters, with recent examples including the LGA Green Paper on adult social care and the council's performance against its priorities. Whilst this set of arrangements can be seen to be resource intensive, they provide for an inclusive and thorough approach that engages councillors at all levels and facilitates effective and smooth decision-making.

Overview and Scrutiny is felt to be delivering some good work at a task and finish group level and there is a focus on pertinent issues. Recent examples include Broadband provision in the city, preparation for the City of Culture and homelessness. Not uniquely to Coventry, the challenge for Overview and Scrutiny is around ensuring the work it undertakes makes a difference as a result.

4.4 Financial planning and viability

The council is proud of having successfully met the financial challenge to date. This has involved addressing what it calculates to have been a reduction in government funding of 50 per cent (around £100m) since 2010. The way the council has gone about meeting the challenge has been refined over time, shifting from a 'framework approach' (in which broad financial targets were set and then the way they would be achieved being identified during the course of the financial year) to the more 'granular' approach that is now being seen and which makes it very clear from where savings are to be delivered or revenue is to be increased.

Significant pressures are being experienced around children's services and homelessness. With children's services, the council is taking a managed approach to reduce demand and build on the improvements that have been made. This is similar to the approach seen with adult services in recent years, with investment being made at a crucial juncture in order to create the capacity necessary to bring about change and improvement and, through this, reduce cost. Children's services are seen to have now advanced to a level of 'Requires Improvement' and the council is carefully monitoring progress and flexing its approach accordingly as it seeks simultaneously to reduce demand, sustain improvement and secure cost reductions.

The council has established what it terms a 'projected balanced budget position' for 2019/20, entailing having identified the means through which the projected financial gap will be addressed. There is recognition that work remains to ensure such planning translates into successfully concluded savings and reductions – involving securing the current year's savings initiatives, managing current demand pressures and fully achieving the agreed reductions next year.

There is much less certainty for the council regarding the financial position in 2020/21, given rising demand and a lack of clarity concerning the funding position for local government generally. The council's projection currently for that year, some of which of course coincides with being the 'City of Culture', is a gap of £20m. This gap, combined

with the cumulative impact of the savings required to date, is starting to inform thinking that the status quo, in terms of what the council delivers and how it operates, cannot be maintained – reinforcing the notion of this being a ‘point of step change’.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

The staff that we met from across the organisation are proud and passionate about their work and the city they serve. A very high proportion of them are residents in the city and many are long-serving. They both feel and contribute to the sense of pride that exists in Coventry and the buzz and excitement that exists and they embody what the city stands for.

Staff are responding positively to changing ways of working. The move to Friargate and the complementary introduction of ‘agile working’ has generated significant benefits both for the organisation and individuals. Staff reflected in our discussions with them just how highly they value the flexibility they now have in terms of where and how they work. The organisation is working increasingly corporately, which is attributed in part to the ‘breaking down of barriers’ facilitated by the move to Friargate and how things operate there. Another key dimension of this is seen to be the way in which the Corporate Leadership Team (the management cohort below Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive level) and Executive Leadership Team (the management cohort at Head of Service level) have been shaped to work together to look at strategic and cross-cutting issues facing the council and the city and identify how to move them forward. Managers at these levels spoke of an increased sense of autonomy having been engendered and recognise and value the trust being placed in them.

Staff are also welcoming the increasing two-way engagement with the council’s leadership which is being seen. The ‘Let’s Talk’ staff forums, which have proved to be very popular and both update people on key issues and enable them to contribute views and ideas, are central to this. There is a thirst amongst staff for knowledge and input, with them being keen to play an increasing role in informing the council’s thinking and helping to find solutions.

All of this is extremely positive. We would simply encourage the council to be very mindful of those staff who have not yet benefited from the changes that have been made and the need to ensure all staff across the organisation can contribute and be involved. Staff who aren’t working out of Friargate or who haven’t yet been equipped to work in more flexible ways risk feeling disadvantaged. Similarly, those who work hours that might be classed as out-with the norm and/or are constrained by reasons of geography, risk finding themselves being unable to participate in the ‘Let’s Talk’ sessions.

Capacity pressures are being felt within the organisation. The council’s workforce has reduced by 40 per cent since 2010, with much of this being achieved through a programme of voluntary redundancy and early retirement. Whilst this approach was designed to ‘lessen the pain’ it also meant the impact has risked being greater in some places than others. Experience has been lost, spans of control have been extended and sometimes people are finding themselves doing their best in a revised role that takes quite some adapting to. Careful thought is required about how to address the capacity pressures. This is as much an issue of prioritisation as it is one of investment, with a recognition that

the financial challenge is on-going and the council is facing a 'point of step change' in the way it operates.

The demands facing the organisation require it to be able to get the best out of its people and respond flexibly in the way it operates. Central to this is a need for 'all managers to manage' and a re-setting of industrial relations within the council. Currently there is seen to be a reluctance on the part of some managers to carry out their people management responsibilities to the full. This is attributed to them feeling they are operating in a climate which they don't feel to be conducive, with significant trade union and elected member involvement e.g. elected member chairing of Appeals Panels. The situation that exists currently around capacity pressures and people management is manifesting itself in levels of sickness absence that exceed both the council's own target and the sector average by around 50 per cent. The status quo here is not an option. The climate must become one in which the council is able to get the best from its staff by being able to operate flexibly and, at the same time, maximise employee well-being. To facilitate this, we would encourage the council to learn from other public sector best practice on industrial relations, pay and reward models and HR policy and practice.

4.6 City of Culture

Coventry was awarded the title of 'UK City of Culture 2021' in December 2017. The approach to winning the bid was impressive, founded upon strong partnerships – reflected in the setting up of the Coventry City of Culture Trust, involving the council, both universities, arts organisations and private sector organisations. This partnership-based approach and devolved model of leadership has continued and is very welcomed.

What is being done is brave and bold, with Coventry having the vision to position culture as the counter-balance to austerity. The City of Culture is a major factor in the buzz and excitement being felt in the city. It is also transforming the lens through which people are viewing the city, with language appearing in some of our discussions along the lines of "is that what you would expect from the City of Culture" and "is that good enough for the City of Culture".

The potential of being the host city is enormous, in the lead up to 2021, during the year itself and, crucially, long after the year has concluded. A direct economic impact of £350m is envisaged and more than 2.5 million extra visitor day trips to the city in 2021 are anticipated. There stands to be a place legacy, reflected in, for example, infrastructure development, increased hotel accommodation and a heightened profile for the city. The potential to leverage future investment is huge, with the opportunity to develop an industrial strategy founded on creative industries and Coventry as a city of re-invention.

There is total commitment to securing a legacy for the people of the city too. Indeed the principles upon which the bid and the planning are founded are of a City of Culture that is community-led and accessible and which builds legacy and capacity. 'Hard-wiring' the legacy and inclusive growth is crucial if the City of Culture is to be deemed to have been successful. The ten year cultural strategy, covering the period through to 2027, has been developed in partnership. Those behind it are seen to be innovative and willing to do things differently and it is already being influential in helping to 'lock down'

the legacy, as seen with the establishment of 'ward producers' and the devolvement to the Historic Coventry Trust by the council of more than 20 buildings that will play a role in the City of Culture and beyond.

Getting the regional dynamic of the City of Culture right will be important. Coventry, as the host city, is the hub of a wider cultural geography. This is reflected in the securing of funding from the West Midlands Combined Authority to assist with what is being delivered and the support being provided by many other partners at the regional and sub-regional level.

There are a range of tactical considerations too as the city prepares to act as the City of Culture. All of these are very well understood by the people that we spoke to during the course of our activities:

- Undertaking a study in to the accommodation requirements for those coming to the city and how the need will be met – with a recognition of the need to accelerate it being carried out
- Communication – there is a growing thirst for information, reflected to us during our discussions with partner organisations, and it is important, now that the key post-holders in the Trust are in place, that communication is stepped up
- Picking up on the transport challenge – ensuring those who wish to visit the City of Culture can both get there and get around is clearly a priority consideration. The city's experience of hosting major international events, not least the annual Godiva Festival which brings more than 100,000 people into the city over a single weekend, will stand it in good stead. There is exciting talk of seeking to deploy autonomous vehicles to assist, although this will only have a minor role to play relative to more traditional forms of transport.
- Recruitment – following on from the recruitment of senior people to the Trust, the remaining posts both in the Trust and the council now need to be filled and the army of people needed to support the City of Culture, often in a voluntary capacity, needs also to be put in place. This needs to move quickly and it provides the opportunity, through the ensuring of visibility around it, of assisting the communications agenda by enabling people to see that things are happening. Ensuring it provides for inclusivity is also clearly important, as a key part of delivering the legacy.

4.7 Housing and Homelessness

The housing and homelessness challenge being faced in the city is very significant. The Local Plan reflects a need for over 42,000 homes being built in the twenty years from 2011 to 2031, including 12,000 'affordable' homes. Around 18,000 of these are designated to be built out-with the city's boundary, requiring very close collaboration with neighbouring local authorities. The current rate of housing completions is just under 1,000 a year – a significant increase on the average of 680 completed annually in the ten years to 2011 but less than 50 per cent of the rate required to secure the figure required by 2031. The council has transformed the performance of its Planning function, which is now seen to be

amongst the best in the country in terms of the speed of applications processing, and based on the most recent comparator data available (for 2016/17) is amongst the best performing local authorities (fifth nationally) for the number of affordable homes being secured.

A new housing and homelessness strategy and action plan are being developed, reflecting a lot of thought being given to the issues in the city. There are some very good aspects of the strategy, such as setting out the homelessness priorities in line with the 'Positive Pathway' approach (a national framework designed to help local authorities and their partners more effectively prevent homelessness amongst 16 to 25 year olds and promote better outcomes for young people who can't stay at home or in care) and recognising the importance of looking beyond responsive measures to more upstream and pro-active interventions.

Homelessness continues to represent a rapidly growing policy and financial pressure for the council. Although increasing rough-sleeping is the high profile manifestation of this, the biggest challenge remains the number of homeless families in temporary accommodation. Currently there are 400 families or couples and 100 single people in temporary accommodation. Recent years have seen a 400 per cent increase in the number of people presenting as homeless and the council's subsidising of temporary accommodation has increased from £1m to £5m annually. The first three months of the current financial year saw more than 1,000 people contact the council indicating they were at risk of becoming homeless.

The prevention of homelessness is now being seen as a corporate priority and there is both more understanding of the situation and better join-up across the organisation in seeking to address it. However, gaps remain in the understanding of the issue. We would advocate targeting the reasons for homelessness and then focussing actions directly upon them. For example, with one of the major reasons for homelessness being people not being able to stay with friends and family, are the mediation services in Coventry sufficient to have the necessary impact with regard to prevention?

Investment to address the situation is clearly being made. Lots of changes are taking place in the organisation and the new Homelessness Prevention team is beginning to deliver some real successes but, based on what people expressed during our discussions with them, it feels as though the council is playing 'catch up'.

Although the emerging housing and homelessness strategy reflects a growing emphasis on more up-stream and pro-active interventions, there appear to be some gaps. As an example, there is currently nothing about working with children's services to assess 16/17 year olds who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Another example is the absence from the strategy of actions for partner organisations. The partners we met are keen to help and the council seems to have good relationships with them. The council needs to secure their sign-up to the strategy and ensure the ownership and responsibility for delivering it is shared.

The council is very reliant on others, through the delivery of commissioned services, and there is recognition that commissioning around homelessness services needs to be more clearly focused and joined up. An opportunity exists here with a variety of

contracts coming up for renewal, such as a number focused on tackling domestic violence which expire in 2019. We would encourage the council to take a step back and ensure their commissioning priorities are clear and absolutely focused on helping to reduce homelessness.

Our discussions with council staff around homelessness demonstrated huge commitment on their part and people across the organisation are, as we have already outlined, clearly working together much more now. They do, however, have a desire for clearer strategic leadership of the homelessness agenda and greater clarity of priorities. People are keen to see the different services linked to homelessness drawn together more, for somebody to 'hold the ring' on the delivery of the new strategy and to push for greater join-up across the West Midlands around the homelessness agenda.

Our overall conclusion is that the actions being taken are not yet sufficient to address the scale of the homelessness problem being faced. The financial pressures are the consequence of a lack of appropriate accommodation being made available to meet the needs of the homeless and solutions need to be found urgently. The council should therefore prioritise action to:

- Replace expensive bed and breakfast with cheaper temporary accommodation options
- Increase the supply of social rented and affordable private rented accommodation so it exceeds projected temporary accommodation demand

This needs to be achieved in the short term. However, the overall strategy needs to continue to be progressed at the same time.

The strategy reflects a lot of action to be undertaken and we would encourage a greater sense of urgency and prioritisation, with increased clarity on where to focus resource and what to concentrate on now relative to what can follow over subsequent months and years. As an example, the creation of dedicated student accommodation in the city may lead to more capacity in the private rented sector but this is very unlikely to be on a significant scale nor to happen particularly quickly. With 28 per cent of housing provision in the city being delivered through the private rented sector, and given what we heard about a reluctance on the part of private sector landlords to accept Housing Benefit claimants, applying joint effort with Housing Associations to develop a service to private landlords to provide them with assurances about support for tenants, good management of their properties and rent top-up or guarantees, might be an area to prioritise. The council's capacity, and that of partners, is finite and therefore needs to be used in the ways that will secure the greatest impact.

4.8 Social Value

Building on the 2014 Social Value Policy, Coventry City Council developed their own definition of social value (the Coventry Charter for Social Responsibility), which went beyond the Sustainable Procurement Task Force definition. The Charter is well known and respected by those close to it, but the council is not clear how well it is understood and valued across the whole organisation.

During our discussions, there was a recurring theme around ‘joining the dots’ between capital investment and tangible activities to reduce health inequalities. For example, how is social value interpreted through Coventry’s status as a Marmot City (there are seven in the UK and the principle is partners across the public and voluntary and community sectors whose decisions and activities have an impact on health, working together to advance the Marmot principles which aim to reduce inequality and improve health outcomes for all) so that business plans, Equalities Impact Assessment and Health Impact Assessments leverage the benefits of social value within all contracts?

The city has strong anchor organisations with a genuine commitment to social value and responsibility, including the universities and a number of large local employers. Businesses that the council is working with feel positively held to account for delivering social value, both by officers and elected members, and it is also seen as a key part of the Planning conditions in the city.

The council is seen as one of the most pro-active local authorities to work with in terms of promoting social value. A good example is the joint work with Jaguar Land Rover leading to the creation of their apprentice centre in Coventry. Others include the street lighting Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contract and the establishment of the direct labour organisation (DLO) for the minor civil works framework. Both of these have strong links to local employment objectives via the Job Shop – a joint venture by the council and other partners to provide pathways into employment for local people. All contractors are encouraged to advertise their jobs through the Job Shop to maximise the chances of city residents securing the benefit of economic growth. There is ambition around doing the same with the city’s leading-edge development of autonomous vehicles and making sure commitment to social value and local regeneration becomes embedded throughout the related supply chain.

Our discussions identified opportunities to enhance things further by building on the good practice that already exists. For example, some officers that we spoke to felt that there could be benefit in seeking to increase accountability further, encouraging commercial providers to maintain the benefits across the whole life cycle of a contract, rather than risk seeing ‘quick wins’ being front-loaded, and to make sure that social value is embedded throughout their supply chains. As another example, it is felt that the opportunity exists to link the work taking place in Coventry around social value to that at the Local Enterprise Partnership level in order to achieve greater economies of scale and impact.

The council takes a case study approach to demonstrating good examples of social value through a ‘Targets, Outcomes and Measurements’ model but there is thought being given to whether a more quantitative approach would be beneficial in helping to increase the level of social value secured. Officers also indicated they felt more could be done to share knowledge and understanding about need in local communities so that attempts to secure social value could become more targeted, particularly in relation to reducing health inequalities.

There is also felt to be the opportunity to link social value contributions to council priorities more clearly, building on the strong council commitment to using social value to deliver an enhanced corporate parenting role. It was felt that, whilst businesses cases being drawn

up within the organisation may reference the securing of social benefits, where they are not explicit about the social value contribution it makes it difficult to measure and quantify the contribution to the city's objectives. A clearer link could also be made between corporate social responsibilities and community needs, going beyond social value. For example, the social value agenda can link well with the newly formed Community Resilience Team and the volunteering strategy. Balfour Beatty, as a PFI contractor to the council, offer their staff two days paid leave and five days unpaid leave to get involved with volunteering. However, those interested do not always know what is needed. A 'brokerage' service would be of value, helping volunteers find opportunities and matching skills within the private sector to voluntary and community sector organisations who may benefit from increased capacity, for example around marketing advice or HR support, to deliver their objectives. Other ideas include the creation of a Social Value Exchange and the introduction of Social Value Credits.

It was also seen to be important that the City of Culture delivers on its promise of sustained community engagement and there was also reference in our discussions to the council potentially doing more with sport and leisure operators to ensure greater involvement from hard-to-engage communities where sport and physical activity may not be the community norm. Another area of potential that was highlighted was around the council having more influence over major building projects and capital programmes in the city that do not involve council investment, in order to enhance social responsibility and impact on local priorities.

Local business knowledge and approaches could also be utilised more in helping to advance the thinking around measuring the impact of social value. Some of the businesses we spoke to said they often present to council forums, for example at Overview and Scrutiny or as part of a procurement process, and they felt it would be helpful to have a standard way of demonstrating their contribution to social value. The idea of social value calculators being developed for specific Coventry objectives was cited.

The businesses we spoke to felt more needed to be done to 'talk up' the contribution of investment and the role of the private sector, working with the council, in achieving social outcomes. They felt that more could be done to shout about the successes being achieved and the sustained impact being delivered. There was a sense of Coventry having a culture of always moving on to the next project rather than taking the time to celebrate and communicate what had been achieved for the city through the various programmes and investments. It often feels to local businesses that residents are not aware of how money is spent and the impact it has beyond the visible development, such as a building.

Local businesses are also keen to see more being done to promote the city on an international basis and, as a return to business who are investing in the local area, potentially making it more feasible for them to join in with trade missions as part of the wider Coventry offer.

4.9 One Coventry

'One Coventry' – the narrative that outlines the council's objectives, key strategies and approaches – is seen as new and the start of something. In actual fact, however, there is

a long 'back story' to it, including long-standing principles of the organisation (most notably 'working together to improve people's lives by being globally connected and locally committed'), changed ways of working (including children's services transformation) and core areas of activity such as housing and homelessness and the capital programme. In talking with staff about 'One Coventry', the core components of it – or the 'back story' – resonated much more strongly with them than the concept of 'One Coventry', although most had heard of it. Making it clearer that 'One Coventry' has this history would be useful in helping people to see it as an amalgam of things long-established rather than a new concept which has suddenly emerged.

It is important for the council to determine what 'One Coventry' is and where it goes from here. For example, it could come to be a set of values and behaviours that sit at the heart of the future organisation. Equally, it could morph into a 'City Plan' that outlines the shared priorities for the city and how the council, partners and citizens gear themselves to addressing them. Another option is for it to become a brand or strapline either for the council or the city. With 'One Coventry' now having been set in train and being 'out there', time is of the essence. If there are ambitions for it to move into the territory of becoming a 'City Plan' then things will need to move at pace and in a very inclusive way in order to ensure that partners can feel ownership of it and citizens can shape it.

'One Coventry' potentially links to what we have touched on at several junctures in this report – that of a 'point of step change' feeling as though it exists. There are two dimensions to this. The first is the potential that has been established of Coventry as a place – a city of reinvention, with technology and digital now at its core, delivering major city centre regeneration and entering the national and international psyche as the City of Culture – and capitalising upon it in order to transform lives in the city. The second dimension is that of the council determining whether to continue on the current trajectory – of seeking to deliver what it traditionally has within a climate of ever-reducing resources – or defining an alternative role that it can play going forward, in order to maximise its effectiveness, and the different ways in which it needs to operate as a consequence.

Irrespective of where the concept of 'One Coventry' heads in the future, we see a great deal of benefit in the council and its partners working together to establish a clear shared narrative for the city. We heard mention during our discussions of different pieces of work getting underway – some of which are linked to the City of Culture – around this. Ensuring joint endeavour on this would avoid both duplication of effort and the risk of competing narratives. Similarly, a clear narrative for the council as an organisation as it shapes itself for the future would be widely welcomed.

5. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership 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. 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. Helen Murray, Principal Adviser, is the main contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her e-mail address is helen.murray@local.gov.uk

Follow-up visit

We are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the council through the course of the peer challenge.

The LGA corporate peer challenge process includes a follow-up visit. The purpose of this 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 usually involves some, rather than 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 two 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 four to five years. It is therefore anticipated that Coventry will commission its next peer challenge by 2023.