

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Trafford Council

28th – 31st January 2025

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance and governance information and then spending four days at Trafford Council to provide robust, strategic, and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of Sector-led Improvement (SLI) put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are: Responsible for their own performance, Accountable locally not nationally and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

CPC assists councils in meeting part of their Best Value duty, with the UK Government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years.

Peers remain at the heart of the peer challenge process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

This report outlines the key findings of the peer team and the recommendations that the council are required to action.

2. Executive summary

Trafford council is highly ambitious for the borough and communities it serves. This is an especially proactive, place-shaping council, a point well recognised by partners and seen through the range of significant regeneration programmes referenced throughout this report.

The biggest challenge the council faces whilst doing this, is operating within - and ultimately addressing - a significant structural deficit within the budget.

The council benefits from particularly well regarded senior leadership. This includes - but is not limited to - the Chief Executive, Leader, Executive and Corporate Leadership Team. They are well respected and are seen as visible, engaging and highly accessible, with strong member/officer working relationships. The Chief Executive and Corporate Leadership Team have played a crucial role in consistently modelling the local EPIC values and developing a highly positive organisational culture, which many staff now experience.

The council provides many well performing and relatively lower cost services as referenced in this report. The improvement needed in children's social care continues to be prioritised, following the most recent Ofsted ILACS inspection in December 2022 which returned a 'requires improvement' grading. This work is supported by a well engaged Children's Ambitions Board and Plan. A continued focus on improvement here must remain a key corporate priority, so that the 'best start for children and young people' can be fully realised.

The council is at the start of the improvement journey to strengthen, modernise and improve the consistency of service delivery within adult social care. Crucially, this has included ensuring effective officer leadership of the service is in place. The new interim Corporate Director of Adult Social Care will require ongoing support to ensure the pace of improvement required is addressed. There is also further work required to strengthen the strategic partnership with Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust (GMMH) and Manchester Foundation Trust (MFT), so that the needs of children, young people and adults across Trafford can be better met.

The partners the peer team were able to speak with, spoke consistently of the positive relationships they have with the council and are keen to continue building on these partnerships. This is a great opportunity for the council to further build on, given the breadth and level of ambition the council has for Trafford as seen through the recently refreshed Corporate Plan. The willing partnerships the peer team were able to observe mean that the plans locally to write a new Trafford Partnership Borough Plan and State of the Borough report could be particularly well timed. This is an opportunity to fully capitalise on, with partners, by articulating the vision and priorities for the people and place of Trafford. Doing so will help to further build the impact of the range of partnerships across the system locally.

There is also an opportunity to strengthen the platform for locality-based working by making these arrangements clearer to understand for those both inside and outside the council. Those the team spoke with found the existing arrangements of locality working, neighbourhood initiatives, integrated neighbourhood teams, family hubs and so forth difficult to understand and therefore more difficult to engage with. Clarifying the vision and how these arrangements connect around communities can help to support partnership working and the collective impact it is able to have.

Partners spoke very highly of how driven and open many council officers are in their partnership working, whilst also recognising the difficult financial reality they were having to operate within, which brought challenges for sustaining and further developing operational partnership working. Finding ways to bring more resilience to local delivery arrangements can support a greater sustained impact not just of the council, but also of its partnerships. This includes taking steps to clarify lead points of contact and bringing further resilience to support those points of contact, helping to avoid single points of potential failure. One example of this, would be to clarify the corporate leadership responsibilities for community safety with partners. Clearer visibility of this across Trafford can help to enable further join-up with wider services, ensuring that community safety is well embedded strategically and is well connected to community engagement, community cohesion and the revised safeguarding board arrangements.

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The peer team heard many different examples of projects and initiatives that had been established across a range of services within the council, which is a further reflection of the positive culture now in place. Giving consideration at this stage to how these are endorsed, captured, learnt from, rolled out, shared and sustained council-wide can help to provide greater focus and resilience where projects are most key to achieving the corporate priorities. Whilst also helping to identify where the council's finite level of capacity can be further focused behind the corporate priorities.

As the council works to meet both the challenge of operating within its financial constraints, whilst also pursuing an ambitious programme for the borough, there will inevitably be difficult decisions, further prioritisation and trade-offs required. Given the challenges and dilemmas this will bring, supporting senior members and officers to develop their capacity as story tellers, can help members, officers, communities and partners to see the route being taken and why, even when those routes are challenging. This includes shaping the narrative at different points around the priorities, progress, change, challenges and difficult decisions taken. With this in mind, it would help senior members to do this, if the Corporate Plan monitoring arrangements were further developed around this particular challenge, providing a focussed set of information which gives a clear indication of progress against the milestones and outcomes that mean the most in local communities and most accurately reflect what members meant, when setting these priorities. This may mean thinking quite differently about this report and reaching beyond the standard performance metrics used elsewhere to good effect.

The council were very open with the peer team about the financial challenge it now faces, and moved proactively to invite CIPFA to review the arrangements for financial planning and management in 2024.

The CIPFA review shone a light on what the peer team have also been able to observe, that the council has strengths in financial monitoring, management, planning and governance, aided by strong financial leadership and a well regarded finance function. In spite of this, there remains a structural deficit within the budget, linked to a particularly low level of Council Tax charged, resulting a lower than average level of Council Tax income. This position has led to a significant reduction

in the level of reserves available to the council as over previous years they have been used to support the annual revenue budget. This has reached the position now whereby any further reduction in reserves is simply not sustainable.

It is within this challenging context, that further work is required in the remainder of this financial year, to minimise the overspend in 2024/25 which was forecast at around c. £2m at the time of the peer challenge. Any overspend remaining at year-end will only reduce the limited reserves position even further. Beyond this, a number of difficult decisions will inevitably be required now, to deal with this underlying structural deficit, which the council can then focus its approach to transformation around.

Given the nature of the savings that will likely be required, being able to make these decisions earlier would help the council to realise the full scale of the savings and efficiencies needed, to deal with this position, whilst retaining the limited remaining resilience available from reserves. Whilst there may be strategies on the horizon that can help to buy further time, they will not help to deal with the scale of the underlying issue, which must now be addressed, so that the council can move forward more sustainably in pursuit of its priorities.

To support the delivery of the scale of change work required, the council are encouraged to establish an overarching programme of change which clearly states the success measures, savings and efficiencies from this work. Doing so can further support wider engagement and assurance. There are other steps the council can take in this regard, including further developing the existing 'Executive / Forward Plan' to provide both a more comprehensive overview and a longer horizon. This is one action that can also help increase the impact that Overview and Scrutiny is able to have prior to decision making, with further reflections shown throughout this report.

The council can also build on the strong day-to-day cross-organisational working shown at the executive director level by capitalising on the willingness and enthusiasm of the cohorts of directors and heads of service at the council. Creating dedicated spaces for these cohorts to routinely come together as collectives, to further develop cross-organisational working under the corporate priorities and major programmes of change.

The Western Gateway is one stand out example of this, as an enormous opportunity for the borough, Greater Manchester and the wider region. It is crucial that the council is able to ensure the appropriate level of capacity is in place to maximise the benefits from the Western Gateway, whilst bringing all of the collective impact from within the council and wider partnership. Doing so will help to ensure the council is able to secure all of the people-based benefits from these projects, helping Trafford to become a place *‘where all our residents, businesses and communities thrive’*.

3. 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 to the council:

- 3.1 Take all steps necessary to eliminate overspend in 2024/25 in light of the highly challenging financial position faced by the council.**
- 3.2 Take the necessary local decisions, at pace, that are required to deal with the ongoing budget deficit, so that the savings and efficiencies required can be fully realised.**
- 3.3 Establish an overarching programme of change which clearly states the success measures, savings and efficiencies that will deliver on your priorities.**
- 3.4 Progress at pace the improvements required within Adult Social Care, to fully capitalise on the positive action taken to appoint the new interim Corporate Director of Adult Social Care.**
- 3.5 Strengthen the strategic partnership with GMMH & MFT to better support the mental health needs of children, young people and adults across Trafford.**

- 3.6 Maintain the corporate, political and partnership focus on the children's improvement ambition.**
- 3.7 Develop the 'Executive/Forward Plan'.**
- 3.8 Further develop the role of Overview and Scrutiny.**
- 3.9 Ensure greater visibility to support consistent connectivity of Community Safety with services across Trafford, including local safeguarding arrangements.**
- 3.10 Clarify the locality working arrangements with partners, to enable greater impact.** This includes clarifying the vision and role / contribution of each of the different aspects of locality-based working across the local system.
- 3.11 Support leaders across the council to develop storytelling around the progress, the priorities, change, challenges and difficult decisions.**
- 3.12 Refresh the Corporate Plan monitoring arrangements to provide a focussed set of information, which gives a clear indication of progress against key milestones and outcomes.**
- 3.13 Create spaces for directors and heads of service to routinely come together as collectives, to further develop cross-organisational working.**
- 3.14 Ensure resilience around single points of responsibility / potential failure across the council.**
- 3.15 Ensure appropriate capacity and governance is in place to maximise the opportunities from the Western Gateway, which is an immense opportunity for the borough and the region.**

4. Summary of peer challenge approach

4.1 The peer team

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

- Lead Peer – **Kath O’Dwyer** (Chief Executive – St Helens Borough Council)
- Lead member – **Cllr Chris Read** (Leader – Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council)
- **Cllr Simon Minas-Bound** (Basingstoke & Deane Council and Hampshire County Council)
- **Pam Duke** (Director of Resources (S151 Officer) – Westmorland and Furness Council)
- **Alice Lester** (Corporate Director for Neighbourhoods and Regeneration – London Borough of Brent)
- **Hazel Summers** (Assistant Director of Programmes People - LGA)
- Peer Challenge Manager – **Dan Archer** (LGA)
- Shadow Peer – **Cath Buckley** (LGA)

4.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils’ performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - are the council’s priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?

2. **Organisational and place leadership** - does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management - Does the council have a grip on its** current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges? What is the relative financial resilience of the council like?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

As part of the five core elements outlined above, every Corporate Peer Challenge includes a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance, and assurance.

In addition to these themes, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on how the mission of creating a place where everyone can live and thrive is suitably permeating into everything the council does.

4.3 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. This included a position statement prepared by the council in advance of the peer team's

time on site. This provided a clear steer to the peer team on the local context at Trafford Council and what the peer team should focus on. It also included a comprehensive LGA Finance briefing (prepared using public reports from the council's website) and a LGA performance report outlining benchmarking data for the council across a range of metrics. The latter was produced using the LGA's local area benchmarking tool called LG Inform.

The peer team then spent 4 days onsite at Trafford Council, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 50 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 240 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.

5. Feedback

5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

The council approved its new Corporate Plan 'Our Trafford, Our Future 2024 – 2027' in July 2024 and in doing so agreed five priorities for the council that support the vision of creating a Trafford 'where all our residents, businesses and communities thrive'.

This vision is very much reflected in the council the peer team experienced. Trafford is a particularly pro-active place-shaping council with a high level of ambition. This is leading to a particularly exciting period of change within the borough, with a number of highly significant programmes in train including:

- New Carrington – a long-term project which includes 5,000 homes alongside a 350,000m² business area.

- Lumina Village – the creation of a 639 home sustainable community which wraps around University Academy 92 within the wider Civic Quarter.
- The continued development of ‘TraffordCity’ – including a £250m wellness resort and the development of Trafford Waters including outline planning permission for 3,000 new homes.
- Trafford Wharfside – which could become one of the biggest sports led regeneration projects that Britain has seen since the 2012 London Olympics, with the potential to create 48,000 new jobs and over 5,000 homes.

This is without mentioning the continued transformation of Altrincham which over a number of years has moved from a town centre with one of the worst occupancy rates in England, to a town that is now regularly listed in the Times’ top 10 places to live in Britain.

Across all of the above, the council is consistent in its drive for developing and supporting communities, which reaches well beyond building homes and should be highly commended. The council has real strengths in the leadership of these programmes – an approach to leadership which is seen as both strong and accessible.

Trafford is a borough with an overall population of around 237,480 people, who each experience a number of contrasts when living in Trafford. This includes urban and rural life, small villages and busy towns as well as a blend of industrial, cultural and sporting influences. In being an active place lead for the borough, the council were clear with the peer team about the challenges that also exist within Trafford and the different communities Trafford represents. An example of which is in Partington, where the healthy life expectancy of a boy born today is around 16 years lower than a boy born in Bowdon, despite being only 5.5 miles apart. In Partington, the peer team heard how the council changed its approach to supporting the community, developing clear priorities with a strong resident voice to help guide their work, making this align more closely around the needs of local people.

One of the council’s corporate priorities within its new Corporate Plan is to ensure ‘The best start for our children and young people’. Alongside this, the council has

moved its focus from being driven by the needs of regulation and firmly towards a 'people first' outlook. The multi-agency children's Ambition Board demonstrates this drive strongly. In demonstrating further corporate leadership of this priority the council has made 'care experienced' a protected characteristic and the Leader of the council will be hosting a business summit in spring/summer to encourage partners to develop their support for care experienced young people too.

The Leader's passion for active travel is also seen across the many positive examples of council delivery and leadership. This includes the Trafford Moving Strategy and Partnership, the 'School Streets' initiative and a new Walking, Wheeling and Cycling Strategy'. The council also created a Beat the Street programme which led to around 6,000 residents travelling 60,000 miles over the course of the programme.

How the council is able to reach, hold and maintain a proportionate balance across the corporate priorities, whilst also maintaining a focus on the needs of different communities, which can differ quite significantly, is a complex, ongoing challenge. Albeit an essentially important challenge to meet, in order to deliver on the vision for the borough. This is particularly the case, given the challenges of capacity and resource that exist.

The council has a number of great stories to tell about the progress made, the assets in the borough and the opportunities that exist. It will be important as the council continues on to the next stage of its journey, that leading members and officers are supported to narrate the stories of this journey towards the vision, and the logic of the difficult decisions made along the way. In doing this, how the council brings into balance the needs of distinct communities alongside the overarching corporate priorities, is again an important balancing act to strike. Doing this successfully will help in taking residents, members, officers and partners along with the changes, difficult decisions and trade-offs required.

Partners speak positively of the Poverty Truth Commission, which was undertaken in 2022/23. Partners involved with this, speak of the positive changes they saw following this, including the launch of the refreshed Poverty Strategy and the One Stop Shop/Advice Hub at Stretford. This is in addition to the continued development

of the six Community Hubs, which were originally established by voluntary organisations working in partnership with the council as part of the borough-wide response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The council shared with the peer team a desire to build on examples such as this by further developing its approach to resident engagement, to help ensure a greater level of consistency across the council. The peer team would encourage that in developing the forthcoming community engagement strategy, the council should ensure consistent, visible 'you said, we did' feedback loops and that co-production opportunities are identified at early stages. Doing so can help the council to capitalise on the enthusiasm observed from the local residents the team were able to meet with. There are also opportunities to look to utilise the places and facilities the community already use when holding this engagement, to help increase the potential reach and impact of further, future engagement and co-production.

Elected members have given a clear message on their wishes for an increased focus on social value, which is now reflected in how seriously the council looks at this and the positive direction of travel seen. There is a 20% weighting towards social value within procurement and a dedicated coordinator role is now in post, which has been seen consistently by those the team spoke with as a positive step forward. Through the co-ordinator role, further work has been done around brokering the relationships between contractors and the VCFSE to deliver increased social value within Trafford, which is welcomed by the VCFSE as a focused approach to facilitating social value impact. To continue to progress in this area, the council should consider ways of maintaining the capacity in place for social value, whilst also supporting officers more widely across the council to engage with social value and the opportunities for this. There are also opportunities to go further in looking more specifically at the type of social value Trafford needs to prioritise, given its own local context, wider change and improvement work and the needs of specific communities, which the council are actively considering. Moving away from nationally prescribed TOMs (Themes, Outcomes, Measures) to locally developed TOMs was referenced and would be an effective step forward.

Trafford is a borough that is changing, with the percentage of the local population

identifying as 'White British' reducing from 85.5% in 2011 to 77.8% in 2021 and the percentage who identify as 'Asian / Asian British' increasing from 7.9% in 2011 to 12.6% in 2021. In regard to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), the peer team heard of a number of positive developments in recent years including the development of staff forums, a Muslim Culture Festival, supported internships and work to embed accessibility standards. The council has received the Gold award in the Armed Forces Covenant Defence Employer Recognition Scheme for a second time, and the Youth Engagement Service has received full 'rainbow flag' recognition for their positive work on the inclusion and visibility of LGBTQ+ young people.

It is also clear however, that the recent community unrest seen in many parts of the country has been unsettling for a number of staff. It is an important message from staff, that this experience is kept in mind to help inform future support. The council has some great opportunities to further develop its approach to EDI, which would include further coordination between senior sponsors and a consistent 'you said, we did' feedback loop with staff, which would help to enhance connected, corporate leadership and responses.

5.1.1 Performance

Key performance metrics, comparing the council to its most similar councils, drawn from the publicly available data on LGInform at the time of the peer challenge, are used throughout this report.

The council has taken steps to develop the use of performance management across the council, which includes performance dashboards being in place across service areas and lead members being able to discuss performance in a strong level of detail. There is a positive direction of travel evident in regards to the use of performance information at the council, which has included acquiring Power BI, establishing the Trafford Data Lab and putting into place 'performance clinics' and deep dives.

There are examples of strong service performance across Trafford. These include lower levels of residual waste and a higher recycling rate than the CIPFA group

average (2022/23). Up until Q1 2024/25, the council had decided 100% of major planning applications on time for the last five consecutive quarters, albeit with a drop in the latest reported figures for Q2. The new business registration rate locally has remained significantly above the CIPFA group over a number of years, as has the average Attainment 8 score. The number of physical visits to local libraries per 1,000 people is also consistently higher than the most similar CIPFA group average (2022/23).

Conversely, there are performance challenges within Adult Social Care as detailed elsewhere in this report and the time taken to process housing benefit claims is the joint longest in the council's CIPFA group at 23 days, 12 days longer than the group average (2024/25 Q2).

The public health indicators for Trafford are consistently positive when compared to the most similar CIPFA group councils. This includes comparatively low levels of childhood and adult obesity, low numbers of admissions to hospital for alcohol related conditions and a lower rate of smoking prevalence in adults. There remain however, significant differences in public health outcomes between some communities within Trafford, which is reflected in the example disparity in healthy life expectancy given earlier in this report. This is an issue that was strongly present in the self-assessment provided by the council and has clearly been at the front of people's thoughts when agreeing the new Corporate Plan. In light of this, the council are encouraged to continue to improve the use of performance data, by further developing how the data available is used to ever greater effect in influencing the development and refinement of locality-based approaches and prioritisation.

Bringing much of this picture together, the council has in place a Corporate Plan performance report which provides an oversight of delivery against its priorities, which is reported to the Executive every six months. This is currently in the process of being refreshed, to reflect the new Corporate Plan. The council are encouraged when doing this, to look at the potential that this document can have for better supporting senior leads in developing their story telling capacity as part of their leadership, for the next stage of the council's journey, taking into account the challenge of meeting the breadth of the council's priorities, the needs of individual

localities, the challenging decisions to come and the financial constraints in place. This may mean moving from the traditional approaches seen in many councils around corporate performance reporting, with the need to provide a focussed set of information which gives a clear indication of progress against the milestones and outcomes that mean the most in local communities and most accurately reflect what members meant, when setting these priorities. This may mean reaching beyond the standard performance metrics used more typically in this endeavour.

5.2 Organisational and place leadership

Throughout the peer challenge, the team received consistent recognition for the leadership of the Chief Executive and Leader. With both seen as highly visible, approachable, proactive and engaging. The Corporate Leadership Team likewise operate as a closely knit and supportive team with staff across the organisation recognising and valuing the quality of staff engagement they receive, including the various workforce events that are in place. There are a number of internal engagement mechanisms which are highly valued by the staff the team were able to speak with. These include quarterly 'Let's Talk' events, an annual Leadership Summit, EPIC spotlights, 'Cheers for Peers', 'EPIC Stars' and 'Time to Shine' awards.

From both elected members and officers, the team heard of the clear, positive and mutually respectful working relationships that are in place between members and officers of the council. This is a further example of the positive working environment fostered by lead members and officers at the council. Following from this, there is an opportunity to continue to build-out the corporate leadership capacity across the council, by creating spaces for directors and heads of service to routinely come together as collectives. This would further develop these connections across the council, which can also help in further enhancing cross-organisational working, under the corporate priorities.

The positive working relationships seen within the council are also mirrored by the

perspectives given from many of the partners the team were able to speak with. An example of this is how statutory partners who are involved with the Children's Ambition Board, work especially well together in both a supportive and respectfully challenging manner.

Both within Trafford and across Greater Manchester, the council are playing an important leadership role in ensuring a positive focus on skills. The Chief Executive is the portfolio holder for Work and Skills for Greater Manchester and a Local Skills Improvement Plan is in place to inform this work. There are examples of how the council is prioritising skills through the work it is doing with Manchester Airport and within Trafford Park – bringing clear leadership to the goal of creating the conditions, which enable as many residents as possible to access quality learning, training and jobs.

Many of the businesses the peer team spoke with felt well supported by the council and reported having a suitable level of access to the right people. The council has a high level of standards within planning, which clearly has its benefits and is an essentially local balance to strike. It is of course vital to keep this balance in mind, particularly when a need for pace and delivery is required. There may also be further opportunities in considering the flexibility available within the approach to viability assessments and identifying the opportunities to strengthen the connection between planning and highways. This can help to support the interface the council has with local businesses and the opportunities this presents to Trafford.

The council has a number of Joint Ventures, within which positive working relationships can also be seen. Showing both a suitable level of challenge, alongside a sense of openness and collaboration. These relationships help enable those Joint Ventures to act more strategically in delivering on multi-partner objectives, and capitalising on the optimal use of the different levers that these arrangements present, such as land and access to funding.

Highly positive, respectful relationships are in place with neighbouring colleagues across Greater Manchester, including the Combined Authority. Partners can see the work the council has done in recent years to both bring about improvement and be an active leader of place. There may be opportunities in the council's next stage to

further consider how the council can deepen its relationships with neighbouring authorities, by considering for example, the strengths that exist within neighbouring councils and the joint delivery or joint working opportunities this may present for deepening the impact in Trafford particularly within the financial constraints that exist.

The council has had some real successes in supporting digital inclusion within the borough, which reached a large number of people, for example through a Tech4All event in Old Trafford that reached over 1,000 residents. If anything, this served to highlight the extent of need for this type of support. This is an area to consider, which could benefit from a potentially deeper relationship with a neighbouring authority so that the benefits for example in Media City, are actively used to greater effect, across a wider footprint. This would of course require careful consideration as to what the council wishes to continue to do directly and where there might be benefit from others taking a lead on the council's behalf.

Trafford has an active voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector (VCFSE) who are keen to continue to develop the relationship with the council. In order to further develop this relationship in a strategic manner, there may be benefits in the council taking steps to ensure a clearer focus around the co-ordination of the sector, moving from the existing infrastructure arrangements, as well as ensuring a clear single lead contact for the VCFSE at the council, is in place. These are just a couple of examples of steps the council could take, which could sit within a refreshed action plan, underpinning the existing VCFSE Strategy.

Partners would also find it helpful if the council could clarify the corporate leadership responsibilities for community safety and help to give this greater visibility to support the join-up with wider services. This can help to ensure community safety is further embedded strategically and is well connected to community engagement, community cohesion and the revised safeguarding board arrangements.

Finally, there is work to do to strengthen the strategic partnership with GMMH and MFT, to increase their engagement in Trafford and the impact of their support for local children, young people and adults. Taking steps to reinvigorate the All Age Mental Health Board is one step which may help with this.

5.3 Governance and culture

Throughout the course of the peer challenge, the team heard consistently about the positive organisational culture now in place at the council and the improvements that have been made in recent years.

The EPIC values state the culture that the council works every day to develop and shape. A culture where the council *Empowers*, is *People centred*, is *Inclusive* and *Collaborative*.

These EPIC values are well understood by colleagues across the council and the officers the peer team spoke with see them consistently modelled by senior leads at the council.

The council can continue to build on the progress made with these EPIC values by increasing the number of 'EPIC Pioneers' from around 14 members of staff at present. Doing so can help to ensure that more teams and services have an EPIC Pioneer, helping this to reach further into all parts of the organisation. This will also help to grow the breadth of feedback and insight the council receives corporately, as it goes through a period of further change.

Elected members the team spoke with, also reflected positively on the support and engagement they receive from a range of officers of the council as well as the offer of member development, made available to them.

A positive, strong working relationship is in place between the 'golden triangle' of the chief executive, chief finance officer and monitoring officer. Building on the high level of regular contact already in place, ensure that regular scheduled meetings of this group are also diarised and can be evidenced if required, as a key part of the council's framework of local ongoing assurance.

Further developing the existing 'Executive/Forward Plan' so that it takes both a more comprehensive view of council activity, as well as a longer view of council activity can help in supporting decision making, cross-council engagement and accountability. This can include having in place a clearer, shared oversight of key place development timeline decisions, key actions linked to the corporate priorities, key

transformation delivery decision timelines and so forth.

Doing this and giving this greater visibility will help the council in a number of ways. This includes helping better tool Overview and Scrutiny (O&S), so that they can conduct well informed pre-decision scrutiny more regularly, which the Executive would clearly welcome. The council conducted a scrutiny review panel in 2022, with input from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny and are due to consider progress against the findings of this review this year.

There are clearly some examples of impactful scrutiny such as the deep-dive work in children's services as well as the recent scrutiny of fire services, which the council can build upon. Other steps that may assist the council in this endeavour include:

- Ensuring routine, scheduled meetings take place between O&S chairs and their relevant Executive members. This can be an important step in managing the risk of a gap growing between the work of the Executive and that of O&S, whilst retaining the independence of O&S.
- Reflecting on how else performance and change information (as well as other papers) are presented, that can make it easier for O&S members to engage with the detail and perform their role more effectively. This can also assist in prioritising the topics that members wish to conduct further 'deep-dive' work into.
- Ensuring an O&S Annual Report is in place and reported annually to full council, to promote the work of the committees and the impact the committees have been able to have.
- There is finally, also an opportunity to further strengthen the working relationship between O&S and the Audit Committee, which can help to inform work planning and challenge, as two similar but clearly distinct member led accountability mechanisms.

The Audit Committee has reviewed its effectiveness and compliance with the CIPFA code and has adopted an approach where strategic risks are reported regularly to the committee, alongside further deep-dive presentations and discussions into specific risks, to support further challenge. This openness and support for challenge is also

reflected in how internal audit appears to be very much treated as a support mechanism at the council, with a recognition for the importance of internal audit to the council, in having in place a strong internal control framework. The majority of reports provided by Internal Audit provide a reasonable assurance outcome.

5.4 Financial planning and management

Like many councils, Trafford has been required to address significant budget gaps over a number of years, in order to achieve a balanced budget. Between 2010 – 2024, these budget gaps equate to a cumulative sum of over £300m, with a further gap of £55m to be filled between 2025/26 - 2027/28. This compares to the net revenue expenditure of the council, which was £217.8m in 2023/24.

The council receives a lower level of funding overall through Core Spending Power than the other Greater Manchester councils. A significant contributor to this difference is the low level of Council Tax received by the council, due to decisions taken locally to freeze Council Tax charges for five consecutive years between 2010 - 2015. Had the council increased its Council Tax rate, in line with the amounts allowed during this period, as most other councils did, then the council would now have an additional £14.4m of funding every year. The council also did not receive any further funding as part of the recently announced new Recovery Grant, as part of the recent funding changes in the 25/26 Local Government Finance Settlement, one of only two councils in Greater Manchester where this was the case.

The financial challenge locally has been further compounded by the sudden loss of a dividend during COVID-19, that had been previously received annually from the Manchester Airport Group. The additional financial pressure from this was also then compounded by the increasing demand pressures and price inflation experienced by all similar councils. This has led to the council repeatedly drawing on reserves in recent years to help deal with the budget deficit exposed. This has reached a point where the level of reserves at the council are the lowest of all of the councils in Greater Manchester.

It is now simply not sustainable for the level of reserves to reduce any further given the financial risks facing the council and it is not financially sustainable to use one off reserves to fund permanent costs.

The council is projected to hold £53m of earmarked reserves at the end of the 2024/25 financial year, which are then projected to fall to £30m by the end of 2026/27.

Like most councils, a significant high needs dedicated schools grant deficit is also being held. This is expected to stand at £20m by the end of this financial year and is expected to increase to £35m by the end of 2026/27. If the statutory override is not extended nationally beyond March 2026 and the council has to fund this deficit from the revenue account at this point, it is likely that this would completely deplete all remaining reserves available to the council. The ongoing work to contain as much of this deficit as possible, will need to remain a key area of focus.

In recognising the scale of the financial challenge faced, the council has been proactive in seeking an independent CIPFA review into financial management and planning. The team were able to consider the draft feedback from this review and recognise much of the draft feedback given by CIPFA.

Trafford is a council with clear, comprehensive and timely reporting of its financial position. This helps support a good, shared understanding across the lead member and officer cohort of this financial challenge.

The council's finance team – in particular, their capability and approach to partnership working - is well regarded. This is also reflected in the experience of the External Auditor who sees this working relationship as open and engaging. The latest published accounts (2022/23) did require a disclaimed opinion due to the introduction of the national backlog legislation and External Audit did state that that the council did not have adequate arrangements in place to secure value for money due to weaknesses that were in place for securing financial sustainability.

The Council has a positive track record in delivering its annual savings programmes, with 99% of identified savings delivered in 2023/24, albeit the achievement of the current years programme of savings and efficiencies (£6.5m) proving more

challenging with a forecast achievement of only 83%.

The council pro-actively monitors the local business rates position because of the volatility and risk involved and the potential impact this could otherwise have on the council's limited reserves position. In light of this, the council has also acted responsibly to increase the Business Rates Risk Reserve by £1.5m. The business rate and council tax collection rates in Trafford appear to be well managed and are both better than the council's most similar CIPFA neighbours.

The council's MTFs is updated regularly to reflect the latest budget position, including being updated following the Autumn Statement, Local Government Finance Settlement and alongside the latest in-year budget monitoring, to continuously refine the expected budget gap for 2025/26.

Despite all of the above, the structural deficit that remains within the budget means that the council faces a significant in-year budget challenge and must avoid any overspend at year-end which would only further deplete this low level of reserves.

Whilst the peer team heard of the steps taken in this regard, there are further steps the council could take, given the severity of the situation (for example, the potential to go further with the use of a recruitment freeze, reducing the amount of agency spend and utilising voluntary redundancy options as appropriate).

Achieving a balanced budget for 25/26 and beyond will require tough decisions, including decisions which the council have managed to avoid to date, which will need to be taken quickly. Particularly given the lead-in time required to see the types of savings likely, realised in full. In bringing about the changes and improvements the council seeks more widely, there is also likely to be a requirement for some realignment of resources. An example of which includes the costs of bringing about the improvement required in adult social care, which could create further pressure elsewhere in the budget if alternative savings aren't identified, at least for the short term.

The council have in place a Finance & Change Board, which has a pivotal role in challenging where savings can be delivered and overseeing the programme of change and transformation. The council has plans in place to further engage O&S

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Chief Executive: Joanna Killian

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with the work of this board, which is a positive step forward in informing the difficult decisions required as well as supporting wider accountability and challenge.

The Council has a significant three year capital programme for 2024/25 -2026/27 of around £413m which is split into two separate programmes - a general capital programme of £155m and an Asset Investment Fund of £259m. The Asset Investment Fund is partially to support income generation in future years and partly to support the wider regeneration opportunities. Delays in some of the Investment Fund activities have resulted in delays in some income generation, some of which were planned to support the ongoing revenue budget. The Council's capital strategy guides these investment decisions and has good governance around the delivery of the capital programme. Maintaining the balance between investment for the future and delivering financial sustainability in the short to medium term will be critical for the Council.

The council will continue to make its case externally around the specific funding challenges faced locally now, as well as the significant risks that may materialise around future funding reform and the business rates reset.

Despite these challenging circumstances however, ultimately, the council must adapt to live more sustainably within its means. Which presents an inevitable need to make and see through the tough local decisions this requires.

Whilst the council has developed its financial narrative for making this case externally, there is a need for the council to be able to adapt this narrative for its internal use, given the changes and difficult decisions that will now be required.

5.5 Capacity for improvement

There is a real commitment to realising the mission of creating a place where all residents, businesses and communities can thrive, which the peer team heard right across the members, officers, partners and residents the team were able to speak with.

This is also shown through good local examples of cross-organisational working including ‘challenge sessions’ – where officers from one directorate are invited to challenge senior officers from another directorate about how they could impact on this vision statement more widely. Across the senior officer leadership team, a number of officers also sit on boards, contributing to realising the wider priority set – such as the place shaping board and Active Travel.

In addition to this, there are also a number of examples of improved and innovative practice locally including:

- the urgent care hub and model – which has been a data led approach to help ensure people aren’t kept in hospital any longer than they need to be and has led to a significant reduction in the number of days in hospital for local residents.
- Exploring the potential to create a Business Improvement District within Trafford Park.

When speaking with officers across the council, the peer team heard of the keenness from services to continuously improve in support of local communities, which has led to a number of initiatives and projects. It would be beneficial at this stage for the council to review the landscape of these different initiatives – to note levels of impact and observe the learning from them to see how this learning might support other services, as well as to help inform resourcing decisions around which to further support given the potential for wider, more sustained impact. This would also help to identify any which could be stopped or altered, to release capacity for a use which is more closely aligned to the corporate priorities and the delivery of savings.

In recent years, the council has invested in the corporate enabling functions that are often critical for improvement and change. This has including investing into data, digital and communications. The council has made progress in bringing the use of digital at the council more towards what is seen in other councils, but there is still much more work to do to reach this level. A refreshed Digital Strategy has been drafted to direct this journey and the service feel listened to and trusted by the Corporate Leadership Team. Completing this ‘catch-up’ on digital, will help in

creating and capitalising on opportunities for increasing productivity and reducing spend. The council is aware of the need to implement an automated member enquiries system, which would support elected members in their essential community leadership role, improve the residents experience of the council whilst creating opportunities for intelligence/insight and should therefore be prioritised.

Bringing all of the council's core improvement, transformation, modernisation and change work together into an overarching, thematically based programme can support corporate oversight of delivery, interdependencies and opportunities. This plan should clearly state the specific impact sought, including the success measures, savings and efficiencies from each project, bringing the oversight of delivery closer to the corporate priorities.

The council recently refreshed the local 'People Plan', which has been welcomed by service leads the team spoke with for recognising the challenges they experience, with relevant actions identified to help mitigate some of the pressures that currently exist. The council has shaped this plan around the employee lifecycle to help ensure the council is supporting staff at all stages of their journey. Linked to this, the council is now seeing a sickness absence rate equating to around 11 days per FTE lost, which is a reduction in sickness absence of around 11.3% compared to the same quarter last year. In addition, the human resources and organisational development functions are seen as having a very open door policy, which has the benefit of making it easier than it might otherwise be to resolve any issues early and provide any necessary help to staff.

It is noticeable, particularly within the financial parameters the council is now facing, that some services have a high level of agency/locum staff which will contribute to budget pressures and inconsistencies in aspects of service delivery. There is more the council can do at pace, in light of the financial constraint now being faced which should now be given further consideration.

The council is signed up to the Places for Everyone Plan, that brings together and outlines the opportunities and types of development across Trafford, and eight other Greater Manchester districts, up until 2039. The council has had the resilience and tenacity to stick with the long-term journey that has been required with the

development of this strategic development framework, which has now appeared to put the council in a good position to drive forward significant future regeneration.

The Western Gateway is a flagship regeneration programme for the borough, Greater Manchester and wider region. A programme which incorporates the high-profile regeneration of the Trafford Wharfside area which has the potential to bring significant social value and long term benefits for local people and the economy. It is essential that the council is able to maximise the impact from this once in a generation opportunity, by ensuring the capacity and governance required for such a major project is in place, particularly given the wider extent of regeneration programmes and business interest across the borough. There are opportunities within a scheme of this size to really maximise the funding of this capacity, from the scheme itself which the council should seek to make the most of.

The council has invested into effective change leadership in adult social care, putting in place an independently chaired Improving Lives Everyday Board, then more recently appointing the chair of this board as the interim Corporate Director of Adult Social Care. This is to reflect the challenges that exist in this service area and the drive to make improvement at pace. The latest data on the adult social care user survey shows that Trafford had the lowest level of satisfaction within its CIPFA nearest neighbour group (2023/24), with the social care-related quality of life score also being lower than this CIPFA group average. The council commissioned three independent reviews of the service in the last 15 months to help inform what steps would be required to drive forward the improvement of the service. Following the appointment of a highly regarded interim Corporate Director of Adult Social Care, this now needs to be developed into a single, coherent plan, supported through appropriate infrastructure and capacity to drive the improvements needed. Alongside this, it is important that the council is able to address the relationship with GMMH and MFT through evidencing their compliance with the respective statutory duties that are in place.

In light of the financial constraints that exist, further consideration should now also be given across 'people' services around how the council manages market sustainability and sufficiency of provision across adults, children's and SEND.

To conclude, right throughout this peer challenge, the peer team were able to meet with members, officers, partners and residents who have an authentic passion and goodwill for ensuring Trafford is a place where all residents, businesses and communities thrive. The council has a high level of self-awareness, a plethora of exciting place shaping programmes, as well as real strengths in local leadership and the organisational culture this has helped to create. We saw that culture through the drive of those people we met for continuing to improve and growing the impact on local communities. This provides an excellent platform for the council to continue moving forward in this next stage of the EPIC journey, navigating through the challenges that exist and towards the priorities that have been set out for the council. The feedback, challenge and recommendations made throughout this report are given in support of the council, as it navigates its way through this next step of the journey.

6. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. The LGA will continue to provide on-going support to the council.

As part of the CPC, the council are also required to have a progress review and publish the findings from this within twelve months of the CPC. The LGA will also publish the progress review report on their website.

The progress review will provide space for a council's senior leadership to report to peers on the progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations, discuss early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC action plan. The progress review will usually be delivered on-site over one day.

In the meantime, Claire Hogan, Assistant Director of Regional Support, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Claire is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk.