

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Surrey Heath Borough Council

11-13 July 2023

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

Surrey Heath Borough Council is a small district council in Surrey with a population of 90,500.

The council has made a good start in reshaping the organisation following a change in political and officer leadership over the last few years. The Chief Executive is well regarded as open and transparent by staff, members and partners, and is well supported by an inclusive and approachable management team, all who have been in their roles at Surrey Heath for two years or less.

Staff are friendly, enthusiastic and proud to work for Surrey Heath. Recent results from the staff survey clearly show that staff are engaged and positive about working for the council with an impressive 72 per cent response rate and 81 per cent saying they feel the council values them and their work.

The organisation has experienced a lot of political change since May going from a council of no overall control to a majority administration with 23 out of 35 councillors being newly elected, many of whom work in full time roles. The newly elected administration is energetic and keen to make change. The council has had three leaders since April, with the current Leader of the Council having been appointed less than two weeks before the Peer Team arrived on site. The Leader, a newly elected councillor, has hit the ground running since being appointed engaging with staff and all political groups which has been well received.

Surrey Heath has a Five-Year Strategy which provides a clear view and vision for the future, based on a recent extensive 'in house' resident consultation. Since then, a new administration has come in with a set of ambitions and has positively engaged staff in the development of a new 'Short Term plan' to complement the Five-Year Strategy. Staff had been involved in the development of the plan and spoke positively about it.

Camberley is the main town centre in Surrey Heath, where the bulk of the borough's population live. There is a strong focus on Camberley Town Centre's economic regeneration as a key priority, however the council's regeneration vision for the town centre has not as yet been communicated.

Senior members and officers recognise that the council's budget is not sustainable

over the medium-term, with the new administration making balancing the budget their number one priority.

A financially sustainable medium-term budget (MTFS) needs to be developed that can be flexed to accommodate the council's regeneration ambitions. The council needs to scenario plan - identify what are the financial risks and where are the opportunities coming down the line that can be modelled.

Surrey Heath has strong local partnerships in place and is well thought of by the majority of partner organisations, who described the council as a '*good active partner*.' However, communications with partners can be patchy – a partnership engagement strategy is recommended so there is a consistent approach to communicating with all partners.

It is clear from everyone that the Peer Team spoke to that there is a trusted relationship between members and officers where open and frank discussions take place.

Member training has been good through the induction programme including for the 23 new councillors who joined the authority in May. The council needs to continue investing in member development, paying particular attention to inducting members around local government finance and effective scrutiny.

Despite improvements being made to governance in recent years, a more consistent approach needs to be developed and reinforced around project management, risk management and procurement. Scrutiny is also not being used to its full potential.

It is also not clear whether members are enabled to review risk in the round. Risk is reported in the Annual Governance Statement. Individual risk is identified in Executive reports. There is also internal monitoring of risk but no clear structured member oversight other than through the Annual Governance Statement.

The council has an ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030. To achieve this, Net Zero needs to be embedded in everything that the council delivers and the longer-term ambitions appropriately resourced.

The council is genuinely committed to learning and development and invests in its people. Staff are actively encouraged to invest in their own personal development using 'Surrey Learn' the core Learning and Development platform used by all 12

Councils in Surrey. There is a need to enable more opportunities for professional development, so that staff can progress in their careers as well as create opportunities for succession planning.

Agile working has been embraced, with staff feeding back positively to the approach of working a minimum of one day a week in the office. It has also allowed the council to successfully recruit from a wider geographical area and attract people from sectors outside of local government, bringing new skills into the organisation.

There is a clear ambition for the council to move premises in the short term. However, there is an immediate need to improve the council offices at Surrey Heath House, so they are fit for purpose to suit a more agile way of working and maximise the most efficient use of the building when staff are in the office.

Surrey Heath has a strong IT base to build on, with good systems and Cloud based solutions. However, the digital strategy is IT led and needs to be more inclusive, involving all stakeholders in its future development.

As part of the council's longer-term approach, the importance of recognising the borough's changing demographic and those with protected characteristics is essential. There is a need for the council to invest in EDI (Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion) training for both members and officers so that policy development is fully inclusive and considers the impact on all communities.

2. Key recommendations

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

2.1 Recommendation 1

Develop a financially sustainable budget, including scenario planning for regeneration options.

2.2 Recommendation 2

Complete a review of governance and develop an action plan encompassing risk management, project management and procurement.

2.3 Recommendation 3

Develop a future engagement plan with partners.

2.4 Recommendation 4

Enhance the role of Scrutiny – use it to its full potential, actively engaging members.

2.5 Recommendation 5

Create a continuous member development plan, informed by members, to support them in their roles.

2.6 Recommendation 6

Ensure Climate Net-Zero is integrated into the council's culture and appropriately resourced.

2.7 Recommendation 7

Develop an Equalities Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training plan including all protected characteristics.

2.8 Recommendation 8

Make improvements to the working environment at Surrey Heath House.

2.9 Recommendation 9

Develop a digital vision that reflects engagement with staff and residents.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1 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 on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Lead Officer Peer: **Daryl Phillips**, Chief Executive at Hart District Council
- Lead Member Peer: **Cllr Alistair Dewhirst**, Deputy Leader of Teignbridge

District Council

- Officer Peer (Finance): **Rebecca Keene**, Assistant Director of Resources and Deputy S151 at Broxbourne Council
- Officer Peer (Finance): **Clive Mason**, Interim Deputy Chief Executive and s151 Officer at Harborough District Council
- Office Peer (Shadow): **David Pealing**, Member Services Manager, LGA
- Peer Challenge Manager: **Sophie Poole**, Senior Regional Advisor, LGA

3.2 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?
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?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

In addition to these questions, the council asked the peer team to particularly feedback on finance and governance.

The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not

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

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days *virtually or onsite* at Surrey Heath, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 36 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 75 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

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

4. Feedback

4.1 Local priorities and outcomes

Surrey Heath has a Five-Year Strategy which provides a clear view and vision for the future, based on a recent extensive 'in house' resident consultation. An Annual Plan is produced each year as a live document which all teams across the council feed into, where performance is regularly monitored to measure progress against the Five-Year Strategy. Staff that the Peer Team spoke to were fully aware of the Five-Year Strategy and understood their role in delivering it.

From this, the council has delivered a number of positive outcomes for its residents with a fully funded Family Support scheme as part of the Troubled Families Programme, the launch of a new leisure centre and website and the delivery of high-quality discretionary services such as doubling the number of Green Flags in parks and open spaces to four.

Post Covid, Surrey Heath continues to provide "excellent" community service support, with officers calling vulnerable residents every week and providing "outstanding" Meals to Home service. It is clear that the council is offering more than

the statutory minimum. In light of the council's financial challenges, there is a question around whether this approach is affordable in the medium term and how sustainable is the current level of support?

As a new administration was elected in May and a new Leader of the Council appointed two weeks before the Peer Review began, the Peer Team were unable to assess what outcomes the administration had delivered this early into the electoral cycle.

However, it was clear that the new administration has a set of ambitions and has positively engaged staff in the development of a new 'Short-Term plan' to complement the Five-Year Strategy. At the time the Peer Team were on site, the Short-Term Plan was due to go to the Executive for approval. Staff that the Peer Team spoke to, were aware of the plan and had been involved in developing it to ensure its deliverability. Staff at all levels spoke positively about it and told the Peer Team that they felt on the whole, actions within it were "*deliverable, affordable and appropriately resourced.*"

Senior members and officers that the Peer Team spoke to, recognised the financial issues facing the council, with the new administration making balancing the budget their number one priority to be immediately addressed.

The new administration also has an ambition to 'Push Power Down' through greater resident engagement, particularly in areas not covered by parish councils to date. The Peer Team heard about ideas on how that might be delivered with possible resident panels and public engagements. Some councillors expressed a wish to see more meetings in the community. However, it will be important to carefully think through how this is achieved with the current resource available and how residents are actively involved from the outset.

Another key priority for Surrey Heath is to be Carbon neutral by 2030. The Peer Team heard some good examples of how this is already being achieved: the Theatre has been plastic free for the past four years. There are also ambitions to use wind generation on the roof of the new leisure centre and gradually replace the council's fleet with electric vehicles. Further investment has been made with the appointment of a new Climate Change Officer. The Chief Executive is also the lead borough Council Chief Executive on Climate Change in the Surrey region.

While the Net Zero actions in the administration's Short-Term Plan were seen as deliverable, there is recognition Net Zero needs to be embedded in everything that the council delivers and that the longer-term ambitions to achieve the tougher Net Zero targets will need to be appropriately procured and resourced. As part of the council's longer-term approach, the importance of recognising the borough's changing demographic and those with protected characteristics is essential, not just in the community but staff and members who represent the council too. The Peer Team heard that the newly elected councillors reflect the wider Surrey Heath population more broadly which is positive. However, there is a need to recognise the growing communities within Surrey Heath and for this to be reflected in the council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) approach with a focus on greater engagement. The council needs to invest in EDI training for both members and officers so that policy development is fully inclusive and considers the impact on all communities.

4.2 Organisational and place leadership

Surrey Heath has strong local partnerships in place and is well thought of by the majority of partner organisations that the Peer Team spoke to, who described the council as a '*good active partner.*'

While local partners that the Peer Team spoke to value their relationship with the Chief Executive and senior staff, some felt there was "*uncertainty when working with councillors*" due to the recent changes and there is a need for members to engage better with partners. The council has a commitment to actively engage with its local and wider community.

The Peer Team also heard that communications with partners can be patchy depending on who their contact in the council is and a Partnership Engagement Strategy is recommended so there is a consistent approach to how the council engages with its partners and shares information.

Surrey Heath hosts the Joint Waste Solutions partnership, a shared service between Elmbridge, Mole Valley, Surrey Heath and Woking Councils which was cited as a good example of partnership working:

"The [Joint Waste Partnership] is a strong partnership, linked up, hitting targets, with a clear officer steer to keep partnership together into the next contract."

On the whole, neighbouring authorities saw Surrey Heath in a positive light with all agreeing that they have a good working relationship with the Chief Executive:

“Surrey Heath is a well-run, unflashy, steady council.”

However, there is also the perception from neighbouring authorities, that Surrey Heath is very focused on the “*here and now*” and there is “*little horizon scanning or recognition and acknowledgment of risks.*”

Surrey Heath is recognised for having a Surrey wide focus and wanting to work with neighbouring authorities. However, there is a perception from neighbouring authorities that Surrey Heath’s smaller workforce could limit capacity to share both ways.

The Peer Team would encourage the authority to also explore the possibility of working with councils that sit outside of Surrey where similar challenges are shared, and ambitions aligned.

Camberley is the main town centre in Surrey Heath, where the bulk of the borough’s population live. As such there is a strong focus on Camberley Town Centre’s economic regeneration as a key priority. The new administration has also set out its intention to have a Longer-Term Agenda to include a “10-year horizon” plan to include regeneration.

However, despite Camberley Regeneration being a key ambition, the Peer Team repeatedly heard that the council’s regeneration vision for the town centre had not been communicated:

“The Vision for Camberley Town Centre was drafted earlier this year but has not yet been published. Is it still valid? If it is, then it should be communicated and shared.”

The Peer Team were told that regeneration schemes were ‘*oven ready*’ but were on hold due to market conditions not being favourable and waiting on a development partner. The Peer Team heard that the biggest risk of delaying regeneration plans to the council was the loss of town centre attractiveness and that the aim is to invest in accommodation and leisure facilities to attract younger people and create a more dynamic use of the town centre.

It is important to keep stakeholders informed and updated, even when there is no obvious ‘news’ or announcement, as continuous communication and engagement

helps to build confidence in the organisation delivering on this key priority.

Several stakeholders told the Peer Team that the council's focus on Camberley was detracting attention away from the rest of the population who live in the villages.

“Don't forget about the villages” was raised on a number of occasions. Councillors representing rural wards expressed concern about the increasing amount of casework they were receiving, due to their residents' perception about the local plan, which councillors saw as creating 'difficult warding arrangements' The council needs to carefully balance the needs of residents who live in Camberley and those who live in the rural areas of the borough.

4.3 Governance and culture

It is clear from everyone that the Peer Team spoke to, that there is a trusted relationship between members and officers, where open and frank discussions take place.

“I'm amazed at the culture and can-do attitude across members and officers.”

Several staff told the Peer Team that this had not always been the case, and that officers have worked hard over the last 12 months to develop a better working relationship with members.

However, there are small areas for improvement with backbenchers reporting long response times to member enquiries. Several staff also told us that members take credit for their work in the press. Staff training on political awareness and greater acknowledgement by members of officers' contribution to pieces of work would help to shift this perception.

Member training has been good through the induction programme for the 23 new councillors who joined the authority in May and June. For the more general induction about the council, a video tour, member roadshows, portfolio holder introductions and fortnightly updates were some of the initiatives introduced, with a buddy scheme for new councillors being particularly popular with members. Members fed back that they appreciated officers developing a flexible programme that worked around their work and family commitments.

There were mixed views on the more specialised committee training with some saying Licensing and Planning training was the “same old thing” while others fed back that Planning and Scrutiny training had been good. The Governance session was also seen as “outstanding.” There is a need to continue member development throughout the electoral cycle. It is important that members have ongoing input into the programme as they can advise what support is needed.

Areas for further development are: ‘Understanding the roles of members and officers’ for new members. Also, it was felt that members would benefit from further training on the council’s finances, particularly for those new members who have no prior knowledge of Local Government. Members would also benefit from ongoing Audit Committee and Scrutiny training. There are also intentions to roll out an internal online member engagement platform, following the success of the staff version “Warbler.”

The council has worked hard to improve governance at Surrey Heath over recent years. Several people that the Peer Team spoke to, said that there is a much greater focus on governance by the senior leadership team, who are clear that governance should be “*transparent and always followed.*”

Despite improvements being made to governance the Peer Team repeatedly heard there was a need for a more consistent approach to project management:

“Project Management has a fair way to go to improve. Services manage projects in isolation and work with others when issues arise. A proper project management process is needed.”

The council needs a central ‘Programme Office’ resource where projects are overseen, tracked, and monitored across the organisation, with a clear project management methodology and framework in place. A central resource also ensures corporate resources are allocated appropriately so they are not over stretched and that financial risks can be centrally monitored.

The Peer Team also felt that Scrutiny at the council is not being used to its full potential. There is a need for more member development in helping councillors better understand the important role they play in ensuring good governance by actively engaging through the scrutiny process:

“Members must understand that following good governance should not be seen as a 'blocker' to good ideas. It's simply a way of making sure everything is done on the right side of the law.”

The culture at Surrey Heath is very positive with a happy workforce who see the council as a 'great place to work.' The Peer Team were repeatedly told by staff at every level that they were proud to work for the council. The Peer Team's own experience is that staff are very friendly, open and enthusiastic.

A number of positive relationships developed across service areas during Covid which the Peer Team were told had improved working across the council.

Wellbeing is also seen as a priority for staff with examples of good support systems for staff: Warbler – the online staff engagement platform means it is easy for staff to share information and success. The Peer Team also heard about regular external support offered to front-line case workers within the Housing and Family Support Teams to underpin their wellbeing.

Managers are seen as supportive:

"I joined the council recently and am amazed at the natural approach of managers."

However, appraisals are seen by some as a tick box exercise and are not popular with staff with some seeing it as “too rigid and laborious.”

Staff have trust in the open approach of CMT who are seen as approachable, genuine, open and transparent:

“CMT have had a positive impact on the culture of the organisation.”

“CMT does not feel like it has a hidden agenda, feels like an open-door policy.”

“Everyone feels listened to.”

4.4 Financial planning and management

Surrey Heath must develop a financially sustainable medium-term budget (MTFS) that can be flexed to accommodate the council's regeneration ambitions.

The council needs to scenario plan: identify what are the financial risks and where are the opportunities coming down the line that can be modelled.

The Peer Team heard from staff that a savings programme "Base Budget Review"

has been undertaken for the last two years which has involved services, the Director of Finance and Chief Executive the Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance all offering input and constructive challenge.

Members support the traffic light approach to proposed budget changes, however there is also a political aspiration to look at income generation rather than just '*hit the red list.*' This will require detailed modelling to ensure forecasting is clearly evidence based.

With potentially three years left in general fund unallocated reserves (although significant earmarked reserves), there are difficult conversations ahead about what can realistically be delivered within the budget available. There is a clear desire from the senior leadership team for the council to be more business-like in its approach. Members fully support 'deep dives' into services to see where efficiencies can be made.

There were some positive examples of where savings have already been found with the Theatre reducing its costs from £400k to £100k by taking a 'shows down, uptake up' approach.

Surrey Heath delivers many services to a 'Gold' Standard' and there is an opportunity to review where services could be scaled back to a 'Bronze' service where appropriate.

The council urgently needs to build a skilled finance team that is front and centre of the financial issues facing the council. The Peer Team heard that the Director of Finance is currently recruiting, in a challenging job market. Working closely with HR (Human Resources) to find ways of attracting financial talent to the council will be essential as there is a potential continuation of financial skills risk if recruitment is not successful.

Good financial management is everyone's responsibility, not just the finance team's and it is important that all staff and members understand the council's position and collectively work together so the council can quickly move to a balanced budget position. The Peer Team were told:

"The council is more robust in terms of how staff view the budget position but there is still work to do to change the mindset of "reserves will cover it."

The Peer Team heard that budget monitoring is patchy and that “*some services are better than others.*”

The Peer Team were also told that, previously engagement in the budget process beyond the finance team was limited, meaning managers were not aware of their service or staffing costs. However, implementing finance business partners and monthly budget monitoring meetings with managers has started to bring about a cultural change to the council’s approach to finance and needs embedding further with continued finance and budget monitoring training for staff.

The council needs to invest in developing the finance skills of budget managers, non-financial officers as well as members on the Executive, Scrutiny and Audit Committees, particularly those new to Local Government finance. This is essential, not just so that the organisation understands the current resource allocation but so that budget monitoring is consistently good across the council.

New members that the Peer Team spoke to recognised they were ‘new to the game’ and finding it difficult to judge the current financial position - they would welcome more benchmarking with other councils to increase their understanding. More and regular finance training for members on local government finance is also needed.

While there are pockets of procurement experience in services, there is no dedicated team that oversees procurement. Procurement needs to be robust and embedded across the council, to improve the longer-term outcomes of the organisation. This was repeatedly raised with the Peer Team.

It is also not clear whether members are enabled to review risk in the round. Risk is reported in the Annual Governance Statement. Individual risk is identified in Executive reports. There is also internal monitoring of risk but no clear structured member oversight other than through the Annual Governance Statement.

Also, while a corporate risk register exists, which addresses the top risks, it does not explicitly demonstrate how those risks are being managed and what measures are being taken to mitigate them. It is also recognised that there are limited risks being managed within services. More work is needed to embed the importance of risk management across the organisation.

Similar to other authorities, the council’s Statements of Accounts are outstanding,

with Surrey Heath's unaudited for the last three years. This is impacting on Surrey Heath's reputation and the perception of the financial resilience of the council. The council is in the process of switching external auditors – it is important this is resolved as quickly as possible.

While the council is giving careful consideration to its future asset development, it is also important to review and actively manage the council's current assets. The organisation would benefit from developing a full-scale asset list and reviewing their current and future purpose. The Peer Team was informed that a full asset register is being prepared by the council. The council is holding onto property assets until the market changes and value increases. Opportunities to use existing assets for income regeneration should also be considered.

4.5 Capacity for improvement

It is clear that the council is genuinely committed to learning and development and invests in its people. Staff are actively encouraged to invest in their own personal development and the Peer Team heard a number of positive anecdotes about the significant take-up of learning opportunities through 'Surrey Learn,' the Surrey-wide Learning and Development platform of which the Council is an active participant.

However, the Peer Team heard from a number of staff about the lack of career progression, which is a challenge in an organisation with a small and lean structure. The Peer Team understands that the authority is looking at more ways to give staff opportunities to lead or work on projects outside of their normal service area, which will be welcomed. Despite the council investing in staff to take professional qualifications, the Peer Team heard that there is a perception from some staff that more needs to be done to encourage this as a standard offer across the council.

“Staff support is done very well but no thought is given to Professional Development. In a commercial organisation, you would have to develop as part of the contract.”

“There is no encouragement to gain more and better professional qualifications whereas the private sector would enforce this.”

While the Peer Team recognises that the council invests in staff taking professional qualifications, more needs to be done to promote this more widely, to address the

current perception.

The Apprenticeship scheme is one way to upskill an existing workforce with the opportunity to take qualifications up to level 7, the equivalent to a Masters degree.

Investing in staff is an important part of succession planning which the council recognises. Surrey Heath has talented staff at its senior management level, and it is important to create a pipeline of talent who are the potential leaders of your future and build this into the culture of the organisation. The Peer Team also heard positive examples about the council talking to local universities about what skills the organisation will need for the future, so there is a skilled workforce coming through.

Results from the staff survey clearly show that staff are engaged and positive about working for the council with an impressive 72 per cent response rate and 81 per cent saying they feel the council values them and their work. Positive staff engagement was also reflected in the wide number of staff that the Peer Team met across the review. The Peer Team also saw there was a good feedback loop with senior management communicating results to staff in face-to-face briefings and demonstrating a clear desire to act on areas for improvement which was particularly impressive. There was also an increase, compared to earlier surveys, in the number of staff believing that the survey will make a difference. Over 90 per cent of staff said they felt encouraged to offer their ideas and make suggestions for improvement.

There is a clear willingness from the staff to deliver the new administration's priorities. However, having an open conversation around balancing the ambitions of the administration and what is achievable within the council's resource envelope will be essential going forward.

The Peer Team heard that Equality Diversity and Inclusion training (EDI) is a priority for the council, in particular around gender awareness. While this is welcomed and acknowledged by staff, there is more to do around communicating this to address perceptions of the past:

“Surrey Learn is very good and personal development is very big here, but gender awareness training hardly happens - the council pays lip service to gender awareness, however it is being taken more seriously now.”

The Peer Team heard that the new Head of HR, Performance and Communications

is the only woman on the Senior Leadership team and is working with the Chief Executive to refresh the approach to equalities for both staff and communities. The Leader is keen to make constitutional changes to reflect gender equality too.

The Peer Team could see that agile working has been embraced, with staff feeding back positively to the approach of working a minimum of one day a week in the office. It has also allowed the council to successfully recruit from a wider geographical area and attract people from sectors outside of local government, bringing new skills into the organisation.

However, with staff working a minimum of one day a week in the office, staff felt more could be done to improve the staff induction process and increase knowledge and understanding of working at Surrey Heath, particularly for those people who have never worked in a local council before:

“Inductions are good, but they need to also support those staff who arrive from outside the local authority family.”

There were also concerns around team building with too many online ‘Teams’ meetings beginning to dominate the working day:

“Lots of what used to be a five-minute chat at a desk are now 30-minute Teams calls”.

There was also much discussion about the council offices at Surrey Heath House and them being fit for purpose in the short term, with a clear ambition to move to new premises in the future:

“Working conditions within the building are not great. The building is shabby, and teams are arbitrarily packed in too tightly without having regard to the nature of their work. There are no quiet areas and Wi-Fi isn’t great.”

The Peer Team would encourage the council to look at quick cost-effective ways it can improve the workspace environment while it decides the future of Surrey Heath House, such as creating break out areas, quiet zones and having a more open plan approach so that people from different teams can sit together to encourage collaborative working.

Surrey Heath has a strong IT base to build on, with good systems and Cloud based solutions. A number of staff fed back positively about Warbler, the council’s internal

staff engagement platform:

“Warbler has really helped – it’s celebratory, light-hearted.”

On the whole, staff that the Peer Team spoke to, felt they had the right technology to help them work remotely. However, some elements caused frustration:

“The telephone system is rubbish, but the laptops are great.”

The Peer Team questioned if the organisation is too heavily reliant on the ICT service in managing systems and whether there is scope for services to take ownership where it makes sense to do so. The Peer Team were told that the current digital strategy was written by ICT managers and reviewed by CMT.

Going forward there is a need to develop a clear digital vision which all stakeholders are involved in pulling together, that meets the needs of all users. There is an increasing generation of residents who are digitally savvy and expect all their interactions with the council to be online. Surrey Heath has a new website where residents can book certain services. However, there is an opportunity to look at digital as a way of finding efficiencies, and being more transactional, so that residents can interact with their council digitally when convenient for them.

The new website is a great foundation to work from. Technologies such as chat bots and increasing the council’s social media presence, also provide an opportunity to engage with communities and raise the council’s profile.

5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a progress review ‘check-in’ session, which provides space for the council’s senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps. In the meantime, Will Brooks, Principal Adviser and Sophie Poole, Senior Regional Advisor for the South East are your main contacts between your authority and the Local Government Association. Sophie Poole is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

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