

Corporate Peer Challenge

Wyre Council

14-16 March 2017
Feedback report

1. Executive summary

Wyre is a good council with well performing services and a strong history of good financial management. The council has helped shape a borough where the majority of residents are satisfied with the local area as a place to live. There is much to be proud of including a number of vibrant towns and villages, open countryside landscapes, award winning beaches and unspoilt coastlines. Recorded crime levels are well below the average for Lancashire and Wyre's overall deprivation score is fifth lowest in the county. Going forward, we saw huge passion and commitment to build on this foundation amongst everyone we met.

There are still areas of the borough which are amongst the most relatively deprived nationally and have remained so over recent years, with wards in Fleetwood recording the lowest results. The health profile for Wyre outlines a number of health and wellbeing challenges with 10 out of 31 key indicators performing significantly worse than the England average. This, together with an ageing population projected to increase by 13% by 2024 (over 65s) presents a number of challenges both for the council and its partners. In response, the council has made 'Healthier Wyre' a key business plan priority.

The council demonstrates a strong commitment to this objective and is beginning to shape the delivery of core functions, including strategic housing, leisure, parks and green spaces to help address the challenges faced. This includes a £6m investment in leisure provision for the borough. The council is well regarded by partners and has worked collaboratively on a number of initiatives which are aimed at early intervention and prevention including the Lockwood Surgery health hub and Healthier Fleetwood initiative. This work is innovative and progressive, supporting wider public service reform principles to reduce demand on front line services and tackle inequalities.

To build on this work and take the next step, the council would benefit from taking the opportunity of sharpening the long term vision for Wyre as a place. The current developmental work around a proposed new Economic Strategy for Wyre has created a space to do this. This should allow the council and partners to clearly articulate its ambitions for the place and the areas of focus which will make the most impact in the longer term. The strategy should be used to pull together a clearer narrative which is better articulated, agreed and shared with partners; this can also help to address the wider determinants of health including housing, jobs, environment, skills and learning.

There are also opportunities to build on the partnership work already taking place in Fleetwood by strengthening the overall co-ordination of activity and initiatives. This includes the innovative work taking place through the 'Healthier Fleetwood' project, along with the Team Fleetwood Partnership, Fleetwood Coastal Community Action Plan and Regenda Homes. Improved co-ordination would facilitate partnership working around shared priorities aimed at reducing social, economic and health inequalities. Lessons learned from the good work taking place to develop an integrated model of health care within Poulton could also be applied.

Within the council, we found a good understanding of health and wellbeing amongst staff, including the wider determinants of health and wellbeing. The council has a positive 'can do' culture amongst staff and members to deliver the 'healthier Wyre' priority. Those we spoke to recognise the key role council services have in improving overall mental health and wellbeing. This includes green infrastructure, leisure services, Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG), debt advice, benefit advice and housing/homelessness. We visited a number of collaborative projects where the council are working with partners to secure improved health and wellbeing outcomes. Examples include the Memorial Park gardening project which takes referrals directly from GPs. We also visited a supported housing project for people with mental health problems where the council had proactively worked with partners to secure funding. To further gear up the organisation to deliver this priority, a number of building blocks would benefit from further work. The council could better articulate the areas of focus for staff linked to the healthier Wyre objective, agreeing the 'big ticket' issues with clearly defined performance measures. The council should continue to strengthen communication and engagement with staff to make health everyone's business, including embedding this priority within the current refresh of the performance appraisal system.

The council has strong and credible political and organisational leadership with effective governance and decision making arrangements in place to respond to future challenges. Cabinet is seen as cohesive and its joint working relationship with Corporate Management Team (CMT) as positive and productive. A clear business plan is in place which identifies council priorities. The creation of a dedicated portfolio post for health and community engagement demonstrates the commitment of the leadership to the 'healthier Wyre' business plan priority. To further accelerate progress the council could strengthen the evidence base on the positive impact their activities/interventions have on the health economics of the local area and use this to build business cases for joint commissioning opportunities and/or further collaborative working opportunities.

The leadership has taken a firm stance against a proposed combined authority for Lancashire but still remain committed to continued collaborative working with the other councils across the county. Most staff and partners we spoke to had respect for the leadership team, seeing them as visible and open to new ideas. Following a senior management team restructure implemented in July 2016, the leadership team are building a positive and empowering culture for staff. There is now an opportunity to harness this leadership capacity to strengthen the shared vision for Wyre as a place.

The council have a good history of strong financial management. Wyre has experienced reductions in government funding, this year by 13.8%. Between 2010/11 and 2017/18 £6.3m of external funding has been lost. The council have responded well and prudently to these financial challenges including harnessing opportunities to work collaboratively with partners. The challenge now is to ensure the council is making the best use of its strong financial position to meet its business plan priorities, including opportunities arising from the development of a new commercial strategy.

1. Key recommendations

The key aspects of the team's findings that we suggest would deliver the greatest benefit if the council were to focus on them are:

1. **Use the proposed new Economic Development Strategy to develop a sharper, more compelling long term vision and set of ambitions for Wyre, agreed and shared with partners.** This will ensure all organisations are working more collaboratively towards a shared goal and set of ambitions that will help improve the lives of local people.
2. **Agree clearer areas of focus and priorities for staff to deliver the 'Healthier Wyre' priority with more clearly defined outcomes.** This should include making better use of the 'heads of service group' and involve developing more clearly defined performance measures linked to these priorities. This will help the council and its partner agencies target resources where they are most needed. It will also help strengthen the evidence base on the positive impact activities have on the health economics of the local area to influence future commissioning.
3. **Strengthen the co-ordination of activity and partnership initiatives taking place in Fleetwood to facilitate partnership working around shared priorities.** This would help the council and partners to make the best use of shared resources to tackle priorities.
4. **Explore opportunities to harness the relatively strong financial position of the council to support business plan priorities.** There may be opportunities for the council to develop initiatives that can continue to strengthen the local economy and attract further investment into the borough.

2. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

On behalf of the team, I would like to say how much we enjoyed spending time in Wyre to work with you on the recent corporate peer challenge. The team very much appreciated the welcome we received and the positive way with which people engaged in the process and the support provided in the lead up to, and during the course of, the challenge.

It is testimony to the council's desire for constructive external insight that Wyre Council commissioned the peer challenge. Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience

and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Wyre Council were:

- Jason Gooding, Chief Executive of Carlisle City Council, Peer Team Leader.
- Councillor Jonathan Owen, Cabinet Member for Health and Deputy Leader, East Riding Council
- Ann Crawford, Deputy Director, Public Health England
- Victoria Gibbs, Head of Integrated Commissioning, Partnerships and Health Improvement, North Lincolnshire Council
- Cindy Lowthian, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

Scope and focus

You asked the peer team to explore the implementation of the council's business plan with a focus on issues which will help the council progress one of its three business plan priorities – Healthier Wyre. In particular, the council asked us to focus on the following two issues:

1. How public sector agencies in Wyre can further accelerate progress on delivering improved health outcomes.
2. How Wyre Council can strengthen its internal working arrangements to ensure strong delivery of the Healthier Wyre priority.

There are a series of guiding questions for all corporate peer challenges which we also explored:

- Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
- Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?
- Leadership of place: Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
- Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?

- Financial planning and viability: Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?

The first three of these issues were explored within the context of the two areas of focus the council selected itself. The latter two issues were explored in parallel to the areas of focus the council selected.

The peer challenge process

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

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days on-site at Wyre Civic Centre, during which they: □ Spoke to more than 60 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.

- Gathered information and views from meetings, visits to Poulton YMCA, Wyre Estuary Country Park, Lockwood Surgery, Fleetwood and Thornton. This also included additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 140 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than three and a half weeks at the council.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit on the 16 March 2017. In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

3. Feedback

How public sector agencies in Wyre can further accelerate progress on delivering improved health outcomes.

1. Wyre council has a good understanding of its local context and factors that influence the wider determinants of health and wellbeing. This information is pulled together through the annual 'State of Wyre' report incorporating a range of data and statistical information including housing, economy, environment, community safety, health and

wellbeing. This report includes comparative data at both regional and national level where it is available. A Life in Wyre survey is conducted every two years and informs the State of Wyre report. It provides baseline information about how residents feel about living in Wyre, the services they value most and what is most in need of improvement. For the last two years the survey has included a section dedicated to community based health services, with a financial contribution made by NHS Fylde and Wyre Clinical Commissioning Group. This should be seen as good practice as it is an example of where partners can work together to share resources and avoid duplication.

2. The council uses this information to inform its business planning process. The State of Wyre report is themed across the three overarching priorities within the business plan; Enterprising Wyre, Healthier Wyre and Engaging Wyre. The council has a vision in place to be “a collaborative council that works together with local communities and partners to make a difference and improve the lives of those who live in, work in or visit the borough”. Implementation of the business plan is measured through key corporate projects along with a series of measures incorporated within the performance management framework. Progress is reported quarterly including a report to Overview and Scrutiny.

3. The ‘Healthier Wyre’ theme is a key business plan priority for the council. The health of people in Wyre is varied. The borough has better than England average rates for a range of indicators including GCSE attainment, childhood poverty, statutory homelessness, violent crime, long term unemployment, smoking prevalence in adults and excess winter deaths. Less than 13% of the population live in deprived areas, with the area of Carleton ranked as being one of the least deprived areas in the country. The latest ‘living in Wyre’ survey shows that Wyre, as a whole, is a place where the majority of residents are satisfied with the area as a place to live.

4. However, there are indicators that are performing significantly worse than the England average including estimated levels of adult physical activity, alcohol-specific hospital stays (under 18), hospital stays for alcohol related harm and rate of road injuries and deaths. There are also dramatic differences in life expectancy across the borough correlating with areas of high deprivation. The 2015 indices of deprivation scores show that whilst Wyre has the fifth lowest deprivation scores in Lancashire, it has seen the highest decline in score compared to the 2010 results and has nine smaller areas in the top 10% of England’s most deprived. Distribution between the most and least affluent wards is apparent, with wards in Fleetwood being amongst the most relatively deprived. Wyre also has an ageing population and increasing numbers with complex long-term health conditions. By 2024 Wyre is projected to have the twenty-ninth highest number of people over 65 out of 326 authorities making up 29% of Wyre’s population.

5. Reported prevalence of mental ill health is also a key challenge as Wyre is above the national prevalence rate. The prevalence of depression is higher than the England rate but compares to a number of other sub-regional CCG areas. Across the Wyre and Fylde

area the prevalence of dementia is significantly higher than the national prevalence value with the Fylde and Wyre CCG the third highest out of 2019 CCGs in England. Projections suggest Wyre will have the highest numbers in Lancashire with dementia by 2025; an increase of 24% from 2014 data.

6. The council is working well with partners, particularly health partner organisations, to address these challenges and promote self-care. There are many examples where the council is beginning to shape delivery of its core services to support new models of healthcare provision including leisure centres where the council has invested £6m. Collaborative working in relation to housing and supported housing has helped secure a new 72 bed extra care housing scheme in Fleetwood. The council is also working with partners to harness better use of parks, open spaces, debt advice, volunteering and community engagement provision to support improved health and mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

7. Wyre's Early Action Hub Project is in the early stages of development but should provide an opportunity to further strengthen collaborative working to support the most vulnerable, including those with mental health problems, victims of domestic violence and abuse and those with drug and alcohol problems. Ensuring early involvement and buy in from key partners including mental health practitioners and social care professionals will be key. Referral pathways, information sharing protocols, links to other integrated models including the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) and overall governance arrangements need to be clearly defined and understood by all.

8. Recently, the council have worked with the Fylde and Wyre CCG to co-locate a GP and Extensive Care Service to the Civic Centre. This is both innovative and a game changer and an example of exceptional partnership working. It is the first step towards creating a community hub that integrates health care provision with council services to help address the wider determinants of health and wellbeing. Referrals are made to council services including care and repair, adaptations, housing advice, debt advice and volunteering. It also helps generate income for the council for the sub lease of part of the building to the Fylde and Wyre CCG. In addition to this, the council support community based approaches to health via the Garstang Integrated Care Community project and 'Healthier Fleetwood'.

9. Partners spoke highly of the council who are seen as a forward thinking council. The council is represented on the county wide Health and Wellbeing Board overseeing the county wide health and wellbeing strategy. We also heard that they are engaged in the on-going development of the Lancashire and South Cumbria Sustainable Transformation Plan – in particular the Prevention and Population Steering Group chaired by the Director of Public Health and the Lancashire Health Leads Group. The council is actively involved in discussions with health and social care partners relating to the Better Care Fund, particularly the use of Disabled Facilities Grant to support people to live independently at

home. Overall, partners said the council are actively engaged in discussions focussed on prevention and self-care, playing a significant role alongside health and social care colleagues.

10. To further accelerate progress the council could develop a more clearly defined set of performance indicators and measures linked to the 'healthier Wyre' priority. These can be used to measure the impact of council activity on improved health outcomes in the longer term. The council could also explore how to more proactively collate existing evidence on the health economics of their activities and interventions, such as cost benefit analysis of particular projects, use of health impact tools. This evidence can be used to help build the business case for further collaboration and integration in relation to the leadership of health and wellbeing in the borough. This could include joint commissioning, pooled budgets, shared service delivery, future shared management posts and even shared management team models with health colleagues.

11. Like other two tier areas, relationships with the county council can be challenging at times, particularly as the county council makes decisions impacting on local service provision in Wyre as a result of its own budgetary challenges. Those we spoke to from both the district and county council demonstrated a commitment to ongoing engagement to unpick these challenges and ensure the best possible outcome for local residents. This relationship is critical to the sustainable health and wellbeing outcomes that Wyre Council is committed to delivering.

12. Many of those we spoke to were aware of the council's 'Healthier Wyre' priority, but not necessarily how this linked to a wider vision and set of outcomes for the borough as a whole. To take the next step, the council could benefit from work with partners to develop and agree a shared longer term narrative and vision that partners can work collectively together to achieve. The council is already committed to the development of a new Economic Development Strategy; this provides the space to do this. It provides an opportunity to build a more compelling shared vision for the place in addition to helping to address priorities that impact on the wider determinants of health and wellbeing; jobs, skills, growth, regeneration and housing.

13. The council is an active partner on the 'Healthier Fleetwood' initiative which is developing new and refreshing ways of work with communities to address the significant health inequalities prevalent in the town. The emphasis is on understanding what matters most to people, rather than what is wrong. The aim is to work with communities to strengthen hope and purpose for the future by focussing on the issues that matter most.

14. The council has successfully worked with partners to attract investment into Fleetwood over recent years on a range of projects that can have a positive impact on health and wellbeing. This includes the work undertaken to the Marine Hall Gardens through the Government's Sea Change initiative, a £1.5m Coastal Community funded regeneration scheme and work to restore the Marine Hall's glass dome via a £50,000 Coastal Revival Fund. Further investment is planned through the creation of a Fish and

Food Park on Fleetwood Docks and opportunities from the nearby Hillhouse International Enterprise Zone which has established globally recognised chemical and polymer manufactures, providing opportunities for the local workforce. The Regenda Housing Group is particularly active in Fleetwood and is developing extra care housing in the area with an estimated capital contract of £8m. More recently, partnership working has helped secure DONG Energy Community funding to establish six new community open spaces with a focus on health creation.

15. To take the next step the council could undertake further work with partners to better co-ordinate partnership activity and initiatives in Fleetwood. This would facilitate partnership working around agreed, shared priorities aimed at reducing social, economic and health inequalities. There are opportunities to apply some of the lessons learned from the good work taking place in Poulton to improve access to services aimed at tackling community health needs and inequalities. Access to support and advice in relation to employment, skills, housing and revenues/benefits is particularly important given the socio-economic challenges facing the area. The approach should build upon existing initiatives including the Healthier Fleetwood project and the work of the 'Team Fleetwood' Partnership. Better co-ordination of activity and partnerships would facilitate partnership working by bringing stakeholders and the community together with a shared set of priorities for the town that can have the biggest impact on tackling health inequalities.

How Wyre Council can strengthen its internal working arrangements to ensure strong delivery of the Healthier Wyre priority

16. Wyre council is a good council with number of well performing services including time taken to process housing benefit change events, council tax collection rates, processing of planning applications and % of household waste sent for recycling where they are the second top performer of all districts in the north-west for 2015/16.

17. The council's own performance report for quarter 3 shows progress; of the sixteen performance measures reported, six show an improvement and seven are not significantly different to previous year's performance. Three measures show a decline including numbers on out of work benefits which is a national trend. The remaining two measures are taken from the Life in Wyre resident survey for 2016 which show a small decrease in satisfaction rates with parks/open spaces and leisure facilities compared to 2014 – however the rates overall were still relatively high.

18. The council's business plan themes are monitored on a quarterly basis via the council's performance management system. Reports are shared with Overview and Scrutiny and the council's CMT/Cabinet. We found that staff and councillors have a good awareness of the 'Healthier Wyre' theme and there is a positive 'can do' culture across the council to deliver this priority. Overall, we found the council has dedicated and talented staff who have a good understanding of health and wellbeing in its wider sense

including the wider determinants of health and wellbeing and the impact their own work area can have on this priority

19. To take the next step the council should consider sharpening the areas of focus for staff linked to business plan priorities. Staff were not always clear on initiatives and projects which should be prioritised in their day to day work. A more clearly defined set of objectives and performance measures linked to the 'Healthier Wyre' priority would help to strengthen approaches to measuring and understanding the impact council interventions have on delivering improved health outcomes, particularly in the longer term.

20. Consideration could also be given to identifying SMART objectives linked specifically to children and young people as part of the next business plan refresh. The current plan is skewed towards older people and adults given the understandable challenges faced by the borough with an ageing population. At the same time there are key health and wellbeing challenges for younger people, particularly alcohol-specific hospital admissions of under 18s; the council's community safety, parks, licensing and engagement teams will play an important role in tackling this issue.

21. A new senior management team structure was implemented in April 2016 which includes a service directorate for health and wellbeing overseen by a dedicated Director. The creation of this dedicated senior management post for a district council demonstrates the council's commitment to deliver the 'Healthier Wyre' priority.

22. Heads of service meet on a regular basis to share ideas and develop joint working approaches but there are opportunities to make better use of this group. The council should consider delegating key pieces of work to this group that can help support the 'Healthier Wyre' objective and help free up capacity within CMT. This will help ensure the 'Healthier Wyre' priority is owned and driven across all teams. It should help build a more shared leadership approach to this priority so it is not seen as the sole responsibility of the Director for health and wellbeing.

23. Heads of service also have a key role to play in ensuring service plans reflect the 'Healthier Wyre' priority more explicitly, with clearly communicated performance targets identified. The group can also be used to feed ideas from staff about projects that can help further the 'Healthier Wyre' priority including service redesign and/or collaborative working and commercialisation – supporting a bottom up as well top down approach to communication and staff engagement.

24. We found an acknowledgement amongst those we met of the need to focus on the wider preventative agenda as captured within the business plan. This will require differential approaches to investment amongst strategic leaders to make best use of joint resources. The collation and provision of performance data and outcome based information in relation to council services and their impact on health and wellbeing is key. Strengthening approaches should help the council build the business case for more integrated commissioning approaches in the medium/longer term.

25. The council has recently developed a strategic narrative which was shared with both Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet late last year. This is good practice. It sets out three clear key goals to shift the way the council works to deliver the business plan vision including building a flexible and change-ready workforce, financial discipline/commercial awareness and an integrated and community focused service offer to support a healthier Wyre. We saw good examples of this narrative beginning to impact on the way staff work. This includes the development of cross directorate project teams to deliver key projects including the Wyre Early Action Project and the performance appraisal review. These teams harness the skills of staff from a range of service disciplines and staff involved were genuinely enthused about this opportunity. It is still early days and the council should continue to engage staff to embed these goals into the workforce culture, particularly around commercial awareness.

26. The council is strengthening its engagement approaches to improve health and wellbeing through the 'Together We Make a Difference' network. A review of existing community engagement approaches was completed in October 2016 and new local networks will involve informal meetings of stakeholders to oversee place based solutions to community priorities. The council are building asset based approaches to the way they engage – done in the right way should help identify and harness community assets rather than solely focussing upon needs and problems. There are further opportunities to build innovative engagement approaches with young people to promote positive health messages including dangers of drugs and alcohol, active lifestyles, healthy eating and sexual health. For example, the council could consider work with partners/schools to develop a 'let's get moving' challenge'- an initiative developed by the North Lancashire CCG to encourage young people to be more active.

Organisational leadership and governance

27. The council has strong and credible political and organisational leadership with effective governance and decision making arrangements in place to respond to the challenges ahead. Cabinet members work well together and the joint working relationship with the CMT is positive and productive. There are fortnightly meetings between Cabinet and CMT who collectively work together to provide leadership. There is also a clearly defined management structure and a scheme of delegation to officers, which is underpinned by the Members' Code of Conduct and a Protocol for Officer/Member relations. The creation of a dedicated portfolio post for Health and Community Engagement demonstrates the commitment of the Leadership to the 'Healthier Wyre' business plan priority. Overall staff said that they felt the leadership was helping to build a positive and empowering culture across the council. There is now an opportunity to harness this leadership capacity to build the shared vision for Wyre as a place, as part of the development of the Wyre Economic Development Strategy (outlined above).

28. The council's scrutiny was seen as good and effective by those we met; officers and councillors said it encourages constructive challenge and helps to enhance the

authorities performance overall. The committee has completed a number of scrutiny reviews which support the 'Healthier Wyre' priority including domestic abuse and food hygiene. The committee is building links with the Fylde and Wyre Clinical 11 Commissioning Group who have agreed to keep them up to date with their work. The committee are also represented on the wider health overview and scrutiny governance arrangements for Lancashire with regular updates shared by their representative.

29. The leadership have established effective working relationships with clinical leads from the clinical commissioning groups and there is a Health Plan for Wyre reflecting the priorities of the Fylde and Wyre CCG and the Fylde and Wyre Health and Wellbeing Partnership of which Wyre council is a leading member. The council are also engaged in the ongoing development of the Lancashire and South Cumbria Sustainable Transformation Plan, particularly in developing work streams under the 'Prevention and Population Steering Group' and are an active partner in the Lancashire Health Leads Group. To take the next step, the council could explore more radical approaches to the leadership of health and wellbeing in the borough, including shared senior management posts and/or teams with the CCGs.

30. Whilst the Leadership has taken a firm stance against a proposed combined authority for Lancashire they have said that they still remain committed to continued collaborative working with the other councils across the county. Most staff and partners we spoke to had respect for the leadership team, seeing them as visible and open to new ideas.

31. The council have a good history of strong financial management. Like all councils, Wyre has experienced reductions in government funding, this year by 13.8%. Between 2010/11 and 2017/18 £6.309m of external funding has been lost. Overall, they have implemented efficiency savings of £5.384m over the same period and levels of reserves remain healthy. Average savings achieved over the last 10 years have been £762,000 per annum since 2006/07. The council have responded well and prudently to these financial challenges including harnessing opportunities to work collaboratively with partners.

32. The council's annual budget report is published in February each year which goes through cabinet and then to council in March. The capital programme and annual efficiency statement are included as part of the budget report. Although the council seeks to align the budget setting process to the business plan which is presented to the same meeting each year, those we spoke to said this alignment could be stronger and the council should explore opportunities to further strengthen this approach. Budget related briefings are held for councillors and senior officers at regular intervals which is good practice.

33. The Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) is produced in September and looks ahead for the next three years. The forecast budget gap at the end of the current MTFP period is £2.2m. The council has continued to set a balance budget over the years through

efficiency savings, not increasing the level of borrowing and prudent financial management.

34. The council has a good track record of attracting external funding into the borough. This includes £63m for the Rossall Coastal Defence Fund. It also includes £142,900 from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Big Lottery Fund for the restoration of the Mount and its gardens in Fleetwood and funding to implement new approaches to prevent homelessness through a joint £607,000 bid from the Fylde coast authorities. The council clearly has experience of producing and submitting quality external funding bids.

35. The challenge now is to ensure the council builds on this good work and continues to explore opportunities to make the best use of its strong financial position. This includes opportunities arising from the development of a new commercial strategy for the council. The council should continue to explore collaborative working opportunities including shared services. It could also explore opportunities to further invest in local business growth in the borough.

4. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Neil Shaw, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). His contact details are: Neil.Shaw@local.gov.uk

In the meantime, we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

Follow up visit

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next two years.

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