

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

25th and 26th January and 1st, 2nd, and 3rd February 2022

Feedback report



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1. Executive summary

We were delighted to be invited back to Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council (TMBC) to see how their improvement journey has evolved since the last full Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in 2014. Following the previous review the council focussed on its economic development, evidenced through the creation of a new manager post to drive this agenda forward.

Since then, a council election took place in 2019 with the current administration retaining a large majority and a significant new cohort of members joining the authority. More recently in July 2021 a new leader took up the leadership position.

TMBC is a politically stable and well-run organisation with an experienced management team. The council prides itself on its financial stability which it has achieved through careful financial management over a number of years, resulting in healthy reserves and no debt, a rarity in local government in the current climate. This careful financial management has meant TMBC has mitigated the challenges that many local authorities are currently facing across the country. However, TMBC now finds itself in unfamiliar territory, with a requirement to find £2m savings over the next few years. In the absence of a strategic vision, TMBC’s dominant narrative has been to focus on financial stability and compliance. While this has proved a successful strategy to date; this approach has the potential to constrain innovation. With transformative change required, this approach is not sustainable, and the council is at a pivotal moment, needing to adapt and be purposeful about its role as leader of the community, not just as a financially stable organisation.

There are many positives for the council to build on and drive change forward. TMBC has an experienced workforce who are committed and valued. They pride themselves in their roles and feel deeply connected to the community that they serve.

Their commitment during the response to COVID-19 has been exceptional and there is an abundance of goodwill to deliver excellent services to residents which is to be commended. The council has successfully embarked on a number of regeneration projects following a recommendation in the last peer review and has made good progress. TMBC is also seen as a dependable, credible and trusted partner and has forged strong relationships with community partners and in neighbouring authorities. The new leader and his desire for change is seen as a positive for the organisation and his inclusive approach is welcomed. In particular the new group leader meetings are seen as a positive new development.

However there are challenges for TMBC to overcome. Currently cabinet and the management team do not have a shared space where they can work informally together, build shared understanding and develop effective policy together. Tonbridge and Malling's priority should be to create a clear, shared and outward looking corporate strategy with key priorities for the future; supporting the new administration to deliver its ambitions. This informal space is essential for the professional and political leadership of the organisation to develop policy together and drive the council forward.

Whilst the council has gained a positive reputation from partners, it needs to be more focussed on its role as leader of place. It is unclear how some of TMBC's strategic partnerships are delivering outcomes effectively, and there is a need to ensure these are more purposeful and focussed on delivery. Underpinning this is the council's lack of a compelling narrative that provides a clear vision of what kind of authority and place TMBC wants to be which inspires, excites, and motivates, and that everyone including staff, members and partners can buy into and get behind. A focus on financial stability is not enough. A lack of vision also means the peer team found very little cohesive work to gain the residents' and customers views of the organisation.

Linked to this there is an absence of a clear corporate performance framework which focuses on meaningful outcomes. This has created a void with finance and compliance becoming the dominant narrative as a way of measuring performance. A lack of performance framework has also meant the council is reactive to challenges, rather than proactively forward planning or swiftly anticipating issues before they emerge. In turn, key enablers of change within the organisation such as HR and communications have become passive responsive services with no clear direction or

strategy. The current workforce strategy is more compliance focused rather than forward looking. While the communications team has developed a customer focused website as a result of the council's digital by default approach, consequently the team has become more of a customer service function.

An unwieldy and cumbersome hybrid governance system is stifling meaningful scrutiny and also inhibits the council in delivering change at the pace required.

TMBC has a proven track record for delivery particularly where there is an urgent need. Its response to preparing for Brexit and the impact on the borough's infrastructure and services, meant it was in a strong position to respond to the challenges COVID-19 presented as TMBC already had the digital capability for the workforce to swiftly work from home. Whereas other authorities struggled in the early days of the pandemic. The council was also the driving force behind setting up a mass vaccination centre in the area. The council has demonstrated its excellent response to flooding in the borough and secured essential funding.

The coming years will be challenging for the council if sustainable and transformative solutions are not identified. Engaging and empowering all staff to be a part of the change process will be essential, particularly in identifying where to drive out service delivery inefficiencies and free up capacity to focus on the council's key priorities. Creating a more compelling corporate narrative and permissive culture will be essential if the transformation required is to be delivered. TMBC is keen to look at ways to increase income for instance through Tonbridge Castle. Transformation is an organisational wide role, not just the responsibility of the finance department. With a clear corporate plan co-produced by officers and members, clear priorities and a clear performance framework, the organisation will be able to define and articulate its purpose, identify the skills, ideas and experience needed to deliver the plan, set the budget accordingly and drive forward the change required.

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

Establish a regular 'safe space' for the management team and cabinet to strengthen relationships and build strategic policy together; be proactive in building workable options.

2.2. Recommendation 2

Co-develop a refreshed corporate strategy, based on resident engagement, with clear outcomes, focussed on delivering for the community – not just finance.

2.3. Recommendation 3

Ensure strategies and policies have SMART objectives and establish a corporate performance framework which provides visibility and a formal mechanism to track your progress. Benchmark and learn from good practice elsewhere.

2.4. Recommendation 4

Establish a shared and ambitious narrative for TMBC and re-energise partnerships, focussed on delivering outcomes, not sharing information.

2.5. Recommendation 5

Develop a communications strategy which strengthens two-way engagement with residents, markets services, promotes place, and celebrates successes.

2.6. Recommendation 6

Be clear on what kind of council TMBC wants to be and make that the focus of the transformation agenda, more than just savings.

2.7. Recommendation 7

Re-calibrate the council's approach to risk and explore opportunities to be more commercial and collaborate with others.

2.8. Recommendation 8

Develop internal communication, build a shared sense of purpose beyond finance and compliance, and recognise the good work across the organisation that happens every day.

2.9. Recommendation 9

Recognise and reinvigorate the workforce, with a focus on the right skills and right resources in the right place to deliver the transformation agenda. Develop a new comprehensive workforce strategy incorporating the council's new ways of working post COVID-19.

2.10. Recommendation 10

Review the council's governance arrangements, with particular attention to area planning committees and the impact of advisory boards on decision

making and the role of overview and scrutiny.

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 Peer: Edd de Coverly, Chief Executive, Melton Borough Council
- Member Peer: Cllr Chris Hossack, Leader of Brentwood Borough Council
- Officer Peer: Deborah Johnson, Director of Customer Services and OD, Newark and Sherwood District Council
- Officer Peer: Matt Garrett, Service Director for Community Connections at Plymouth City Council
- Shadow Peer: Harry Parker, Adviser, LGA
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager, Sophie Poole

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?

3.3. 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 to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent five days virtually with TMBC, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 48 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 90 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

TMBC's recognises that its corporate strategy is currently internally focused and sets a limited ambition for the place. Aspirations in the strategy are generic: *"To continue to be a financially sustainable council with strong leadership that delivers valued services, a commitment to delivering innovation and change to meet the needs of our Borough"* with *"Achieving efficiency, Embracing Effective Partnership Working and Funding and Innovation"* as values and priorities that underpin this. But there is nothing specific setting out what these priorities are and how they will be delivered making it hard to measure success or be accountable for performance.

The council has said it is keen to refresh its corporate strategy and priorities. In doing so, it is essential to engage with local residents, understand what matters to them and prioritise accordingly. The role of elected ward members is to reflect the views of their local residents in the decision-making process. The council also measures resident satisfaction through complaints. However there is no formal process for proactively gauging the views of residents who may not normally be engaged with the council, such as through a regular corporate survey or other mechanism. Although the team were told that regular surveys happen at a service level, there is no corporate oversight that captures the resident voice.

Previously there was a citizens panel, but this is no longer used to gauge opinion. The peer team were told that the new leader attempted to co-ordinate a consultation to gauge the views of residents when first elected to help shape priorities around the budget. This piece of work was largely driven by the leader, with support from the communications team to promote the questionnaire. Unfortunately, the response rate was relatively low. This was a lost opportunity to more comprehensively engage with residents, prioritising what is important to them and shape the future direction of the council and set the budget accordingly.

A lack of shared strategic vision was evident throughout the review, with no strong sense of priorities being reflected in conversations the peer team had with a wide range of different stakeholders. There are separate strategies for different parts of the organisation which include specific priorities, however there is no overarching plan that sets out the key priorities for the organisation, what the council is about, its purpose and how it will achieve it. The absence of a clear vision and narrative to support it, makes it difficult to bind the organisation together, and secure buy-in, motivation and commitment from officers, members and partners to deliver the aspirations set out. The current corporate strategy does set out some key outcomes to be achieved by 2023 such as meeting targets set for future cost savings, developing a climate change strategy, introducing new technology and ensuring key service meets all statutory obligations. However, it is not clear how the targets reflect the administration's priorities. There is also no explanation as to why the council has made these deliverables a priority for the community and what impact they will have or how they will be measured.

Despite this, TMBC has demonstrated it can successfully deliver, particularly when

there is a clear focus. The peer team heard a number of positive examples of how the council responded to crises such as COVID-19, flooding and also preparing for Brexit given the particular challenge TMBC faced due its geography.

The peer team also found that there is an absence of a corporate performance framework. Several sources talked about the legacy of a framework that had previously existed, which had turned into a *'real industry'* and as a consequence was scaled back. But in doing so there is now a gap and very limited performance monitoring occurs, particularly at a corporate level. This limits cabinet and management team's ability to have collective visibility and oversight of how the council is performing against its responsibilities and aspirations. Measuring performance also provides the opportunity to see where the organisation successes are and that these can be celebrated. One member of staff when asked how staff would know whether their service was doing a good job, if there are no performance indicators, said *"they would be told if they weren't."*

The peer team did see that some performance is reviewed through the council's advisory boards with positive feedback from sources about how performance is reported on council tax collection rates and housing benefit distribution. However, performance reporting is fragmented and there is no collective overview that gives assurance on the delivery of the council's priorities or allows competing issues or challenges to be proactively evaluated against each other. Without a framework, the peer team questions how cabinet and the management team can have effective oversight of the corporate health and performance of the organisation and reassure itself that things are not being missed. There may also be missed opportunities to pre-empt issues before they become a major problem.

The peer team recognises the challenges the council has faced around the waste contract, and that consensus on a way forward is close to being reached. However, it raises questions about how effectively the council has consistently kept the community informed and updated, communicating that it understands residents' frustrations, that the council's priority is to resolve any issues and provide the best service.

Temporary accommodation has been another key focus for the organisation and the peer team understands an independent report has been commissioned to review the

situation with recommendations. Sources the team spoke to raised concerns about whether the expectation and capacity needed to deliver the level of change necessary has been fully realised and whether there is sufficient resource to address the significant backlog of people waiting to go onto the housing register. While the council told the peer team they have put additional temporary resources into addressing the backlog, there may be work to do to regain the trust and confidence of those involved in delivering the service.

The peer team has sympathy with the council's situation regarding the local plan but the team questions how the authority will get the necessary buy-in and ensure it is delivered on time.

The Tonbridge and Malling Leisure Trust is clearly an important contract for TMBC, and the trust has a good relationship with the council. However there is a question around how well the council monitors performance as currently there is a lack of regular effective scrutiny around how services link to the overall health improvement and wellbeing of residents in the borough, with more of a focus on how the contract is performing financially.

The team heard positive feedback about the excellent work the council is doing on the green agenda particularly around the eco café. The team recognised the cabinet member's drive to address climate change and it was good to hear about the recruitment of a climate change officer who will continue the good work.

4.2 Organisational and place leadership

The peer team heard positive feedback that partners are confident in working with TMBC and that the organisation is seen as dependable and credible.

TMBC recognises that it was previously quite insular but there have been positive moves to be more outward facing – examples around the impact of external funding being secured for the local growth fund, East Malling Research Centre and the flood defences were noted by the peer team. The team also heard positive stories about the council advocating for the local community during the pandemic in securing a mass vaccination centre. However, looking beyond that, there is no visible sense of what the council wants Tonbridge and Malling to be in the future. There is no shared

narrative with partners and no effective strategic partnership that owns that narrative and actively promotes it.

The peer team recognises the challenge of place diversity and that the borough is not one where Tonbridge recognises its affiliation with Malling and vice versa which creates challenges and tensions. For instance, the peer team heard how two leisure centres had been built, one in Tonbridge and one in Malling, when only one was really needed. This ongoing tension needs to be resolved as it is inhibiting the council's ability to move forward and speak with confidence about what the organisation wants to achieve for the borough.

There is also a sense that the council is passive strategically and not fighting hard enough for Tonbridge and Malling. One source said the council had taken a passive approach and '*let the market do its thing*' noting that the council '*could do so much more.*' The peer team questions whether the council is putting enough resource and emphasis into its place leadership to shape the borough. This will be an important aspect as members begin shaping the vision for the new local development plan. The peer team also observed that the council is not proactively selling the success stories of the external funding that it has secured and how it is helping to use that to shape the borough.

The West Kent Partnership (WKP) is a helpful vehicle that the council uses, to influence strategically in the sub region. While it is delivered in the past, the peer team heard, that it is not currently firing on all cylinders, and there is a need to be more strategic and stop being the '*poor relation*' in Kent. The peer team questions, is TMBC leveraging strategic partnerships and relationships to secure investment and raise the profile to stimulate investment in the place? This is something that the TMBC has recognised, and the peer team understands work is being done to move this on.

The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is the council's vehicle for bringing partners together within the borough, however it does not appear to be effective as it could be and needs to be reinvigorated. The peer team heard that the LSP is a long-standing institution but was described as "*rather dull*" and "*too big and too unwieldy.*" The LSP requires a greater sense of shared purpose which will motivate and invigorate partners to work together on delivering a common vision and solve shared problems.

On organisational leadership, TMBC has a reputation for being a stable, solid, well-run authority with an experienced management team, all of which are assets. In addition, the inclusive and energetic approach adopted by the new leader has been positively received on the whole and welcomed by those that the peer team spoke to. There is a recognition that new leader is keen to increase the pace of change and bring fresh ideas. This new leadership style creates an opportunity for the whole council to innovate and look at how it could do things differently.

Staff length of service carries a lot of weight in the organisation. Everyone that the peer team talked to introduced themselves by stating the number of years they had worked at the authority. While the organisation's internal staff progression and retention, and long-standing staff have served TMBC well, this approach may have inhibited the organisation's ability to adapt and innovate to the changed financial and local government landscape. One source observed that officers are "*very helpful, knowledgeable and well-seasoned*" but questioned if they had "*been with the council too long.*" The repeated phrase that the peer team heard was '*we're stuck in our ways*' and '*this is the way we do things around here.*' This presents a real challenge when there is a recognition that the council needs to adapt to a new landscape. There needs to be a balance. While it is important to value and respect long service, explicit permission needs to be given to staff to challenge assumptions and to find ways to incorporate new ideas and bring new experience into the organisation.

The peer team also observed there is a deference to hierarchy and that the tiers that staff are in, and their length of service create status. One officer said it was a "*real privilege to go to management team*". While hierarchies are good in a crisis such as during the immediate response to the pandemic where command and control is required, they are far less capable of serving an organisation's needs when change and creativity is required. If TMBC is looking to adapt, change and be transformative, there is a need to address the cultural hierarchy that exists in the council as well as any structural hierarchy.

The peer team found little evidence of a corporate narrative that unifies staff across the organisation and creates a sense of purpose that everyone can buy in to and want to work towards. This presents a challenge for both cabinet and the management team to set the tone at a time when people are seeing far less of each other due to COVID-19. It is even more important during a pandemic to focus on

internal communications, giving it prominence and priority. The peer team understands that regular emails are sent to staff from the chief executive and that some messaging exists in pockets of the organisation, but there is little that unifies staff in a one council approach. Although TMBC references values in its corporate strategy, these would be more characterised as outputs. The peer team could not find any reference to how the council wants to operate as an organisation, how it wishes to achieve and deliver and what it feels like to work at TMBC.

4.3 Governance and culture

Staff are hardworking and highly committed to the organisation, residents and the place. The peer team heard powerful stories about how staff saw each other as family, with many colleagues having worked together for over 20 years. This family ethos was generally seen at team level rather than across the whole organisation. As outlined previously, a corporate narrative would help to unify staff across the organisation, not just in pockets and create a collective sense of purpose. Staff in some areas the peer team spoke to, were showing signs of strain, with variable levels of support and capacity. In a recent staff survey there appeared to be a reduction in confidence to talk to managers about stress from 81 per cent to 41 per cent which is concerning. The peer team understands that the council was bringing in the Mental Health Champions scheme, but this was stopped due to COVID-19. It would be advisable to consider reinstating this as it sends out a positive message that the wellbeing of staff is a priority,

As stated previously the peer team saw little evidence of internal communications, with no regular staff bulletin, newsletter or other channel featuring messaging from management, or stories about staff and their successes. The team also found there were no staff recognition awards or equivalent - this is a lost opportunity to create a sense of team across the whole organisation. One source the peer team spoke to suggested staff would see it as an insult and that *“they don’t need a certificate to know they’re doing a good job.”* Following on from this, there is no evidence of reward, recognition and celebrating success seeking external recognition either. The peer team would not recommend going for awards for the sake of it, but external validation and recognition can be a way to build confidence and momentum in an

organisation as well as with partners and neighbouring councils.

The focus of TMBC's culture is the mindset of financial stability and compliance, which the council is rightly proud of. However this is the dominant narrative. One source described the council as "*doing the boring things well.*" Also, one service said their role was to "*deal with things at the level it occurs and ensure we are legally compliant.*" Compliance and financial stability are the backbone of local government, and a council ignores this at their peril. However local communities are looking to their council for more than good regulatory services and compliance. Statutory services are seen as untouchable at TMBC, rather than taking a more strategic approach and assessing what level of service is needed. The peer team also heard a number of people say that TMBC is risk averse. One source described the council as '*bumbling along and scrapping the barrel for new ideas.*' The changing local government financial landscape over the last decade has meant councils have had to radically adapt the way they deliver council services, becoming business-like and entrepreneurial in their approach. Therefore a similar shift in culture at TMBC would underpin the council's desire to be innovative and identify the savings required.

Historically there has been a consistently strong member - officer relationship, helped by a stable political leadership over a number of years. Following an intake of new members in 2019 and a new leader in 2021, a difference in ambition for the pace of change has opened up between those elected pre and post 2019.

While the peer team heard that behaviours were respectful amongst members and officers, it is clear tensions have emerged since the change in political landscape, resulting in a disconnect between cabinet and management team. The peer team heard examples where members were getting involved in operational matters that they did not need to. Equally the peer team were told that officers are defensive being described as '*resistant to change, guarded and in their comfort zones.*' There is a risk that if the council does not start to strengthen the connections between officers and member and to establish and clarify the vision that is needed between them, those tensions will increase and have a risk of potentially becoming problematic further down the line. It is clear there is insufficient priority and capacity being given to joint policy development and relationship building. Therefore the peer team recommends a 'safe space' is created for cabinet and management team to create better understanding, develop policy together and refresh the corporate plan.

The team suggests monthly sessions, to deal with issues or opportunities as they arise, but also to periodically consider various strategic themes.

To support this the peer team would suggest looking at the council's programme of learning and development, to bring clarity to the different roles and responsibilities of officers and members, and how to develop policy together. It is not the case that officers or members should come up with the ideas, but that ideas are shared and cocreated together.

TMBC's hybrid governance structure may have served the authority well historically, but it is resource intensive, and impedes the council's ability to respond to the changing landscape as governance requires many decisions go through the advisory boards prior to being considered by cabinet, with sometimes up to five months wait between meetings. The peer team heard from a number of sources that there were "far too many boards, meetings and committees." In addition, the peer team repeatedly heard that having three area planning committees is resource intensive and impacting on the quality of decision making. While three planning committees provides a locally focused approach, planning committee members should be planning policy focused. Ward members can advocate for their wards as speakers in favour of or against any individual applications which could be accommodated through one committee. The current system also means that planners' time is also being used to generate lots of reports and attend meetings, limiting their capacity to focus on the day job and manage applications. In addition, Not only is this out of sync with other councils, it makes it hard to keep good planning officers and impedes TMBC's ability to accelerate its regeneration plans. The paperless reports have generally been welcomed by members.

The council's advisory boards also create a challenge around the scrutiny function which is devoid of having any real impact. The peer team observed that scrutiny is struggling to find a place and a role, and is disempowered by the advisory boards, evidenced by the lack of call ins over the last 20 years. There is no apparent scrutiny work programme where members can examine in greater depth a topic of interest or concern to the community bringing recommendations to the council and no pre-development work. As a result scrutiny has become officer led who suggest what is discussed. Members do not see its value with very little debate or questions being asked. The peer team suggests increasing the status of scrutiny within the council

and the role of the chair, to address this.

TMBC operates an inclusive structure and the new leader's collaborate cross party approach is welcomed across the groups. However there is a concern that in the current structure, where everyone is involved in the decision making, it presents a risk of going to the lowest common denominator as that is the only option members can all agree on. Good governance is making effective and timely decisions that serve the local community's needs. Therefore it is important to create a system where there's leadership and a clarity of roles, and those roles will be different across different members and officers. If TMBC is to move forward and make change at the pace required, it is recommended that the council reviews the current governance structure.

In reference to the boundary review and the 18 per cent proposed reduction in members, there is a real risk that the current advisory board system will become unsustainable with a source commenting that "*lower numbers won't sustain the current format*". There is an opportunity to reset before the next election and enable that administration to make a strong stride forward in the new direction it wants to take.

The peer team observed that TMBC has had fewer cabinet meetings than expected in the last 12 months. The expectation would usually be once a month. In not meeting regularly, cabinet is missing opportunities to demonstrate its leadership, to set the tone for the organisation and articulate its ambitions for TMBC. It would also be an opportunity to celebrate the council's achievements and promote any good work that is being done.

4.4 Financial planning and management

TMBC has successfully navigated the financial challenges it has faced to date. Prudent financial management is evident through well-established financial planning, consistent unqualified value for money audit opinions and a healthy level of reserves (£7.5m). It is well led by an experienced and knowledgeable finance team. A long-term strategic approach to finances is adopted which is demonstrated with the ten-year medium-term financial strategy (MTFS), although given the volatility in local

government finances, it is unclear how meaningful assumptions on future funding streams can be made over a such a long time

Officers and members are well informed on the council's financial position, indeed, the peer team found this to be the dominant narrative. It is fair to say the council does face a financial challenge. There has been a marked increase in the funding gap (savings yet to be identified and delivered over the course of the MTFS) it faces with particular pressures from waste services, temporary accommodation and the outstanding local plan. The gap in February 2021 was £475,000 and the gap today is £2.15m, of which £1.5m needs to be delivered over the next three years.

TMBC have delivered £3.5m savings since the inception of the savings and transformation strategy in 2015/16. Of the current savings target there has been some slippage in delivery, as referenced earlier in the report, a robust system of performance monitoring and progress tracking would improve the governance and assurance on the delivery of savings.

The focus to date on bridging the financial gap has been on cost reduction, which was within council control rather than relying on income generation or a more explicit commercial approach. In the past this has delivered balanced budgets and the financial approach has meant TMBC holds no debt. The peer team heard from a number of sources that the identification of savings is becoming more difficult, with a need to look closer at possible reductions in the generosity of statutory services. Members have an appetite to participate in the generation of identifying savings or income, a joint member and officer task force could provide a space for this collaborative working to generate ideas.

The peer team viewed the current financial approach as careful and judicious but one that would benefit from revisiting its ambitions and priorities and should question whether the predominant cuts and savings focus is sustainable. The council could consider developing a more commercial approach focused on increasing the income it can generate. In doing so diversifying the ways in meeting the funding gap it faces rather than a reliance on service level savings. The peer team did pick up on an instinctive hesitance towards commercialisation: [we] "*are not predilected to taking risks*" especially with regards to investment. However, if TMBC wishes to deliver meaningful transformation and be a leader for the place, investment will be required.

This ambition was evident too: “*we have got to look at some income generation opportunities particularly with our existing assets.*”

The council will need to be clear how it wants to develop its approach to the commercial agenda, and whether it needs additional skills and capacity to deliver this. By developing an investment strategy this could give structure to this activity, by providing a strategic framework, opportunities and risks could be properly considered.

TMBC seems to gravitate towards a worse-case scenarios mindset, warning of the consequences of poor financial management which is the dominate narrative. The council has shown good practice in presenting a paper to the overview and scrutiny committee and cabinet on learning lessons from Northamptonshire County Council’s intervention report, but it must not become paralysed by risk. It would be positive to see an equivalent paper on some of the best practice and innovation from the sector and how to enact that within TMBC.

TMBC plays a leading role in the West Kent Partnership and up until recently operated a shared building control service with Sevenoaks District Council. TMBC has been described as “*a great partner to work with*” and “*punching above its weight.*” The peer team felt that generally shared services across West Kent were underdeveloped, and with TMBC being an attractive organisation to partner with should consider partnering with organisations where shared aims can be delivered at a larger, most cost-effective scale. While the peer team recognised that sharing service with councils is not always cost effective, the council should continue to fully explore all opportunities and the range of options available to them.

TMBC recognise that particularly following the pandemic the need to make a strategic decision on the size of its office accommodation. The council is in the process of commissioning an independent property consultancy to carry out an appraisal of its sites in the borough which could bring a significant return to the council.

4.5 Capacity for improvement

It was very clear from everyone that the peer team spoke to that stability has been a strength at TMBC for many years. However a new political and financial landscape requires the organisation to adapt the way lead members and officers work together.

Ultimately TMBC needs to agree what kind of council it wants to be, set the corporate narrative, clarify the plan and then finance it.

The peer team heard a number of times about how TMBC has made good progress on digital transformation, which has been a real success. However, in striving to do “*digital by default*”, and deliver a financial saving, it is important the customer is not squeezed out. The peer team heard a number of times, that in delivering digital by default, some customers were finding it increasingly difficult to engage with the council and further analysis of the impact on service provision and customer interaction should be undertaken.

People the peer team spoke to said, there was scope for the council to take on more risk and be innovative. One source said: “*TMBC is happy to present savings opportunities but less so investment opportunities*” going on to say, “*proposals and initiatives are stress tested to death*”. The council has a director with transformation in their job title, but there is no team or resource to deliver transformation. Instead officer groups are pulled from across the council, lacking time to devote to projects and made up of what was described to the peer team as ‘*dabblers*’ rather than specialists.

Meaningful ‘transformation’ requires investment, creativity and expertise. If this does not exist in the organisation, then the peer team suggests bringing it in. There is an opportunity to recruit, reorientate and inject fresh ideas to meet the future challenges of the organisation. The peer team would also suggest that when new people join the organisation, actively encourage them to challenge the way the council does things to help breathe fresh energy into the way business is done and reorientate the council.

The peer team heard a number of times that change does not come naturally to some managers in the organisation and that they “*need to be dragged to adopt change*.” Staff need to be proactively engaged in shaping change and presented as an opportunity to develop and be involved in areas of the council that they might not have done before. This approach can instil trust, as well as help to maintain good will and buy in from staff. To underpin this, training will be essential in helping to develop the skills and culture of the organisation, and should be looked at as part of the council’s workforce strategy,

There is a need to strengthen and refocus the enabling services such as HR and communications that are going to help make the change. The peer team recognised that there has been progress with the recruitment of a head of communications and the development of the new website. However the peer team heard that the communications team is not focusing on core business, instead often servicing customer service requests on social media. In doing this, the communications team is not focused on strategically creating a narrative and is inhibiting the team's capacity to proactively seek opportunities to tell TMBC's story. This is evidenced by the lack of positive headlines about Tonbridge and Malling as a place in the press and social media.

Succession planning and the longevity of TMBC's workforce has been an asset. However while having staff with experience is a positive, a number of people that the peer team spoke to questioned if the organisation was "*stable but stale.*" The peer team were told "*the notion that people will not want to be here their whole career is just incomprehensible*" and "*if you're here for five years, you're probably here for life.*" The peer team also heard 'grow your own' stories about staff who had been specifically handpicked to succeed when long standing staff leave. However as suggested earlier, while it is good to have experienced hands, it is important to bring in new people with a fresh outlook. With a number of staff having worked for the organisation over 20 plus years, there is a continuity risk when long standing colleagues leave. The peer team found the current workforce strategy was more compliance focused than forward thinking about how to shape the workforce in the future. A more strategic approach would help the council understand how to address the balance of having an experienced workforce and identify any skills gaps through recruitment or upskilling current staff.

Going forward, it was good to see that the council has developed a plan and is piloting how staff will work post COVID-19. The peer team heard that a number of staff have found working at home difficult. As well as staff, the risk and impact faced during the pandemic is the breakdown of the informal relationships of members and officers. The peer team would urge the council to accelerate their plans and be more intentional now about bringing people back together so colleagues can work together, and members and officers can reconnect and rebuild.

It was good to see that a plan has also emerged for temporary accommodation. The



peer team recognised the organisation has a committed and motivated team to deliver the plan. The team urges the organisation to make sure expectations about what can be achieved and when are realistic and shared by the housing managers, the management team, members and cabinet. There is a risk the work that needs to be done gets clogged up in the council's decision-making process when there is a need to resource and deliver now.

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 the LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a six-month 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 for the South East, is the main contact between your authority and the LGA. Will is available to discuss any further support the council requires – william.brooks@local.gov.uk

Annex 1: signposting and best practice examples

CHANGE IN LEADER SUPPORT – FIVE FREE DAYS

- Top team workshops
- Governance Review
- Communications Peer Challenge
- **Internal communications** – Tandridge District Council has been commended on their internal communications function. Giuseppina Valenza, Head of Communications and Customer Services (gvalenza@tandridge.gov.uk) would be happy to discuss the approach her councils takes and advise on some recommended areas for improvement.
- **Place branding/marketing** – The LGA has funding for some bespoke support for councils to develop a new place brand/narrative. Using the LGA's experienced associates to advise and assist in the development of a new strategy. Developing the story of Tonbridge and Malling. [Place marketing: Telling the story of your place in a way that works for everyone | Local Government Association](#) If interested in some bespoke support contact Harry Parker (harry.parker@local.gov.uk)
- **Future Comms** interprets Government Communications Service standards and guidance and applies it to local government context: [#FutureComms - building local public services for the future through modern communications | Local Government Association](#)
- Strategic communications [Strategic communications in local government – the challenges and opportunities | Local Government Association](#) (defines the purpose of communications in a council)
- What good looks like [What good looks like – the conditions and skills needed for success | Local Government Association](#)
- **Engagement** standards are set in New Conversations: [New Conversations Guide refresh 11.pdf \(local.gov.uk\)](#) – toolkit that defines inform, engage, converse to help focus attention on engaging instead of often, currently, just

informing/broadcasting

- Commissioning an LGA Communications Review - <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-site-communications-support-offer>

Future ways of working / workforce

- **Future ways of working** - Hyndburn Borough Council have given consideration managing the multitude of issues that sit within future ways of working Kirsten Burnett, Head of Policy and Organisational Development (Kirsten.Burnett@hyndburnbc.gov.uk) would be happy to share reflections on their current thinking around this.
- **National Graduate Development Programme** – a two-year management trainee programme offering councils a unique opportunity to grow their own local government leaders. A good way of bringing fresh talent and ideas into an organisation - <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/national-graduate-development-programme-202122#next-generation-leadership>
- **Mental wellbeing support for staff** – Oxford City Council worked with Mind in better equipping line managers and staff to understand and talk about mental health issues at work - <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/equipping-line-managers-support-employee-mental-health-work>

Performance monitoring / benchmarking

- **LG Inform** – a free benchmarking service for local authorities. It contains latest (and historical data) across over 9,000 individual metrics: from over 45 sources and 250 data collections - <https://lginform.local.gov.uk/>