Corporate Peer Challenge
Rochford District Council
18 – 21 November 2019
Feedback Report
1. Executive Summary

Rochford District Council (RDC) is one of 14 councils in Essex, covering an area of just under 17,000 hectares and falls within the Thames Gateway regeneration area. The district is bounded by the North Sea to the East and the River Crouch to the North. RDC shares land boundaries with Castle Point, Basildon and Southend on Sea. The district also shares marine boundaries with Maldon and Chelmsford. The landscape is rich in biodiversity, heritage and natural beauty with two Ramsar sites (Foulness and the Crouch and Roach Estuaries), three Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), four Local Nature Reserves, 328 listed buildings, 10 conservation areas and 6 Scheduled Ancient Monuments. A further 12,481 hectares of the district is designated as metropolitan green belt, which adds further complexity to development and growth in the area.

The district is home to a population of around 87,000 people who mainly reside across the three towns of Hockley, Rayleigh and Rochford and surrounding smaller villages. There is a high percentage of home ownership (around 83%), few pockets of deprivation, average life expectancy and a higher than average employment rate. Almost 20% of employment is in the public sector and a significant proportion of residents use the good transport links to commute out to London, Southend and other neighbouring large towns. The district is home to the important employment hubs of London Southend Airport and the Airport Business Park.

As in 2012 (when the last LGA peer challenge took place) a Conservative administration is in place with a majority of 12. A new leader, deputy leader and executive team were appointed in May 2019 and officer leadership has changed twice since the last LGA visit, with the current Managing Director taking up the role in 2016. There have also been changes to the Leadership Team (LT) which is now fully resourced. In recognition of these changes there is a need for significant team development across both LT and the Executive. This would benefit the council in helping to develop and define a shared vision, priorities and resourcing plan, along with clarifying roles, responsibilities and accountability for these. Increasing the opportunities for wider engagement with all members is also an important area for development. The council is at a pivotal moment, with mission critical projects around assets, growth, transformation and procurement. Developing a strong, united political and managerial leadership is needed to successfully take the council forward over the next five years in line with the medium-term financial strategy (MTFS).

A new business plan is in draft form for 2020 and beyond. This urgently needs to be completed and further internal consultation would ensure it is fully outcome focussed, outward looking and sustainable. The business plan must be aligned to the MTFS to ensure adequate resources are in place to deliver the priorities. The ‘golden thread’ needs reinforcing from the business plan, through to the MTFS to service plans and appraisals, to help staff recognise how they are contributing to the council’s overall vision.

Rochford has a small but dedicated workforce who are passionate and loyal to public service. Economic development, change champions, digital and democratic services staff were all specifically praised by partners, staff and members. The connect transformation programme has ensured staff are kept fully briefed and are able to contribute to...
transformational projects within the council. The connect transformation programme should be expanded to include the people plan, IT strategy and financial plan.

There are examples of good practice and strong performance across the council. The reduction in bed and breakfast accommodation, open doors pilot, leading on health and wellbeing, discover 2020 and performance in recycling are just a few of the areas the council can be proud of. Performance in regulatory and customer serving services is however below standard, hindered by significant IT infrastructure and software issues. In the short term, RDC needs to urgently address these issues to give staff the best chance at getting the basics right. Over the longer term an IT strategy and roadmap should be developed, supported by the MTFS, to direct and communicate the council’s ambitions for its digital future. This should be aligned to the ambitions of the connect programme.

The council is very lean, requiring additional specialist skills and capacity if it is to meet the challenging timetable for procurement projects, asset programme and the possible development of a garden community. The council needs to address these capacity issues and build in programme management systems and capacity to manage and oversee key projects, provide risk and financial assurance. Housing strategy is another area which needs resourcing if the council is to meet its ambitions for housing delivery and growth. There are good examples of shared services with other organisations across the council which should be developed further to incorporate these functions. Every option for increasing capacity needs to be explored.

There are ambitious plans for realising assets, saving money through procurement, moving to new office accommodation, becoming more agile and regenerating the district. Whilst these ambitions are admirable RDC must ensure there are robust financial plans to deliver these programmes. The council, therefore, needs to develop a medium to long term financial strategy that underpins its business plan aspirations and make some tough decisions in the MTFS, on how it will address capacity and enable future development and/or investment. The establishment of member working groups to look at the options for raising additional income is a good first step and these should be supported to bring about change. Members will also need to establish the council’s risk appetite, tackle the issue of borrowing in the current economic climate and consider borrowing to advance current investment which will produce future savings. Alongside this is the need for a financial resilience strategy to develop contingency plans for the “what if’s” and potential widening of the £1m budget gap in 2025.

RDC needs to be clear about what it wants from the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA) and other partnerships. There are good reasons to invest in the district, but the council needs to understand and develop its story of place and clarify expectations on what the council wants and what it can give in return. It is important partners understand RDC’s aspirations. Partners are keen to work with RDC and targeted investments have been successfully sought - £4.5m full fibre connectivity and £23m to the airport business park. This should give the council confidence to enter partnership arrangements on equal footing.
2. **Key recommendations**

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

1) Establish clarity of purpose for engagement with ASELA with clear objectives linked to the council’s business plan priorities
2) Develop the story of place to lead and promote the council’s ambition for Rochford
3) Complete the business plan for presentation to full council in February 2020 aligned to financial strategy and budget
4) Establish capacity aligned to the council’s priorities, for example to help develop a housing strategy and ambitions around growth
5) Build programme management capacity to deliver the council’s ambitions and procurement programme over the MTFS period
6) Complete IT migration to the Azure cloud and develop a new IT strategy
7) Deliver a five-year MTFS with a multi-year approach to council tax including headroom to build capacity
8) Develop a financial resilience strategy and establish the councils risk appetite for borrowing and investment in its priorities
9) Invest in leadership development for the executive, the leadership team, scrutiny and the whole council
10) Continue the development of the “connect” programme to embrace the people plan and develop an active communication strategy

3. **Summary of the Peer Challenge approach**

The peer team

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

- **Lead peer** - Ian Fytche, Chief Executive, North Kesteven District Council
- **Member Peer** - Cllr Paul Middlebrough, Worcestershire County Council
- **Officer Peer** - Isabel Brittain, Head of Strategic Finance & Property, East Hertfordshire District Council
- **Officer Peer** - Julie Slatter, Director of Corporate Services & Commissioning, Selby District Council
- **Peer Challenge Manager** - Kirsty Human, LGA
Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges cover. These are the areas we believe are critical to councils’ performance and improvement:

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

2. Leadership of Place: Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?

3. 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?

4. 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?

5. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

6. In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to consider three focused questions reviewing the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA) partnership:

   i. How can Rochford contribute to ASEL A and ensure its voice is heard?
   ii. Is Rochford viewed as an effective partner by ASEL A members?
   iii. Is Rochford sufficiently leveraging its leadership role in the interests of improved outcomes for residents?

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 current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge every four to five years. RDC Council had a Corporate Peer Challenge in November 2012. Where relevant to do so, findings from that previous peer challenge have been referenced in this report.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent four days onsite at RDC, 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 more than 35 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.

- Collectively spent more than 187 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than five weeks at RDC.

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 (21 November 2019). 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.
Feedback

3.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

The council understands its geographical place and the varying land uses within. There is a clear spatial strategy for the district, which provides an overview of the district and how it plans to grow. Maps of the district covered the walls in many rooms across the council and help to show the positioning of RDC within its wider context. What wasn’t as clear were the connections RDC has to its neighbours, the county council and South Essex as a whole. The peer team felt there were opportunities to elevate the council’s ambitions with partners, building on the work on the South Essex Plan and the potential for a garden settlement.

RDC is currently at the point of transition between its old and new business plans. There has been some consultation with the public, members and staff, and the priorities in the new plan are smarter and more outcome focussed that in the previous plan. However, further refinement of the new business plan is needed to take it from its embryonic state to something that reflects the critical areas of focus for RDC over the next three years. Members, officers, the public and partners need to be bought along on this journey together and have ownership of the plan. Whilst there is a commitment to the ASELA partnership and moving it forward, be clear about what you want to achieve for RDC its communities and South Essex within your business plan.

It was positive to see the creation of working parties to take forward priority proposals, for example, carbon reduction, assets, CCTV and car parking. The efforts of these groups need to feed into the new business plan and service plans across the council. At present there is no mention of climate outcomes within the draft business plan, yet a motion was passed by members to address this earlier in the year. Priorities need to be adequately funded and resources allocated within the budget. The links between the business plan and budget/MTFS need strengthening to ensure the council can fund what is required whilst still maintaining a balanced budget. There is a window of opportunity before budget setting in February to make adjustments, reflect feedback from consultation and align the resources accordingly.

There is a developing but inconsistent approach across RDC to service planning, appraisals and communications around the business plan. The peer team did see good examples in the people and communities directorate but only 40% of staff currently feel they have an alignment between their priorities, their service and the councils priorities. Developing a “golden thread” from the business plan through service plans and into individual objectives in appraisals is needed and will strengthen staff understanding in this area and in turn deliver better outcomes for residents as impact can be seen and measured.

There is no doubt that RDC is ambitious, particularly around the growth agenda, housing and economic development. The peer team heard positive feedback from several sources on how by strengthening the economic development function, RDC had
opened doors, been successful with grants and was making an impact beyond what had been achieved in the past. There is now a need to develop the strategic capacity to articulate the ambitions around housing, growth/development and infrastructure. If RDC is to be clear on what it wants from future growth ambitions, it needs additional resources to develop strategies around this and commit to funding this by whatever means are necessary.

3.2 Leadership of Place

The council is to be commended on how its leadership of place has continued throughout austerity and in the face of depleted resources. The set up of town centre task forces for Rochford, Rayleigh and Hockley involving the wider community businesses, members and residents is a clear example of how to create a fully inclusive vision for place that can be shared by all, particularly in the fast-changing nature of town centres and retail over recent years. This approach needs to be well resourced in order to fully leverage your leadership and to start producing development/regeneration plans to shape the towns over the coming years. Be bold and take the lead on this regeneration. Consider how RDC could invest in the town centres to give confidence to other interested parties that any risks can be overcome.

The council needs to develop clarity of purpose around its vision for growth in order to maximise the opportunities available, particularly around a possible garden community, business park and strategic infrastructure (A127). Developing a clear “place narrative” for RDC, linked to the vision which articulates what the district will look and feel like over the longer term and how people can engage with it, will help to ensure RDC is in control of its future rather than a junior partner. RDC and Southend Borough Council have already worked together on a Joint Area Action Plan for the airport and Environs. This approach has worked well and could be replicated for further joint work, particularly in relation to meeting growth and housing ambitions.

The Rochford/Southend garden community is one of nine being proposed/planned across Essex (23 nationally) to deliver approximately 86,345 homes. This movement creates opportunities for RDC in terms of resources, funding, expertise and county wide infrastructure/services. By pooling resources RDC could increase capacity and resilience to its planning function that will enable its priorities to be met without losing its identity. Playing to the council’s strengths and using those of others is likely to attract external investment into the infrastructure requirements so greatly needed, including improvements to the road and public transport network.

The Council's latest evidence suggests that a total of between 7,200 and 7,800 homes would need to be built over the next 20 years if the District was to meet its full, objectively assessed, housing needs. Sites that are already allocated for housing development, from adopted plans, are expected to provide around 2,600 new homes by 2025. In order to meet this need, the council must clarify its strategy for housing, affordable housing and infrastructure within the constraints the geography of the district affords (74% of the district is designated greenbelt). As it stands, only one in every six
households on the housing register are ever likely to be rehoused. The council must develop its resources to match its ambition for these key priorities.

Providing capacity in priority areas has already proved its value to the council. The economic development function has in partnership:

- Secured £4.5m to extend full fibre connectivity to rural and public sector sites in the district.
- Developed and funded a skills and career opportunities programme with secondary schools in the district.
- Successfully applied to the governments “open doors” pilot to develop an empty property in Rochford town centre into a free community space.
- Delivered free business events and signed up over 1340 businesses to the council’s weekly “tell me more” bulletin.

This should give the council confidence that investing in key areas, can and has proved to be successful.

The council is a respected partner - the peer team spoke to several who all said RDC engaged well with them on strategic issues. These included Essex County Council, Essex Police, the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) and neighbouring authorities. It was said that RDC “punches above its weight” in relation to the health and wellbeing agenda. The publication of the Essex joint health and well being strategy last year has enabled RDC to re-engage with partners and lead this agenda on behalf of RDC and Castle Point DC within the wider Essex forum.

Partnership working is delivering positive outcomes. The recent work with Sanctuary to provide temporary accommodation for residents in bed and breakfast and support for the homeless has been widely praised. The youth council is actively engaged and working with the council to improve its communications to younger residents. The Discover 2020 programme is another success for the council in promoting its tourism offer, involving the wider community and celebrating the history and legacy of the place. Why just celebrate for one month, could this be considered a year of celebrations involving community activities every month?

RDC and Southend Borough Council have been successful in attracting external funding and investment - £23m from the SELEP for the Airport business park. Partners including ASELA, want to work with the council to develop future projects. The peer team recommends several “oven ready” projects are prepared in order to maximise the council’s chances of being successful following future government funding announcements.

### 3.3 Organisational leadership and governance

Following elections in May 2019, although the council remained conservative led, the political leadership of the council changed and a new leader, deputy leader, cabinet and portfolio holder positions were appointed. Six months on, relationships are still forming and would benefit from external support. There is a need to strengthen leadership team
(LT) and executive team leadership through development to build a common vision for the authority. RDC need to take time to step back and be clear about your roles and responsibilities as the ambition for the next four years is huge. Every component part of it is mission critical so there must be the trust and confidence between members and officers that you are in it together for the long haul to get the job done. Some honest and open conversations need to take place if you are to achieve this.

The past few years has seen many new, first time councillors elected to the council. RDC has an active member development programme, but the support new members require should not be underestimated. Review the induction programme for new members to include a whole council approach. Tours of the offices, introductions to service managers, familiarisation with the constitution and codes of conduct would all be welcome additions to the current programme of activity.

The minority political groups on the council do not feel sufficiently engaged. Despite the council setting up events to share and discuss the business plan with all members, these were poorly attended by non-conservative councillors – all councillors need an opportunity to engage. The peer team concluded that some externally facilitated sessions for members of all parties will help to strengthen areas of agreement – ideally around the vision for RDC whilst still allowing for political and policy differences to be respected and understood. The council also needs to strengthen the scrutiny function which members said does not play a positive role in policy development. The use of formal questions and notices of motion at full council has been limited. Training in methods of raising important issues at full council could enhance the involvement of minority political groups and increase backbench member engagement. This was an issue raised in the 2012 corporate peer challenge and despite several efforts overview and Scrutiny is still not effective.

The peer team heard from several members and officers who welcomed a review of the constitution. Modernising the constitution to reflect the council’s ambition - particularly member/officer scheme of delegation will help to deliver the vision, aims and speed up decision making. Work is needed to identify the councils risk appetite and the parameters that are acceptable to members. Officers need to involve members in the development of appropriate processes, which will help them understand and be confident the right decisions are being made through delegation.

The connect transformation programme which is engaging all staff in the debate around culture change and new ways of working has been well received by staff and is a valuable forum for RDC to articulate a vision for the council which involves all staff and members and takes the whole council forward. The peer team heard from many staff who valued the “connect” days with almost 100% attendance. The engagement method used for the connect programme should be the preferred method for future engagement on council wide issues such as place and vision.

The council enjoys a good working relationship with the trade union. Results from staff surveys in 2016 and 2017 reinforce the positive working culture at RDC with over 90% response rate to both surveys. Comments from staff include; “I am regularly given
opportunities and encouraged to communicate/express my views which makes me feel valued and a key member of my team.” “Love working for the council and the local people that we all play a part in helping.”

Processes are in place to monitor performance, manage risk and oversee projects and programmes. Fortnightly meetings between the leader/deputy and managing director/strategic director serve as a useful sounding board to highlight potential issues. Quarterly reports are taken to the executive for public accountability. The quarter one performance lists 18 indicators, 7 are red, 6 amber and 5 green. It appears from the minutes that no discussion took place on these even though over 70% were below target. A healthy discussion and challenge to officers on these would give confidence that issues are being addressed and better outcomes will be achieved. If the council is to succeed it needs to ensure that both officers and members improve performance of core services and manage this effectively going forward.

The council has a large asset programme which is overseen by a project board. This is the biggest project in RDCs history and needs to have the necessary expertise at all levels to ensure a successful outcome. The peer team were impressed with the achievements to date but concluded, programme management capacity needed to be unlocked and a risk-based approach developed for the work – this echoes the recommendations from the Local Partnerships health check in February 2019 which the peer team urge you to adopt and urgently deliver.

The peer team heard from many sources that RDC is a member led authority. They also heard a few different definitions for what this meant. It is right and proper for RDC to be member led but there needs to be clarity around what this means. Take some time as LT and the executive together with backbench members to develop a common definition that underpins future leadership and avoids any misunderstanding.

3.4 Financial planning and viability

RDC is a small district authority with a revenue budget slightly in excess of £10m, which is highly dependent on funding through Council Tax income. Spending is well controlled with small underspends year on year. There is a five-year medium-term financial strategy (MTFS) and the council has a robust approach to reserves, with an appropriately sized General Fund Reserve.

The MTFS delivers a five-year challenging view, projecting a £1m gap over that period. Whilst there are always short-term pressures to manage, the council needs to make decisions to back up the MTFS over the multi-year period. This will require a robust financial plan that delivers on the identified savings or generates income to “plug the gap” and give the council financial reassurance. Underspends in current years should be carefully considered given the projected financial deficit in future years.

The economic and political climate is volatile. Following the general election in December there could be changes to local government finances which may make RDCs
situation more challenging. It would be wise to consider a “plan b” in the shape of a financial resilience strategy, outlining the council’s response to the “what ifs”. This could identify RDCs approach to further savings, income generation, investments and borrowing. Conversations on increasing fees and charges and the introduction of green waste charges need to be had, as viable options to income generation. The strategy should also address the approach to the council tax base – an area of finance the council can control. By making decisions on these issues over a multi-year period it would give the council confidence of a longer-term cumulative increase in funding.

Engagement on the proposed budget drew responses from 160 residents, from which views around reduced leadership costs, members allowances, pursuing additional income streams and where allowable licensing fees and charges have been taken forward. The council hopes to engage more residents in future budget setting processes by using a new consultation tool. Members have also been involved in the budget setting process with an “away day”. Presentations to members should be organised to ensure all members have an opportunity to receive briefings to fit in with their personal circumstances.

The council received positive feedback on the 2018/19 close down process. Internal and external audit have no concerns and the process for audit is strengthened by having shared resources with Basildon and using external independent specialists to audit certain functions for example IT infrastructure.

The invest to save initiative around temporary accommodation has delivered savings and better customer outcomes – quarter two projections show there are now no families in bed and breakfast accommodation. This should give the council confidence to replicate and develop further. The council has a large growth ambition which elsewhere would be underpinned by an investment strategy. The peer team challenges the council to consider its risk appetite and answer key questions around targeted borrowing in order to deliver on its ambitions for growth.

A series of time critical procurement exercises are on the horizon (waste, street scene, leisure) which need to be planned and delivered well if RDC is to deliver better outcomes in the community and financial stability. Building these into the MTFS and resourcing them sufficiently should again deliver long-term benefits.

The asset strategy is a bold and exciting piece of work. The largest project the council has undertaken. It is a long-term project which carries significant risk. There are good governance arrangements in place to monitor its progress, but more work needs to be done on the scenario planning. For example, will the planning process go smoothly, will an investor want to take on all the buildings, will the council reap the financial benefits it has projected, or will there be a shortfall? Each scenario doesn’t have to mean the end of the project, if planned well. There are many different routes to achieving the same end goal, they just need to be thought through and built into the process.
3.5 Capacity to deliver

RDC has a committed, positive and dedicated workforce. Leaders should not forget to be visible and accessible in the organisation and to recognise and celebrate RDC staff. Some officers are really delivering change and leading the council to a new future in the face of adversity – the council lost 35% of its staff four years ago. However, this is not consistent across the organisation. The change champions exuded a positivity and energy that every organisation would be proud of. Staff survey results are overall very complementary with quotes such as “RDC is an understanding, flexible and fair employer” and “I work with a fantastic, hardworking, conscientious and caring team who support each other.”

Performance across the council is varied. The waste and recycling service are exceeding expectations with 60.9% of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting (annual 2018/19) the mean based on CIPFA near neighbour’s comparator was 45.97%. Whereas, based on the same comparative group, it takes 14 days to process housing benefit new claims and change events, where the mean is 5 days (Q1 2019/20). Performance is also an issue within the planning service where 65% of minor planning applications are being processed within 8 weeks against the mean of 84% (Q4 2018/19). A recent Planning Advisory Service (PAS) review suggested a number of recommendations, some of which have been implemented. Review those outstanding recommendations and execute as quickly as possible to help this service improve further. Performance is below target in services where data entry, systems and IT functionality are key. It appeared to the peer team that although the council is lean in terms of its capacity, the knock-on effects of IT and other issues had impacted on the ability of staff to meet performance expectations.

The peer team heard from many different people about the issues with IT infrastructure and software. It is evident the council has worked hard to address these issues and moving to the Azure cloud (and managed services) has started to have an impact. However, some individuals are experiencing higher levels of system downtime and this is clearly having an impact on performance and service delivery. Capacity to deliver features in the negative comments in the staff survey, for example, “there are insufficient resources for me to do my work and insufficient resources for other staff to do the work I would like them to undertake.” Short-term problems urgently need resolving and must be owned and managed by LT. The issues can not wait until the asset programme is complete. In the longer term the development of a roadmap and IT strategy detailing the direction of travel, investment priorities, resourcing and timescales needs to be produced. Weaving this work into the connect programme, which has credibility with staff, good methods of engagement and a clear timetable staff can be reassured of the what, when and how to win back hearts and minds.

In respect of housing, the council has achieved a huge reduction in bed and breakfast accommodation this year, down by 81%. Data for quarter one 2019/20 shows there are currently five households in bed and breakfast, all with move on plans and 12 in nightly lets. The challenge now is how to move families from temporary accommodation into secure homes. Sanctuary have been providing around 40 properties per year and are
projecting 61 for 2019/20. Strengthening the housing service with a strategy function and aligning it with the planning service would enable the council to be clear on how it plans to meet need, who will be delivering and what resource/investment this will require. This information will also be valuable in formulating the councils wants from any partnership arrangements around growth, the garden community and ASELA.

With an ambitious delivery programme (Assets, procurement, LDF, IT) comes the need for resources. Specialist skills in project management, assurance and commercial are required to ensure the council maximises its opportunities for these programmes. Where the council has invested in skills and capacity – finance and digital – there has been enhanced productivity.

The Green Gateway Trading company is a step into the commercial arena which can be built upon. To take full advantage of its potential the peer team recommends some external advice is taken. Similarly, with aspirations around housing development and the need to move people from temporary accommodation the council needs to consider its role as developer. The housing company options should be revisited in light of new legislation and numerous different operating models across the country.

The council has a good track record of investing in training and development. The revised people plan takes this further by introducing new initiatives to incentivise staff, attract and retain high quality staff, encourage talent and develop resilience. Although there was a high turnover of staff last year (30) the council recruited the same number and sickness absence remained below average at 6.2 days. The peer team encourage the council to build on the successful connect programme and embrace the people plan.

The capacity theme features throughout many aspects of this report. RDC is a small, lean district council but the numbers in themselves are not the issue. Staff are dedicated and want to achieve the best outcomes for residents. They need to be provided with the technology that enables this and allows the council to get the basics right. Additional resources are required for the large-scale priority projects to ensure the council maximises its opportunities, delivers the best outcomes and mitigates risks. This additional resource needs to be financed, but there are many options available to RDC. The council has a good track record of working in partnership to share resources (audit, finance, parking, council tax etc.) Consider the options to increase capacity by looking at further shared service/partnership arrangements - partners want to work with RDC.

4.6 ASELA

The council really does have an opportunity to benefit from the South Essex initiative, ASLEA. There is strong support from partners, despite some local government media reports, to make the partnership work. RDC needs to be clear what it wants from the partnership in terms of the investment prospects for the district, deliver clear information to the wider group and build capacity to take actions forward.
The senior leadership of RDC has been driving the partnership until now and this is commendable. However, considering recent political changes, discussions around governance and decisions on future investment priorities, now is the time to widen the input on ASELA to other senior officers and members and build a team approach to engagement with ASELA. The next round of service planning should be used to direct resources towards the partnership.

RDC has good political links with the leader being a member of the SELEP and Essex county council. Utilise this advantage to drive the conversation and leverage benefit for Rochford by being clear about priorities. Understand where the council can influence and contribute, what you are prepared to negotiate on and what are show stoppers.

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.

To support you in your improvement journey the Peer Team have identified a number of key recommendations, some of which you may already have in hand. We welcome your response to these recommendations within the next three months through the development of an action plan.

Your Principal Adviser Rachel Litherland Rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk will be in contact to assist the council going forward and to provide additional support, advice and guidance on any areas for development and improvement and she will be happy to discuss this.

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 2 years.

Next Corporate Peer Challenge
The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the Council will commission their next Peer Challenge before 2024.