

# **Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review**

**Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council**

**9 October 2023**



## 1.0 Executive summary:

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council undertook a full Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in January 2023. The Council's response and Action Plan regarding the findings and recommendations from this review were led by their interim Chief Executive who served in this role from January to October 2023. In October 2023, Members of the Peer Team returned to the Council to discuss progress against these recommendations on the first day for the Council's new permanent Chief Executive. This context is important when considering the response of the organisation in this time, as well as the new opportunities that exist going forward.

The Peer Team recognise that Walsall Council has engaged positively and constructively with the findings of the original Peer Challenge. This is illustrated by the clear Action Plan which was developed in response to the Team's recommendations and presented to Cabinet in March 2023, as well as the update provided to the Team on progress against this Plan. This illustrates that responding to these issues (and wider improvement) is seen as a corporate priority within the Council. The Peer Team recognise that the previous findings of the CPC helped to provide a structure for improvement for the Interim Chief Executive and hope that the considerations of this report support the new Chief Executive to further embed and build on this work.

The Peer Team heard that the Council has made good progress against several of the key recommendations presented to them, this includes a renewed commitment to issues of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion. It is also apparent that the Council has deliberately phased their work in responding to some of these recommendations, including those on flexible mobile working, and the responsibilities of senior officers across the Council to enable the incoming Chief Executive to shape these decisions as part of the next phase of the Council's Transformation. Going forward, the Team recognise that there is potential for the Council to corral some of these recommendations together through the development of a new Council Plan, setting out more clarity on the next stage of transformation, communicating the deliverables of the Proud Programme, and defining the role and contribution of the Council to We are Walsall 2040.

The Local Elections in May 2023 did not impact on the political control of Walsall Council, with the distribution of seats across parties remaining similar to those pre-election, with the Conservatives holding 37, Labour 20, and there being one Independent Councillor and one belonging to no-political party. Whilst there is continuity in the political leadership of the Council, there have been some changes made at a Cabinet level, and the Council should consider the ongoing support and training needs which could support those with new remits. There has also been the creation of new non-Executive roles as "Cabinet Support Assistants". The Council will need to consider the support required for these roles and be

aware of the need for potential changes or amendments to maximise the benefit from these new positions alongside the wider ten members of Cabinet.

Previous recommendations that have been presented to the Council still remain relevant to the organisation. This includes clarity on issues of flexible-mobile-working, as whilst the Council continues to promote a 'customer first' approach, there remains a need to consider the relationship of remote working, community engagement, member/officer relationships, as well as customer experience. Furthermore, the Council recognises that they have a number of vacancies at a senior level, and the opportunity this presents to the new Chief Executive to consider the senior structures and skills which are required for the organisation moving forward.

The Peer Team made a number of recommendations to the Council on issues of internal controls. Through our Progress Review, it is clear that Walsall Council has maintained their previous effective approaches to financial planning and reporting, as illustrated in the preparation and publication of their external audit accounts for 2022-2023. As issues of inflation and increasing pressures on demand led budgets in Adults and Children's Services continue to affect the wider sector, these approaches will need to be maintained over the coming years.

Finally, the Peer Team heard about the progress that the Council has made on issues of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion since our time onsite in January. It is clear that the organisation has responded well to these findings and has put effort and resources into making improvements. Achieving the benefits and positive impact of these efforts will require ongoing support and sponsorship from senior political and managerial leaders to take this forward and demonstrate support for this important theme of work.

## 2.0 Background:

Central to the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Process is ongoing engagement with Councils regarding issues and recommendations presented through Peer Team's time onsite, and through Corporate Peer Challenge Reports. Therefore, Progress Reviews are designed to take place approximately six months on from the Council's publication of their original CPC report and supporting Action Plan. In Walsall, these Reports were presented to Cabinet in March 2023, and therefore, this Review took place seven months following publication, and nine months following the Team's time onsite.

This timing presents the opportunity for the Peer Team to re-engage with Walsall Council, discuss progress, reflect any changes in context, as well as areas for further consideration. Importantly, this Progress Review was designed to build on previous findings rather than repeating previous work or incorporating additional lines of enquiry. To support this

Progress Review, a Scope was agreed with Walsall Council that clustered findings into a number of themes and considered the necessary stakeholders for the Peer Team to meet during a physical revisit to the Council on 9 October 2023.

### 3.0 Peer team, Scope, and Context:

The original CPC in January 2023 was supported by eight Officers and Councillors from across the Local Government sector in England. The full report from the Peer Team is available on the LGA website [here](#) and was also published by Walsall Council alongside their Action Plan for improvement.

- **Lead Peer: Alison McKenzie-Folan:** Chief Executive (Wigan Council).
- **Lead Political Peer:** Cllr Rob Waltham: Leader (Lincolnshire Council).
- **Officer Peer:** Ellen Vernon: (Local Government Association).
- **Peer Challenge Manager:** Matt Dodd (Local Government Association).

The Progress Review included the Council developing a self-assessment of their progress to- date against their Action Plan which was shared with the wider Peer Team in advance to support the development of appropriate questions. This document was clear and concise, and the Peer Team would encourage it to be published alongside this report to support cross-referencing. The Peer Team also considered the Council's published financial reporting ahead of the Progress Review, considering publicly available reports including the Council's Budget, Medium Term Financial Strategy and Quarterly Monitoring Reports.

The timetable for the Peer Team's time onsite included a scene setting meeting to consider changes in context, several 1-2-1 interviews, as well as focus groups across key themes from the CPC Report. The key findings and feedback of the Progress Review were shared with Senior Political and Managerial Leaders of the Council through a facilitated conversation at the end of the day.

The original Corporate Peer Challenge made a series of 11 recommendations to support the Council's ongoing improvement journey (these are contained in full in Appendix 1.0 to this report). For the purposes and structure of this report, these have been clustered under the following themes and headings:

- **Theme One:** Organisational Development, Human Resources, and Culture.
- **Theme Two:** Change, Transformation, and New Ways of Working.
- **Theme Three:** Internal Controls and Processes.

Whilst this six-month review focuses on the progress made against the Council's Action

Plan, it also allows consideration of changes in the Council's operating environment over this time. This can often mean new opportunities or challenges, or wider changes in context since the team were last onsite. As part of this review the Council provided further information on this context, this included the outcomes of the one-third Borough elections in May 2023, as well as the appointment of a new permanent Chief Executive. Finally, it is recognised that many of the recommendations originally presented by the Team spoke to long-term issues, therefore, Team Members recognise the realities of what can be achieved in seven months and were pleased to hear about Walsall's plans for the future.

## 4.0 Organisational Development, Human Resources, & Culture:

Under this theme, consideration was given to the activity and progress of the Council against the following five recommendations. These recommendations are listed in full in Appendix 1.0, but are summarised below at a headline level:

- There is a framework of Plans and priorities that exist across the council; however, consideration should be given to their alignment and support staff understanding.
- Provide a coordinated approach to issues of EDI to support the workforce to better represent local communities.
- Review the council's approach to flexible working in the round and communicate this clearly to staff.
- Articulate and consider the contribution of Organisational Development to the next stage of the council's transformation.
- Consider the Management Responsibilities of Senior Officers at the council.

The Peer Team recognises that since the original review in January 2023, further progress has been made with regards to the We are Walsall 2040 strategy, this includes further engagement with partners and residents, as well as refining content – with an updated version of the Strategy shared with the Peer Team before arriving onsite. Importantly this Plan was approved by the Council in the summer. The Council have used this Plan to complete a policy and strategy audit to set out a clear 'pipeline' of activity for coming years and to support alignment. The Council is aware that the opportunity now exists to revise and refresh the Council Plan to provide further clarity regarding the role, approach and contribution of Walsall Council as an organisation in delivering these wider strategic goals at a borough wide level.

The original review of the Peer Team contained a number of specific recommendations and challenges for improvement on issues of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion, this included the recommendation to provide a more coordinated approach towards these issues in order for the workforce of the Council to better reflect and represent local communities. It was

encouraging to see that progress has been made in this area. This includes embedding responsibility for these issues corporately with the Policy and Strategy Unit of the Council, and the commitment to develop an overarching Strategy built around issues of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion to build on the content of the Council's Workforce Strategy. This strategy will act as an important first step for making progress and achieving improved outcomes in this area.

A copy of this Workforce Strategy was shared with the Peer Team, and it was appreciated that the first objective in this document is to welcome, develop and advance a diverse mix of individuals, built around the outcome of the workforce better representing the borough. It is clear that further work is planned by the Council on these issues, including consideration of the Equality Framework for Local Government as part of their new Strategy, revised protocols, and increased staff training. The Team was pleased to hear about these actions but continue to challenge the Council for improvements in these areas. Central to these process improvements bringing a tangible impact, will be the demonstrable actions of senior political and managerial leaders visibly demonstrating their commitment and support to these issues. Therefore, the Peer Team would encourage ongoing communication and promotion of this work on a regular basis. Furthermore, the Council may want to consider the potential for further practice of leadership development programmes for staff from underrepresented backgrounds, as well as the potential use of more inclusive recruitment processes.

The Peer Team still heard different perspectives regarding the Council's approach to flexible mobile working. Whilst the team appreciate that these are included in the Council's 'Customer First' approach. The improvements that have been made to the Civic Centre present new opportunities for colleagues to come together in-person, and it is recognised that occupancy in the building is higher than during the Team's original visit. The Team would recommend that the Council continues to be live to this issue including the ongoing inter-dependencies of engagement with Councillors, communities, and colleagues.

The Peer Team appreciates that there have been changes within the structures of the Council's Human Resources since June 2023, and there is ongoing work to improve and bolster the Council's Organisational Development. Given the relatively short-time period since the Peer Team were onsite, this is good progress and has the potential to support the organisation going forward. The Team would encourage the consideration of Organisational Development issues in the development of any new Council Plan in 2024, including the consideration of PLATE Values. A key finding of the Team's previous work was that only 49% of staff had undergone their 'annual conversation' – the Team reiterates the importance of this process in supporting values, behaviours, and priorities to be embedded across the workforce. These conversations are required as a 'first-step' to more reciprocal models of communication with staff.

The Peer Team previously encouraged the Council to ‘consider the management responsibilities of Senior Officers of the Council’. The team appreciate that these structures have served the Council well historically but contained a mixture of service and ‘cross-cutting’ responsibilities. The appointment of a new Chief Executive, as well as key posts at a senior level (Executive Director and Director level) which are currently vacant or filled on an interim basis provide the opportunity to revisit these senior structures holistically. The Team recognise that the Council’s interim Chief Executive has taken the thoughtful decision to use vacancies and interims to provide the incoming permanent Chief Executive with the opportunity to consider what is needed for the next stage of their improvement journey. The Peer Team would encourage the Council to look at these structures in the round, and maximise this opportunity, the Council should not rush to make these decisions, but instead consider the structures and approaches that will be needed for the medium-term over the coming years.

## 5.0 Change, Transformation, and New Ways of Working:

Under this theme, consideration was given to the activity and progress of the Council against the following four recommendations. These recommendations are listed in full in Appendix 1.0, but are summarised below at a headline level:

- Define the content and deliverables that will be included in the ‘Proud’ initiative going forward.
- Consider the knowledge transfer required from the council’s strategic partner to support the newly established Corporate Hub.
- Consider the council’s approach to inclusive growth in delivering the 2022 Economic Strategy and maximising the impact of the ‘Walsall Pound’.
- Maximise the opportunities that are presented to the council through partnership and convening arrangements.

The original review of the Peer Team recognised the progress that has been made by the Council through the Proud Programme. However, the Peer Team heard mixed positions regarding the future of the initiative, with some stating that the programme was closed, others saying that it was now embedded as a ‘way of working’, and some presenting ideas for the next stage and iteration of this work. The Peer Team appreciates that the existing workstreams and governance from this programme are well established and embedded within the Council but would encourage more clarity regarding next steps. This could be supported through an analysis of the programme’s achievements to-date and communicating the closed deliverables and benefits.

Furthermore, there is an exciting opportunity for the Council in designing and delivering their next stage of transformation after the Proud Programme. Given the end of the Council’s

relationship with their Strategic Partner for this work, there is the potential for this to be locally led, developed, and owned, particularly across the workforce, more than the previous programme. It is pleasing to hear that the Council's Human Resources and Organisational Development Teams are working to develop recruitment and training plans to support these areas of the organisation, and this has the potential to be a more rewarding and sustainable approach to transformation going forward.

Walsall Council have engaged well with partners on the development of the We are Walsall 2040 vision and recognise that the next phase of this work will require communicating, sharing, and embedding these priorities across partner organisations. This is a natural stage for the programme given that it was only formally approved by the Council in June. The Council has made progress to date by engaging with partnership forums including Children's Alliance, Safer Walsall and the Health and Wellbeing Board, and has plans for further engagement and promotion in to 2024, including a review of the Walsall Proud Partnership.

Finally, given the inter-relationships that exist across these issues of transformation, social value, and partnership working, the Council may benefit from the development of a new Council Plan. This would enable the organisation to consider the specific role and contribution that it will make towards these borough wide outcomes, provide clarity on the next stage of transformation, and provide clarity on achievements to-date. Importantly, this could provide an opportunity to embed the Council's existing Social Value Policy from 2020 at the heart of the organisation and extend the impact of this approach into wider service areas.

## 6.0 Internal Controls and Processes:

Under this theme, consideration was given to the activity and progress of the Council against the following two recommendations. These recommendations are listed in full in Appendix 1.0, but are summarised below at a headline level:

- Maintain effective financial control and establish a sustainable and resilient financial future post-COVID.
- Ensure that internal processes are proportionate and consistently applied.

The recommendation to 'maintain effective financial controls' spoke to the Team's confidence in the Council's approach and rigour to financial planning and management and was encouraging a continuation of the practice which they have benefited from to date. Therefore, the Team were pleased to hear that the financial accounts for Walsall Council for 2022-2023 have been prepared and published. The Team recognise that the Council reported a relatively minor overspend of £486,000 last year, but did draw significantly on reserves of £30 million, but appreciate that is largely as a result of COVID grants and

rescheduled borrowing, therefore leaving the Council in a better financial position than many other authorities.

We recognise that the Council has maintained their approach to budget setting and is working to continue the move towards a more outcome-based approach over coming years. However, the Council will need to remain alert to these issues due to the projected overspend and demand issues which, as with other Councils, are creating pressure on demand-led budgets in Adult and Children's services. These challenges are facing other Councils across the sector, and it will be important that the Council remains focused on these issues over the coming years, giving due capacity, time and space to resolving them.

Finally, the Team recognise that there have been efforts from the Council to simplify internal processes, including the approval process for recruiting staff and governance training which has been completed with officers. It is encouraging that the Council has committed to reviewing officer governance arrangements, and the Team would encourage the organisation to consider sector norms on issues of delegation, approval, and reporting to inform this programme. This work should also include consideration of the interplay between officer governance arrangements and elected members, including forums such as Personnel Committee, and the involvement of Councillors in human resource issues.

The Council also informed the Team regarding progress that has been made in developing and implementing a new Members' Enquiry System which was launched in July 2023. Whilst there is ongoing training and refining regarding the system, the Peer Team recognise that this has the potential to support more timely responses to Councillors, as well as the use of improved performance reporting to better understand needs and issues across the Borough. The Team encourages the Council to continue to prioritise this work, support Officers and Members with the new system, and consider the ongoing training needs and further support that may be required as the system is kept under review.

## **7.0 Summary, Considerations and Next Steps:**

This Progress Review has been completed at an important juncture for Walsall Council and illustrates the organisation's commitment to Sector Led Improvement and engagement with the LGA by prioritising this review in this context. The Council communicated to the Peer Team that the findings and recommendations of the original review have been helpful in structuring the work and approach on key issues over the past six-months and provided a helpful structure and framework for the interim Chief Executive. With the appointment of a new permanent Chief Executive, the Peer Team would encourage the Council to consider the following issues as they continue to move forwards:

- **Council Plan:** Given the strength of the We are Walsall 2040 Borough Plan; it is important for the Council to set out the organisation’s role and contribution in delivering these goals. The development of a new Council Plan could support this work, and the development of a clearer narrative on the approach of the organisation, whilst also defining the contribution and expectations of wider partners.
- **Culture and Values:** The Peer Team recognise that the development of a new Council Plan presents the opportunity to revisit the PLATE (Professionalism, Leadership, Accountability, Transparency and Ethical) values which the Council has used since 2017. As part of this work, there Team would encourage the Council to consider how these values are demonstrated and communicated on an ongoing basis.
- **Process Improvements:** The Peer Team heard that there had been uneven progress regarding improvements to processes and systems (e.g. the approval of reports). The Team would encourage the Council to continue to consider the use of ‘co-creation’ approaches to move beyond the current system of approvals. There is potential for this to be supported by a discrete piece of work to support officers in better understanding decision making across the Council.
- **Transformation Programme:** The Council’s “Proud Programme” is well embedded and understood as a way of working and a lens for improvement across Walsall. In this context, the Council should consider the formal closure of this Programme, officially capturing progress and achievements, and providing a ‘blank page’ for their next wave of transformation. This next wave will be locally driven following the end of the organisations’ strategic partnership and is an exciting opportunity to be locally defined and driven.
- **Co-Production with Communities:** There is potential to build on the engagement through the We are Walsall 2040 programme to enable more input into issues of community delivery, and ongoing conversations. This would build on the answers and solutions to social challenges which are ‘known’ and ‘owned’ at a neighbourhood and community level. This would enable the Council to work ‘closer to the problem’ and move towards more preventative and outcome based approaches which are built around an investment methodology, and linked to the Council’s financial context.

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss, and reflect on these findings. To support transparency, the council is advised to publish this note. Helen Murray is the LGA’s Principal Adviser for the West Midlands and can be contacted on [Helen.Murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:Helen.Murray@local.gov.uk)

## Appendix 1.0. Full list of previous recommendations from Corporate Peer Challenge:

Replicated below is a complete list of the Recommendations which were presented to Walsall Council through their Corporate Peer Challenge in January 2023.

- **Recommendation One: Maximise the opportunities that are presented to the council through partnership and convening arrangements:** The council's improvements through the Proud Programme have been largely internal to date. The next phase of WAW2040 will require these priorities being shared and embedded across partner organisations. There is more work to be done to socialise this vision and support its recognition and understanding of partners contributions towards it. This will require regular and active engagement, investment in relationships, and clear communications.
- **Recommendation Two: Consider the council's approach to inclusive growth in delivering the 2022 Economic Strategy and maximizing the impact of the 'Walsall Pound':** There is strong political appetite to support inclusive growth in Walsall. The peer team would encourage the council to be ambitious in this space, this should include ambitions for better paid jobs in the borough, as well as an increase in the number of roles, and could do more to benefit from the council's role as a major employer and procurer of goods and services. There is learning available from within the sector on social value frameworks and good employment charters, and this will build on the good foundations that are already in place from the council's approach through Walsall Works.
- **Recommendation Three: Define the content and deliverables that will be included in the 'Proud' initiative going forward:** The council's 'Proud Programme' ran from 2018 to 2022 and identified significant savings within a specific business case. It is appreciated that the council has now moved towards these principles as an ongoing way of working rather than an individual programme with specific milestones or end dates. However, there is still a need to set out what this includes (and does not include) in order to support resourcing, reporting, and tracking benefits.
- **Recommendation Four: There is a framework of Plans and priorities that exist across the council; however, consideration should be given to their alignment and support staff understanding:** The relationship between 'Proud' transformation, 'EPICC' priorities, 'PLATE' values, and 'WAW2040' vision is a language which is spoken fluently among senior council officers. There is a need to make sure that these programmes are appropriately aligned, and that this understanding exists at all tiers of the organisation.
- **Recommendation Five: Provide a coordinated approach to issues of EDI to support the workforce to better represent local communities:** The council has recognised that further work is needed to strengthen work on equality, diversity, and inclusion, this has included good progress to date on your gender pay gap, and the introduction of staff network groups to support staff voices. This should be built on with reporting, publishing, and monitoring progress against other 'pay gaps' (such as ethnicity and disability) as well

as wider public sector duties. This will support the workforce to better represent the communities of borough.

- **Recommendation Six: Review the council’s approach to flexible working in the round and communicate this clearly to staff:** Through COVID-19 Walsall Council has transitioned from a largely onsite corporate workforce to a largely remote corporate workforce and is now working to strike an appropriate middle ground built around “customer focused ways of working”. This needs to be considered in the round alongside the workforce implications for teams, engagement with elected members, council assets, as well as the strategic approaches to supporting the local economy and being connected to local communities. This work will require engagement and communications to talk through these issues and their relationship to each other. The peer team would recommend that this includes officers attending formal meetings in-person as far as possible and appropriate, particularly scrutiny committees and joint consultation committee meetings with trade unions.
- **Recommendation Seven: Articulate and consider the contribution of Organisational Development to the next stage of the council’s transformation:** The importance of OD to the next stage of the council’s journey cannot be understated, and the council should consider the investment of time, capacity, and resource required to support this, as they move to embed proud ways of working. This should include how PLATE values are embedded beyond annual conversations, and how these principles are demonstrated at all tiers of the organisation. This will require regular two-way communication with staff.
- **Recommendation Eight: Maintain effective financial control and establish a sustainable and resilient financial future post-COVID.** In common with most councils, Walsall has experienced additional funding pressures and disruption to its financial strategy during the pandemic which, despite government funding, have had to be managed. The council now needs to ensure that it re-establishes a sustainable budget and maintain reserves to assure its future resilience.
- **Recommendation Nine: Consider the Management Responsibilities of Senior Officers at the council:** The council’s approach to giving executive directors additional responsibility for cross-cutting initiatives such as ‘customer experience’ is not a model which is used commonly elsewhere in the sector. It is appreciated that this supports senior accountability for corporate priorities and helps work across directorate silos. However, this model will require the council to be live to implications such as capacity challenges and succession planning in the medium-term.
- **Recommendation 10: Consider the knowledge transfer required from the council’s strategic partner to support the newly established Corporate Hub:** The council has worked through a strategic partner model to deliver the Proud Programme. Going forward, the council should consider the benefits that can be gained across the organisation through the knowledge transfer from the council’s strategic partners over coming years to make sure that it maximises the value from this investment. Similarly,



there is potential for the council's community hubs to consider the whole council offer beyond the current functions and improve the customer journey.

- **Recommendation 11: Ensure that internal processes are proportionate and consistently applied:** There is potential for the council to free up capacity within the organisation by simplifying some processes, including report approvals and recruitment processes. This would support capacity to be best aligned to priorities. This should also consider the channels and processes used for sharing information with and resolving issues raised by elected members. This would be welcomed by both officers and members and would free up capacity that is currently being spent resolving these matters elsewhere.