

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

London Borough of Barnet

19<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2023

Feedback report





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# 1. Executive summary

The peer team visited at a significant time of change for Barnet, with the Council just over one year on from a change in administration. Labour returned 41 seats out of a possible 63 in the local elections in May 2022 to become the leading group in a Council that had been Conservative led for the majority of its past history.

The Labour group were elected with a manifesto promising an ‘ambitious vision’ for Barnet, including a focus on areas like the climate agenda, tackling inequalities and ensuring growth and development works for everyone in Barnet.


Significant work is now under way to embed this new vision for Barnet – now captured in a Corporate Plan for 2023-26 – which seems to have been well articulated to both staff and partners. The peer team witnessed energy and commitment to the new plan, based around the themes of people, places and planet. There was widespread recognition of the need to enhance engagement with local communities and partners in delivering this plan.

This new agenda represents significant change for Barnet, in both the relationship Barnet Council has with its communities and the aspirations it has for them. It has a significant impact on how the Council sees its role and the work the organisation now does to fulfil it.

Barnet is moving away from the legacy of ‘the commissioning Council’, and towards a more proactive role in shaping Barnet as a place, as well as the outcomes it hopes to achieve for its residents and communities. The Council is intervening in spaces it hasn’t operated in before, or where it has historically played a different type of role. Some of the related new ways of working are in their infancy as a result, though the peer team also found much to celebrate, with demonstrable progress made in only a year.

Overall, the Council is well managed and well run, and has strong foundations to see it through the journey ahead. Senior leadership is highly regarded, with both the Leader and Chief Executive seen as both passionate and committed, responsive and open.

It will be important to ensure that the collaborative approach and ethos modelled by senior leaders is embedded across the whole organisation in the context of the new



political vision for Barnet. This needs to go beyond the important focus on work to bring previously outsourced services back into the Council into a wider cultural shift towards people and place.


Following the change in administration, the Council has changed its governance system to move from a 'Committee System' to a 'Strong Leader and Cabinet' model. Whilst much work has been delivered at pace to bring about this change, the peer team observed that there is more work to do to fully adapt to this change culturally as well as structurally.

In particular, the peer team felt strongly that Cabinet Members need to be further enabled to fulfil their roles, and that resources and support must follow the new lines of accountability and responsibility as part of the shift in governance model. Ensuring structures, processes and support are realigned to the new model will enable the most effective decision making.

The Council will need to ensure that its ambitious agenda is embedded in all financial planning, with the MTFs not currently aligned with the new Corporate Plan for Barnet. There are a range of financial risks and challenges the Council will need to be cognisant of as it moves forward, including an assessment of whether company structures, governance and arrangements, including loans, continue to serve the Council well in delivering its future ambitions.

There is a range of transformation work going on across Barnet, with much achieved in a short space of time, thanks in large part to talented and driven staff who have felt invigorated by the refreshed agenda that they are bringing to life. To continue to deliver against this early promise and to avoid loss of momentum, further consideration will now need to be given to how the Council can mature this work, embedding it fully into the organisation, not just as an 'add on'. This will mean both harnessing opportunities and mitigating risks along the way.

The peer team found the working culture in Barnet to be broadly positive, with a prevailing culture of respect and commitment, which will be the bedrock upon which to build and deliver wider change. Staff tend to feel supported in their own career advancement and development, with the principle of 'grow your own' noticeably evident; though there is work to do to ensure this includes all staff, particularly those from underrepresented groups.



That said, the Council will need take stock of existing capacity and potential skills gaps and see where external expertise or inward recruitment may add fresh perspectives. This includes managing risk and complexity with companies and delivery vehicles, and ensuring effective challenge to those leading those structures which continue to operate. There is an important balance to meet between utilising the skills and expertise on offer from existing staff and risking potential burnout and capacity overload. Furthermore, the Council may need to be more proactive in finding the right balance between shorter term pilots and longer time transformation required to meet the challenges faced in the borough.

Though individual staff are well networked, the Council should feel emboldened to shout louder about the positive work it is doing, and in particular, supporting its political leadership to do this. Whilst gaining knowledge and insight from other Councils will be useful to Barnet on the journey ahead, there is also much existing good practice that the wider local government sector would benefit from learning from Barnet.

## 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 Ensure the Council's ways of working truly reflect the strategic responsibility and accountabilities of Cabinet Members in the new governance model.**

The organisation still retains some legacy of its past model and ways of working need to further adapt. This should include greater support and development for Cabinet Members to enable them to fully undertake their strategic role, as well as updated processes around reports, meetings and decision making.

### **2.2 Ensure alignment of Cabinet priorities to MTFS planning, including a collective leadership review of the capital programme; and ensure financial challenge is embedded within the transformation programme.**

The Council's financial planning must create the conditions for its long term vision to be delivered. Transformation activity should be core to how this is achieved and not seen as an 'add on'.

### **2.3 Policy and administrative support to the Leader and Cabinet should be proportionate to their level of accountability to best support effective decision making.**

The peer team suggests that officer support is realigned from serving the committee model, and that the administration have appropriate political and policy support for the Leader's office and Cabinet in line with that seen in other councils.

### **2.4 Ensure that the Council clarifies its approach to transformation and articulates what this means for 'Business as Usual' in order to embed new approaches into its core business.**

As Barnet's transformation work matures, new ways of working will need to be embedded. This will require a fundamental role in shifting what is meant by 'Business as Usual', with clear plans for how new approaches and piloted work can achieve long term goals.

**2.5 Undertake a review of company governance and loan arrangements, providing clarity of responsibility around the management of risk.**

The Council must ensure that arrangements continue to serve the organisation well in delivering its new priorities and ensures an appropriate level of resilience for the challenges ahead. The Council needs to ensure effective risk management and scrutiny of those company arrangements which continue, particularly in relation to spend against its financial plan.

**2.6 Ensure stronger coherence and prioritisation of workforce wellbeing, OD and EDI programmes to maximise impact.**

There are a range of good initiatives in place, but these must operate in a joined up way to ensure the best results and accessibility and impact for staff.

**2.7 Review long term organisational capacity to ensure that people resources are aligned with the new priorities for Barnet – including an assessment of where skills can be developed internally, or where fresh perspectives may add value.**

The Council has already responded in the short term by adding capacity in key priority areas but will need to establish a model that will best support its ambitions longer term and offer flexibility as the nature of the work this entails evolves.

**2.8 Develop the strategic narrative on economy, business and skills to support sector led approaches; harness the potential of innovation in place and increase levels of inward investment.**

To realise the political vision for place and maximise innovation and investment, the Council needs to develop an updated strategic narrative for the economy, good growth, and its role in economic development. This could be supported by enhanced targeted collaboration with its fast growth SMEs to amplify their voice and strengthen the value of the Council's convening role in place and the local economy.

**2.9 Better harness the leadership potential throughout the VCS, to empower and enhance 'parity of esteem' with the sector.**

There is clear talent and leadership within the VCS in Barnet – strengthened through the pandemic – but there is untapped potential to collaborate within the sector and to support the Council's work with communities.

### **2.10 Utilise the Council's senior leadership role on health in the NCL ICB to strengthen focus on prevention, population health and community services.**

The Council's senior leadership role with the NCL ICB can support both local government and the NHS to deliver further and faster in its work on prevention, population health and integrated community services. This influence and shaping of the operating model – at an extremely challenging time for the health and care system – should consider use of resources, data and workforce planning.

## **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:

- Robin Tuddenham, Chief Executive, Calderdale Council
- Cllr Claire Holland, Leader, London Borough of Lambeth
- Alex Thompson, Director of Finance and Customer Services (S151 officer), Cheshire East Council
- Jonathan Lloyd, Director for Strategy and Change, London Borough of Waltham Forest
- Sadie East, Director of Transformation, London Borough of Brent
- Shadow – Dhanya Nair, NGDP, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
- Peer Challenge Manager – Helen Reeves, Senior Regional Adviser, LGA

### **3.2 Scope and focus**

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to Councils' performance and improvement.

- 1. Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the Council's priorities clear and



informed by the local context? Is the Council delivering effectively on its priorities?

2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the Council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the Council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the Council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the Council have the capacity to improve?

In addition to these questions, the Council asked the peer team to provide feedback on:

- Ensuring resources, capacity and expertise is in the right place to deliver the transformation programme e.g. journey to Net Zero, Community Participation, Reducing Poverty, Tackling Inequality and 'Borough of Fun' without compromising BAU delivery
- Going beyond communication: what more could you do to really embed priorities, strengthen work with partners (particularly statutory partners), with VCS, with residents, with businesses to deliver ambitions together?
- In understanding workforce wellbeing and being confident that the OD programme is equipping staff to meeting challenges and thrive in the future
- The approach to financial sustainability – what else should be considered?
- What more should be done to support Cabinet to develop and embed different or new ways of working?

### 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 in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The peer team then spent three days onsite at Barnet, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to a wide 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

The local priorities the Council has set, and the outcomes it hopes to achieve for its place and residents have significantly shifted following the election of a new administration last year. The Council now has a new ambitious Corporate Plan which outlines its vision for Barnet, based around the key themes of people, places and planet.

Included within this are commitments around BarNet Zero (in which the Council will reach net zero by 2030 and the borough by 2042), tackling inequality and reducing poverty, creating community wealth-building opportunities, building affordable homes, and becoming a 'Borough of Fun'.

These new priorities – coupled with a renewed commitment to community participation, greater partnership working and a neighbourhood working approach – represent, not just new outcome targets, but a new relationship between Barnet Council and its citizens.

Principles of community engagement and participation seemed to resonate with staff, and much activity has been undertaken to add this as a component to different strands of work, but the Council will benefit from further learning and guidance from

others with experience in doing this well. Equally, it will be valuable to take stock at different points and share learning from its own existing good practice from across different parts of the Council. This is an area of work showing promising green shoots that will need to mature to become deeply rooted in all that Barnet does.

Though the peer team found the Council at a time of significant change, it is worth noting the foundations of quality service delivery this builds upon. Ofsted rated Barnet's Children's Services 'Good' across the board in 2019, and the Council is seen as an exemplar in many areas of its children's practice, in particular around SEND. Educational performance is also high, with 95% of schools rating 'Good' or 'Outstanding'. Colleagues across the local government sector can and do benefit from learning from some of the excellent work going on in Barnet.

There is also good practice in Adult Social Care. Partnerships are in place with the other north London boroughs and there are strong relationships with the VCS. However, the changing demographic picture is significant to the outcomes Barnet will be able to deliver for its people – particularly with regards to an ageing population – and it is vital the impact of this demand pressure is fully understood. At Census 2021 over 26,000 of Barnet's population was over 75 years old, an increase of 10% since 2011. There are 84 registered care homes in the borough, meaning Barnet has the most care home places for older adults in London, plus 4 registered extra care services. The care sector is worth around £300m to the local economy and employs 10,000 people. The needs of people requiring care are also becoming more complex, contributing to growing demand. Scenario planning to map potential pressures and around social care demand will be beneficial to the Council's long term financial planning, with further work to address the fragility of the social care provider market. This will have cross-cutting implications for how the Council is able to deliver against its ambitions. Whilst these challenges are not unique to Barnet, the depth and immediacy of the challenge does create an opportunity to use the influence of senior leaders within the Integrated Care System to prioritise long term strategic work on prevention, population health and workforce planning.

Though a relatively affluent borough, as in other parts of the country the cost of living is also a growing concern for residents. As noted in Barnet's position statement, in October 2021 average house prices were fifteen times the average income, and average rent higher than that of Outer London as a whole. Barnet currently has the

sixth lowest amount of social housing in London, though there are plans to address this. The turbulence of the private rented sector, alongside rising interest rates, is also adding complexity to the picture.

The Council is committed to a long term approach to tackling the social challenges facing the borough, but to maximise impact in areas such as reducing poverty and tackling inequalities, the peer team suggest that the Council would benefit from ensuring insight shows the diversity of experience and outcomes for different groups or people and business. This will better enable more targeted intervention versus universality.

Historically, the Council has taken the approach of delivering blanket services across the borough but may now benefit from understanding where impact will be maximised by delivering services slightly differently; an approach that will be served well by the shift to neighbourhood working outlined in the Corporate Plan.

Additionally, it is important that the Council explores the use of key council services in how they could respond to diverse local need. It is important that the innovation and change in which the Council aspires is considered for all services. For example, a re-evaluation of library services could provide an opportunity to deliver particular services at a local level while using more participatory approaches— building from the ‘Community Hub’ model – matched to what different localities and populations most need. What benefits one area may be less apposite in another, and there is an opportunity here to be more effective in what the Council delivers. There are good examples of this way of working in other local authorities, which Barnet would be wise to explore and learn from.

#### **4.2 Organisational and place leadership**

Senior leadership in Barnet is very highly regarded and this came up in almost every meeting the peer team took part in. The Leader and Chief Executive are seen to be both passionate about Barnet and accessible to staff and partners alike.

The Leader’s visibility with staff has gone a long way to bringing them on the journey which the new political vision entails and his personal commitment to doing this is highly valued. Many people reported feeling energised and invigorated by the new direction for Barnet.

It is now important to ensure that this highly valued approach to leadership is distributed further, and that all Cabinet Members are supported and empowered to fully exercise their strategic leadership role. Decision-making responsibility no longer sits with committees, but with the Leader and Cabinet. It is important that the role of a Cabinet Member is well understood across the organisation, and that the organisation recognises the significant accountability that now sits with them.

Partners speak highly about relationships with senior leaders and report a clear sense of a collaborative approach. The Council must ensure this culture and the positive tone it has set permeates throughout the organisation and acts as an enabler for all colleagues to feel empowered to work in a similar way. Some partners (particularly in the VCS), noted a positive shift in relationships in recent years, but in places still felt stymied by the sense of a prevailing client/contractor relationship, with many only having channels into commissioners and procurement teams, and not to more systemic policy decision making discussions.

New ways of working with the voluntary and community sector during the pandemic have brought new life to relationships. It is important to ensure that these foundations are built upon, and that the strategic opportunity they present is harnessed. The peer team saw untapped potential in partnership working with the VCS, but this can only be brought to bear if the sector is treated with a parity of esteem and brought into conversations as equal partners. The voluntary sector is subject to many of the same pressures facing the public sector, with increased demand and diminishing resources; a new way of working will mean working together to tackle the issues of the day, including delivering care closer to home, and with greater complexity in community settings, and in responding to the cost of living crisis.

The Council has an ambitious programme for the built environment, town centres and growth, with much development currently under way – which is immediately apparent to anyone visiting the borough. But despite a significant capital investment portfolio, place leadership is in its infancy in Barnet.

Barnet has a large number of SMEs and evidence of fast growth innovation in some sectors. The Council's approach to business engagement is underdeveloped and lacks a clear strategic narrative, and the Council should consider taking more of a convening and shaping role in this space. Developing a sector led approach, for

example to harnessing the strength of fast growth SMEs, would be welcomed by business leaders and representative bodies who feel the potential for further investment and good growth could be amplified by a data led targeted approach. This would only need modest additional resource to make an immediate impact within the context of a new strategic narrative, given the strong relationships in place.

There are a range of organisations who can provide an injection of knowledge and expertise here, and this is something the Council would now benefit from exploring. The potential opportunities to be leveraged through expanding this work would greatly contribute to the Council's ambitions on an inclusive economy and community wealth building, as well as tackling inequality.

Similarly, the Council has an opportunity to take a strong leadership role and build new relationships with partners and other stakeholders around the journey to BarNetZero. This target is not something that can be achieved alone and will require fundamental commitment and behaviour change from individuals, communities, visitors, other parts of the public sector, businesses and partners alike. Equally, there will be difficult decisions ahead potentially in areas such as transport planning, investment decisions and impact assessment for any new capital programme. The sooner this vision for Barnet can become a shared one, the easier it will be to navigate as a united front. Barnet has made great strides on its climate change work in only a year – recognising that it starts some way behind other Councils in this respect – but will need to draw upon a range of partnerships to continue to take this forward. The Council itself does not hold all the levers to change. The recent Citizens Assembly has gone some way to embarking on this conversation, but there is more work to do to drive this work forward.

The role of senior leaders in health partnerships could be leveraged to further Barnet's aims around health inequalities and address its social care challenge.

### **4.3 Governance and culture**

The Council is in the first cycle of meetings after a change in governance from a 'Committee system' to 'Strong Leader and Cabinet' model. Officers have worked hard to deliver this change at pace and communicate the change to the wider Council.

At the time of the peer review, plans were in place to review processes and practices after this initial cycle of meetings and iterate accordingly. In doing so, the Council will need to be mindful to the fact this change of model is cultural as well as structural and that working culture must be fully realigned to the new model. At present, though key structures have changed, the understanding about how and where decisions are fundamentally made has, in places, not caught up.

There is a good degree of trust between members and officers, but it will be necessary to ensure that a culture of appropriate political challenge is cultivated. This does not simply mean members being open to officer recommendations (as was sometimes observed as the image of 'good working relationships') but finding a means of genuinely setting the agenda together and working jointly to make the best, most effective and robust decisions, whilst respecting each other's positions and judgement.

As part of this, resources and focus will need to be aligned proportionately to the new levels of accountability and responsibility within the system – in this case, appropriately supporting the Leader and Cabinet in their political decision making. Attention should also be given to effective co-design and co-production of Cabinet reports.

Scrutiny still has an important role in the business of the Council – and Barnet may wish to engage further support to ensure effective Scrutiny in the new model is appropriately understood – but committees are no longer the nexus of decision-making they used to be.

The Council will also need to move quickly to review the impact of the new governance arrangements on the roles and responsibilities of members and officers in the Council's group structure, in terms of its companies and subsidiaries. For example, at present the Cabinet Member responsible for setting the Children's budget is also responsible to the Board for BELS and its own approach to budgeting and risks, which brings competing interests.

Staff report an increasingly positive working culture in Barnet and as a result many employees stay for a long time. There is good evidence of a commitment to the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion, with a range of different initiatives underway. This is recognised by staff, but it will be vital to ensure this commitment

does not lose momentum in the face of competing demands. There is also a risk of 'change fatigue' for staff with demanding workloads, who are not always clear which internal initiatives to prioritise. Staff reported a sense of internal comms 'overload,' and it will be important to streamline efforts to maximise their efficacy. The Council must work to ensure a 'golden thread' throughout all this work, aligning plans across the organisation, supported by distinct strategic ownership.

In line with the 'Borough of Fun' initiative, a bold appetite for celebrating Barnet's successes and painting a positive vision for Barnet will need to be further embedded in strategic communications planning. There are a number of councils that Barnet can learn from in terms of proactively planning a celebratory communications agenda, not just reacting to immediate concerns or generating 'quick wins', though these have their place.

Additionally, in the spirit of celebration and collaboration, opportunities to celebrate Barnet must be inclusive and open, including where appropriate relevant ward councillors and opposition members, as well as external partners and stakeholders. This culture of celebrating successes and community and cultural life will help encourage staff at all levels to understand their place in the political vision for Barnet, particularly as many are also residents.

#### **4.4 Financial planning and management**

The senior team has a strong foundation of financial expertise and there are clear financial planning processes in place. The financial position of the Council appears comparatively secure, but in the current climate, no council can afford to be complacent. Significant challenges lie ahead, and the peer team recommend that there is some key work still to be done to properly plan for and mitigate these.

Although the Council currently has adequate reserves, the size of the budget gaps in later years (with in-year savings for 2023/24 of £11.199m required), added to repeats of the previous year's overspending (£6.844m for 22/23) should this arise, could rapidly deplete this position. The Council's approach to planning up to 2030 is a positive step to managing this risk, but there is more to do.

Despite solid foundations, it will serve the Council well to be mindful of potential risks, for example testing its assumptions about future funding in line with other councils



and professional advice. The Council will want to assure itself that growth pressures, particularly with regards to social care, are comprehensively and robustly mapped and planned for.


To do this, it would be beneficial for the Council's collective leadership – both political and officer – to test scenarios based on different financial assumptions. This should enhance understanding as well as test out the risk appetite that the Council is comfortable with. This in turn should create clarity over how the Council will respond to the impact of emerging financial pressures; as a key part of this, ensuring an effective strategic approach to reserves, and the Council, and its wholly owned companies', ability to manage them. For example, areas for scenario testing should include the impact on BELS of potential High Needs deficits, and of capital spending requirements on the HRA.

The Council's increased ambition in specific areas, particularly Net Zero, will need solid financial planning, but these are yet to be integrated into the MTFS, especially in relation to capital investment. There is a risk of tension between managing the existing savings challenges, plus growth pressures, whilst delivering against the administration's priorities, and work needs to be done to ensure this is properly embedded.

A review of existing capital projects and where they sit within the new vision for Barnet will be a crucial part of this. This must take account of lessons learnt to date and anticipated return on investment, with an appraisal of how this supports the current aims and ambitions for Barnet, as well as existing savings challenges.

As the Council undertakes this work to fully integrate new Corporate Plan priorities within financial planning, this may create opportunities as well as risks, such as the ability to generate revenue savings, for example through new preventative approaches to service delivery, or through harnessing digital innovation. The Council's digital work has a strong focus on accessibility and inclusion and there is also good practice in relation to the use of data. There are opportunities to learn from other Council's digital innovation to deliver efficiencies as well as improve services by supporting more residents to transact online and modernising inefficient systems and processes.

Though early conversations appear to be in progress, all staff need to feel part of a



shared responsibility around savings and efficiency, with the transformation programme a key part of this. Establishing the roles and responsibilities around this process is critical. Transformation need not be seen as a budget 'add on' but become part of what is understood as 'business as usual' and a key component in continued financial resilience.

A further, frank assessment of the impact of insourcing is also needed to ensure the MTFS is resilient against any further pressures this may create, as the Council learns from its experience on this to date.

It would be timely for the Council to undertake a review of companies, governance and structures to assure itself that future structures and arrangements serve Barnet appropriately for its current and future priorities, and do not create potential for risk or exposure. This includes the ongoing risk in terms of managing cost related to financial plan, and clarity on accountability and challenge within the governance of those companies which continue to operate. Similarly, and in line with a similar re-evaluation across the sector, it would be prudent for the Council to undertake a robust assessment of loan arrangements and the ongoing benefits of these arrangements, and that these are transparently understood.

## 4.5 Capacity for improvement

The organisation has embarked on a new approach to cross-organisational working through its approach to transformation projects, with key staff acting as ‘convenors’ – deploying a sense of systems leadership – helping to break down organisational barriers on cross-cutting initiatives. This is a clear sea change for how work has typically been undertaken in Barnet and seems to be offering compelling new challenges and opportunities for staff.

Barnet’s collective leadership will need to ensure there is strategic balance achieved between achieving ‘quick wins’ whilst putting the conditions in place to achieve longer term outcomes and goals, including an understanding of where staff energies are best invested. It will be important to maintain a clear sense of purpose as this work matures. Additionally, there is a need to develop increased sophistication in defining systems change, policy development and project delivery. The Transformation programme is aligned with the Barnet Plan and has been created to support some of the key shifts the council is making e.g. towards more community participation and a focus on the climate agenda. It will be key to ensure that these approaches become embedded in working practice across the council. A clear narrative for employees needs to underpin this – with the Transformation agenda supported by OD and L&D initiatives – to ensure the workforce is clear what new approaches mean in practice, and that they have the right skills and tools to deliver these.

New ways of delivering services, informed by a greater use of technology and innovation, should form a key part of the wholesale transformation picture for Barnet – this is not distinct from the political vision and ambition, but part of how it is achieved.

Barnet benefits from a wide range of both skilled and highly committed staff, many of whom feel energised by the new direction they see the Council taking. Compared to other authorities, retention is less of a problem, though challenges remain in recruiting to some skilled professions as is more typical across the sector.

It will be important to ensure that the commitment to ‘grow your own’ – though valued for the development opportunities it has presented for many staff – doesn’t contribute to staff burnout or overloading. There is a sense in Barnet that skilled and dedicated officers continually gain more responsibility, with service or project portfolios growing

and shifting with them.

Though the drive to develop and promote staff internally tends to be valued, it is fundamental to delivering the Council's ethos and ambitions that underrepresented staff groups feel this includes them, increasing diversity at all levels of the Council, in particular in more senior roles. And, given the novelty to Barnet of elements of what it is now working on, it will need to take a reflective appraisal of where in fact, fresh perspectives could be effectively deployed to complement existing staff knowledge.

Barnet may benefit from further detailed review of capacity, to ensure people resources are aligned with the new priorities for Barnet over the longer term, and that skill or capacity gaps can be mapped and responded to – and equally that duplication in staff efforts is avoided, as efforts to deliver Barnet's priorities play out within different departments. For instance, the peer team noted that the number of officers ostensibly working on the climate agenda had significantly increased in the last year, but in other areas, such as around inclusive growth, work was being delivered by a comparatively small number of (albeit very skilled and committed) officers.

As previously mentioned, there are various plans and strands of work around HR and OD, and it will be important, as with the commitment to EDI, that these form a coherent people strategy for Barnet which responds to both the current and future ambitions for Barnet and that there is a clear narrative that employees can understand.

## 5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a follow up 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, Kate Herbert, Principal Adviser for London, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Kate is available to discuss any further support the Council requires. [Kate.herbert@local.gov.uk](mailto:Kate.herbert@local.gov.uk)

