

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Rushcliffe Borough Council

Monday 15 to Thursday 18 January 2024

Feedback report





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# 1. Executive summary

The borough of Rushcliffe is a great place to live, and Rushcliffe Borough Council's (RBC's) varied, dedicated work is a clear contributing factor. The borough's town and village hubs are home to a variety of successful independent shops, leisure facilities, and pleasant residential areas, which continue to develop. The council has clearly contributed to this positive environment through its good, committed services to its residents, visitors and businesses. RBC is also working on significant, strategic projects, such as the redevelopment of the Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station site as part of the East Midlands Freeport and the East Midlands Development Corporation.

A constant throughout the council's work is its very strong relationships with its partners, who also as a result contribute substantially to the borough's success. RBC often leads and influences these close relationships and partnerships through its substantial place leadership role, not only within Nottinghamshire but the wider sub-region. As a result of all this partnership work, the council is highly respected by all partners the peer team spoke to. RBC should therefore continue developing this partnership agenda, especially within the sub-regional space.

RBC's Leader plays a key role at the strategic and partnership level. RBC's councillors have a strong role also at the community level, having often built strong relationships with their parish and town councils. All councillors should further strengthen and use these positive networks to make the most of related possibilities.

The council's Extended Management Team (ExMT) – its Executive Management Team (EMT) and Service Manager Team combined - is strong and supportive. EMT is visible and approachable as part of RBC's open office environment. ExMT supports its staff through career progression, training and development. Together, EMT and ExMT have created a caring and supportive culture throughout the council.

RBC has a robust, current financial position, endorsed by its auditors, through its:

- clear, five-year Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) to 2027/28
- robust financial planning process, reporting and scrutiny
- prudent and measured management of its finances, debt-free position, and plans to maintain its reserves for the MTFS's duration
- credible plans to deal with its budget gap identified in the MTFS.

The council should use its strong financial and influential place leadership positions to further extend its corporate and financial ambitions within the wider, developing sub-regional space. This will ensure RBC's resources, including its expertise and experience, best shape that as well as its own agenda. It will also ensure Rushcliffe's residents and other stakeholders are best served by those agendas.

The peer team felt that RBC could particularly extend its ambitions further for the benefit of its local stakeholders through its planned annual or mid-term, light-touch refresh of its corporate strategy, by analysing and using local demographic data and engaging more its diverse communities to improve its services for all residents. The borough's older, rural, ethnic minority and digitally excluded residents are just part of this diversity. Analysis and use of this data, and targeted engagement with these groups would help the council deliver even better services to all its residents. It could also enhance community relationships and volunteer networks, who could further contribute to the borough's success.

The council clearly communicates 'to' its residents by providing them with a variety of information in numerous ways. Conversely, RBC communicates less 'with' its communities on a two-way, interactive basis. This risks communities feeling that they are simply being told what is happening in the borough, rather than also being able to influence and shape what happens as part of an inclusive community approach.

## 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 **Take a strategic/corporate approach to programme and project management, building on and aligning with your existing corporate performance management function** – service-level project, programme and performance management works well within the council but there is no corporate function to co-ordinate, oversee and support these aspects of management together. This presents potential risks and missed opportunities to share learning, enhance practice and consistency across services, and present the strongest stances on any given work area – internally and externally. You should therefore review your corporate approach to

programme and project management, align it with your existing corporate performance management function, and consider creating an overall corporate function to support this work in the round.

- 2.2 **Invest further in staff and councillor training; ensure councillors in particular take up mandatory, essential and other training, including that on councillor/officer roles, political awareness, code of conduct and other internal processes** – this need only build on your existing training and development offer and would enable officers and councillors to fully understand each other's roles and related codes of conduct. Addressing this will enhance work and relationships between the two groups. It would also enhance key internal procedures relating to councillors, which needs resolving urgently through more engagement with councillors, their attendance at related training and related regular monitoring.
- 2.3 **Create further time, space, resource and capacity with your strategic partners to identify what could be needed in future regarding changes in the landscape that affect you and your communities, notably the East Midlands Mayoral County Combined Authority (EMMCCA), Development Corporation and Freeport** – you play a significant role sub-regionally but as this agenda takes shape and grows, you could lose out or fall behind. You therefore need to create further time, space, resource and capacity with your partners to identify what could yet be needed in this wider context. You also need to review whether all your partnership arrangements are fully strategic and delivering the priorities of, and value to, the borough.
- 2.4 **Further develop and align your capital programme with your economic growth strategy once you have agreed the latter for 2024/25, with clear outcomes for both.** You have successfully completed substantial capital works through your healthy financial resources. You now have the chance to review, strengthen and communicate your future capital programme and align it with your economic growth strategy once you have agreed it to make the most of this substantial success and learning. This would make even better use of the council's strong financial and influential place leadership positions. This is a clear chance to make the most of all this work to deliver your key priorities to full effect and strengthen your finances further, such as

through extra income generation.

- 2.5 **Use your respected position with all your partners to deliver further defined outcomes across the whole council** – you are already using your environmental partnerships to lever in additional funding to support delivery. So make the most of this and your strong partnerships to attract further funding to deliver other work across the council. Unlike many other borough and district councils, you receive relatively little external funding. You should therefore maximise financial potential via these partnership routes.
- 2.6 **Explore options through your climate change action plan to maximise delivery of environmental outcomes across your strategic development and growth sites** – you are successfully delivering a range of environmental activity via a corporate team, with many more options to explore and develop. You now need to further articulate this work, so you and partners are clear who is doing and funding what activity, and how well. This will give you a clear sense of what is making the most impact and therefore how best to progress this agenda further.
- 2.7 **Integrate climate change ambitions in all your service areas** – since the environment is one of your key priorities, thoroughly explore each of your services for related possibilities, and integrate climate change ambitions within each service plan. This will help you use every option to realise your environmental goals.
- 2.8 **Reduce the number of RBC values, eg to a maximum of five, working with your employee liaison group and trade unions** – it is difficult for your staff to remember, distinguish and work to your 11 current values; there are too many. So review and reduce them with staff to a more focused, manageable number. This will make them more effective and easier to live.
- 2.9 **Build up your future, annual or mid-term, light-touch corporate strategy refreshes from community level to best understand and respond to your communities' needs and aspirations for the future.** Make the most of local demographic data. Rushcliffe is home to many diverse and

intersecting communities. Making the most of this data and engaging with your diverse communities would help improve existing services and could enhance the borough's sense of community/ies, volunteer networks, and make the most of what these diverse communities have to offer.

## 3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

### 3.1 The peer team

Corporate Peer Challenges (CPCs) are delivered by experienced elected member (councillor or mayoral) and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the CPC, and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise:

- Member Peer – Peter Fleming OBE, former Leader, Sevenoaks District Council (DC)
- (Member Peer was originally Duncan McGinty, former Leader, Sedgemoor DC)
- Member Peer – Cllr Martin Stone, Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Planning and Environment, Chesterfield Borough Council
- Chief Executive Peer – Scott Logan, Chief Executive, Basildon Council
- Executive Director Peer – Ian Edwards, Director of Economy and Environment, Wychavon and Malvern Hills District Councils
- Executive Director Peer – Julie Baird, Director of Planning and Growth, West Suffolk Council
- Shadow Peer – Josh Alderton, Graduate Management Trainee, Southend-on-Sea City Council
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager – Vicki Goddard
- LGA Project Support Officer – Suraiya Khatun.

### 3.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes that form the core components of all CPCs. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement, and were tailored to Rushcliffe BC:

#### 1. Local priorities and outcomes – in the context of being based in, and

wanting to inform, influence and steer the decisions of, the EMMCCA, East Midlands Freeport, East Midlands Development Company and the Government's Integrated Rail Plan/HS2 areas, whilst refreshing Rushcliffe Borough Council's corporate strategy, which at the time of scoping this CPC ran to 2023 and was therefore being consulted on as part of a review to refresh it: Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities and achieving improved outcomes for all its communities?

2. **Organisational and place leadership in the context of that outlined in the previous bullet:** Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture in the context of 20 new councillors as a result of the May 2023 local elections:** Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of respect, challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management:** Does the council have a clear understanding of its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a clear plan to address its financial challenges? **How is environmental revenue expenditure developing, eg regarding potential recycling opportunities, grants for e-car charging points, etc, and what further opportunities are there for the council to secure external funding?**
5. **Capacity for improvement:** Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

Additionally, RBC asked the peer team to feedback on the additional theme of:

**Environment** – to explore the council's approach to this subject all round, for example in terms of climate change, net zero, energy generation and waste management – not only within the borough but the EMMCCA and the East Midlands region more generally.

### 3.3 The CPC process

CPCs are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical



assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three and a half days onsite at RBC, during which they:

- gathered information and views from more than 50 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
- spoke to more than 105 people including a range of council staff together with councillors 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 councillors.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1 Local priorities and outcomes

RBC refreshed its corporate strategy promptly after the local elections in May 2023. The council used its residents' views, through RBC's online and other consultation processes, to inform and shape its aspirations and activities against each key priority. Service managers and lead specialists significantly informed and shaped the refreshed strategy through their service teams' insight, which altogether led to an enhanced corporate, collated view and strategy to enhance the borough and the lives of its residents. RBC has used the refreshed corporate strategy to provide a clear 'golden thread' from its key priorities to its service plans, strategies and actions.

A number of people the peer team spoke to could not articulate what the refreshed high-level aims look like as outcomes in practice, nor how they could support their delivery. This is understandable as these aims were only adopted in December. RBC cascaded the aims to staff this month but recognises it can communicate these aims further. This current situation nevertheless makes it harder for councillors, staff, residents and other stakeholders to communicate, prioritise, deliver, enhance, engage with, recognise and celebrate corporate strategy related progress and

success. RBC should therefore address this as part of the strategy's annual or mid-term, light-touch refresh so that everyone understands what the strategy means in practice, whether they are delivering or benefiting from its outcomes.

RBC's recent ambitious capital investments have enabled successful delivery of new environmentally-friendly community facilities such as the Bingham Arena leisure centre, a business centre and the Rushcliffe Oaks Crematorium – one of the UK's first electric cremators that other councils have visited to learn from. All of these new facilities are benefiting local residents and businesses, and have business cases to provide income to the council. Notably, RBC committed to and delivered this capital programme during the Covid-19 pandemic when it could have chosen otherwise.

Having delivered these capital projects, RBC has the chance to review, strengthen and communicate its ambitions and future capital programme to make the most of this substantial success and learning. This would also make the best use of the council's strong financial and influential place leadership positions.

RBC's four key priorities remain the same in the refreshed corporate strategy: The Environment, Quality of Life, Efficient Services and Sustainable Growth. Yet the council is doing much more than remaining the same. The council could therefore, by way of example, more strongly articulate and communicate its ambitions to deliver excellent, innovative and sector-leading services, rather than state, and so be perceived to be aiming for, just Efficient Services. It could also invest in renewable energy regeneration by way of financial investment, helping deliver its net zero agenda and substantially advance its other priorities. RBC wants to retain its strong financial position to best withstand future pressures, so understandably does not want to take unnecessary risks through its future capital programme plans.

Communicating and explaining RBC's prudent financial stance and its latest ambitions could help residents, partners and other stakeholders understand the council's balance to deliver its corporate strategy with responsible finances. RBC should also consider how to further its capital programme plans through additional calculated, evidence-based decisions to help deliver its corporate priorities.

Strong, service level performance management, with regular activity and ownership, monitors and addresses performance and targets. Quarterly councillor scrutiny via RBC's Corporate Overview Group, regular EMT oversight, and performance reviews

- whereby service managers challenge each other's progress in supportive yet challenging ways - are greatly assisting this approach. [RBC's LG Inform headline report](#) outlines performance successes: council and business tax collection rates, housing services, public health, household waste and recycling.

RBC and the same LG Inform report also recognise some performance areas have not been as strong. The council's planning service was one of these areas as evidenced by complaints, resource issues, staff feedback and performance data but senior and service managers did much to improve the service. National expectation was for planning demand to fall during the pandemic but it increased 40 per cent in the borough. RBC planning staff were also feeling the effects of a national shortage of planners, pandemic-related isolation and grieving the loss of two dear, senior planning colleagues. Planning performance suffered as result but robust service level performance management improved the situation. Additionally, senior service managers worked with planning staff and: encouraged people into RBC's office more, supported staff individually, restructured the service to allow for promotion and growth with additional resource, created a healthy, positive environment for service managers to challenge each other's performance data, and colleagues redesigned processes to make them more efficient. With sustainable growth a corporate priority, within a wider sub-regional agenda with partners, RBC should continue monitoring and enhancing this planning service and its resources to ensure it remains fit for purpose. This includes developing staff as needed to support delivery of RBC's significant strategic sites including Ratcliffe-on-Soar, and facilitating joint working to address gaps in provision such as infrastructure. With so many high profile sites, it is important the council develops a clear narrative about its role in supporting good place making as developments come forward. RBC's growth board has been set up to support delivery of its economic agenda and strategic sites. The council needs to continue its corporate oversight, monitoring and resource allocation to ensure partners including developers are held to account in delivering policy requirements and other important place making outcomes.

Across council services, there are lots of, and potentially too many, performance and other indicators to monitor and act on. This could divert focus, time and resources away from RBC's key priorities. The corporate performance management function should therefore review, co-ordinate, remove, enhance and/or replace council

indicators as required, so remaining indicators align with RBC's key priorities, related outcomes, and are fit for purpose. This smaller, tighter and most relevant set of indicators would be easier for all to focus on and manage, to deliver RBC's key priorities within a set of agreed timescales.

RBC has a bespoke, flexible and successful central resource to plan and deliver individual significant projects, such as building the crematorium and latest leisure centre. This resource draws on skills and expertise required per project from across the council and manages each project with a sponsor and supporting team. RBC also has a strong service planning process, notably at ExMT level.

The peer team strongly felt that RBC should review its corporate approach to programme and project management. A new central function, to manage all council projects and programmes, and focus on delivering corporate priorities, could build on and align with its existing central project resource and corporate performance management function. Together, these corporate functions could co-ordinate, streamline, oversee and support these three areas of management across RBC's work. This would help focus on, prioritise and drive the delivery of priorities and cross-cutting issues, related performance, and resourcing opportunities across the council to the maximum. It could also help monitor and manage related cost controls.

Looking outside the council, RBC uses various mechanisms to communicate strongly 'to' its residents, business and partners, who as a result know what RBC is doing. RBC's refreshed and more accessible and functional website, its social media channels, residents' newsletter and weekly subscription email, fortnightly newsletter to town and parish councils, and the work of its councillors, who respond to and action residents' comments in various ways all help promote the council's work.

RBC communicates less 'with' its residents on a two-way feedback basis. RBC does not have an engagement strategy but having one would help the council understand and address its communities' immediate and future needs and aspirations. It would also enable more residents to provide feedback and inform council and sub-regional approaches, and get involved in council activities. An engagement strategy could also inform and contribute to the council's annual or mid-term, light-touch corporate strategy refreshes from the community level.

The council could also make more use of local demographic data across a range of

equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) dimensions – protected and other characteristics - to enhance service provision for all its residents. RBC has used this data in some respects and has worked with specific communities accordingly, through partnership work in Cotgrave to address health inequalities, and engaging with the local Hong Kong community and Ukrainian residents. The borough is however home to a range of diverse and intersecting communities - an ageing population, with many living in rural areas, with differing levels of digital connectivity - and 11 per cent of residents are of non-white heritage. RBC should therefore make the most of related data, and engage more with these and other communities. Work of this nature could additionally enhance the borough's sense of community/ies, volunteer networks, and make the most of what these diverse communities have to offer. Promoting, and otherwise making more visible, what the council is already doing in relation to this, as well as future work, would also reassure Rushcliffe's communities that their council recognises and is responding to their different needs. It could also encourage them to further use these services and engage with the council, and enhance services even more as a result.

That said, the council is undertaking a variety of more work in relation to EDI within the council with its staff, which is further outlined later in this report.

## **4.2 Organisational and place leadership**

RBC is an exceptional partner, locally and sub-regionally, as highlighted by all partner organisations that the peer team spoke to, from the police to the voluntary sector, from the sub-region to parish and town level, in two key regards:

1. as a leading partner in its own right – RBC's Chief Executive in particular, who is “tapped into all partnership arrangements”, as well as the Leader of the Council, provide excellent, ambitious, outward-looking place leadership and are well respected for doing so, especially regarding joint work on fraud and anti-social behaviour. They produce, persuade partners of, and lead clear business cases, not only for Rushcliffe but for whatever spatial level they are representing on other partners' behalf - greater Nottingham, the south or full county, the sub-region and the East Midlands as a whole
2. as a mature partner that continues to develop great working relationships at all levels: corporate, service, managerial and political. These partnerships, in which

RBC operates, span from locally shared services through to the sub-regional and regional agenda of the EMMCCA, Freeport and Development Corporation.

RBC has also invested significant money, time, staff and other resources in major strategic projects across the region, giving it further influence and representation – ‘a seat at the table’ – as well as contributing to the delivery of projects.

Notably, RBC leads and drives the environmental agenda at regional level. Section 4.6 looks at these developments in more detail.

The council provides a range of good support to, and engages strongly with, its parish and town councils. RBC publishes a fortnightly newsletter to these councils, and organises and supports the Town and Parish Forum, which seeks local views and shares information, as do RBC councillors as communication champions at this level. The council has established a new parish council, and progresses various initiatives with these councils. RBC also runs a parish forum specifically about Ratcliffe on Soar, a growth board specifically about the Fairham area, and engages with Newton Parish Council about growth in that area.

RBC should continue all this good work with its parish and town councils to continually capture and respond to needs at that level. With so much positive and proactive work going on with parishes and towns, RBC could usefully develop a public strategy or master framework that brings and presents all this work together. This would enable the council to monitor and co-ordinate this work in the round to make it even more effective. It would also help parish and town communities understand how and why RBC prioritises its related activities and resources in the areas chosen, and help them further engage with and influence related agenda and decision-making.

At a much bigger scale, significant change is on its way through the EMMCCA, Freeport and Development Corporation, as part of the developing sub-regional agenda. RBC’s Chief Executive chairs the Ratcliffe-on-Soar forum that brings together these organisations with government, Uniper – the international energy company that owns the power station, the county council and other strategic partners. This is another clear example of RBC leading the development of strong, local partnerships. Through such work, RBC has explored some but not all the related risks and opportunities, especially its ‘known unknowns’. These include for

example how partners will work and fund future projects together in response to the developing sub-regional agenda. This prevents local businesses and RBC itself from working to their full potential – individually and together. They may even lose out or fall behind as a result of not exploring these known unknowns sufficiently. The council must therefore continue its good sub-regional partnership work outlined above, including its development of a regional strategic vision for economic and other growth. This vision will align and maximise all partners' work including that of the council, its development and community boards, and local businesses.

New housing is a key area where a vision and plans for growth need to be clear between all relevant partners, notably in relation to RBC's key priorities of the environment and sustainable growth, to make the most of everyone's resources and plans for these goals. The council has set up the Fairham Board, is setting up a Fairham parish council, developing a Supplementary Planning Document for the Gamston Sustainable Urban Extension as part of this. An overall vision and plans for growth would align and enable the best co-ordination of all this work with all partners, and help ensure that housing being delivered meets different needs as required.

Now is therefore a crucial time for RBC to create further time, space, resource and capacity with its strategic partners to identify what could be needed in future regarding these landscape changes. The council should also review whether all its partnership arrangements are fully strategic and delivering the priorities of, and value to, the borough. This will ensure, as these significant developing sub-regional agendas develop, that the council's partnerships, partners and all their work programmes contribute in the soundest way to these bigger agendas and make the most of these combined resources. RBC's successful, leading sub-regional work on the environment perfectly illustrates how the council can and should use its influence and involvement in other strategic sub-regional work areas such as skills and transport, where historically RBC has not yet played a leading role, to ensure the needs of the borough are best met.

#### **4.3 Governance and culture**

Councillors are mainly respectful, supportive and understand each other's role. RBC welcomed 20 new councillors after the May 2023 local elections, and has introduced a range of induction training and development to support them in their role.

There is a positive culture within the council generally, which is supportive and caring. Visible, in-person, 'practice what you preach' leadership from the Chief Executive and EMT has been a clear contributing factor to this. They work in the open plan council office alongside their staff and councillors, accessible and approachable to all. This positive culture extends to the proactive relations between senior management, staff trade unions, RBC's employee liaison group and staff more generally. Everyone feels valued and supported through this positive work culture.

Despite the range of support available, the peer team heard throughout its visit that not all councillors understand the role of officers and vice versa. Consequently, some councillors and officers are not undertaking their roles as strongly and efficiently as they could be. Officers for example can take councillors' questions as criticism, when councillors often just want to know how or why the council responds to various situations. This can lead to councillors asking fewer questions for fear of offending officers, hindering their understanding of how the council operates and relations with officers. Some officers can spend significant time drafting and presenting reports to councillors at meetings on issues that do not require this level of formality or operational detail. RBC should therefore provide further training and enable all councillors and officers to understand each other's roles and codes of conduct, and consequently make the best use of all their time. It is key that the council ensures as many councillors as possible take up such training whilst the current Council and opposition are still relatively new, including the 20 new councillors since the May 2023 local elections. Training and development on this, which the LGA can provide, will help officers and councillors resolve any remaining problems and best work together throughout this electoral term and beyond.

Scrutiny is a key council function, and the developing sub-regional agenda will make that function even more so. It is therefore crucial that this function is robust across the council's four scrutiny groups. The Corporate Overview Group has a good handle on scrutinising council performance, and planning the work programmes of all the scrutiny groups. The role and definition of successful scrutiny however is not clear. Neither therefore is it clear whether the scrutiny function is taking the best actions and decisions. The peer team also heard mixed messages about scrutiny throughout its visit. Scrutiny recommendations could be more precise and proactive instead of being to 'consider' action or information. The RBC's matrix approach and form could



be enhanced, so scrutiny requests outline what needs to happen, rather than just what needs to be understood. The matrix approach could also be more transparent at officer and Corporate Overview Group level, so it is clear how each submission was considered and actioned. This would particularly help reassure councillors who see their submissions go into the “bureaucratic machine” for hidden officer, rather than open councillor, consideration. Some councillors also felt that scrutiny is not working for opposition councillors. Given these mixed messages, RBC should consider undertaking a comprehensive review of its scrutiny function, the role and number of overview and scrutiny groups, processes and procedures, aligned with progressing RBC’s corporate strategy, with councillor engagement at its core. This would help clarify the role of scrutiny, each group, and improve related processes.

Many risks have been identified, through the corporate risk register and elsewhere. Proactively identifying risks is a positive but there are too many at the corporate level for the council to effectively manage. Sometimes identified risks have no detail beyond being a heading in a report, nor have any high level mitigations to address them. The council has undertaken related work recently following detailed training from its auditors. RBC should therefore build on this work to address these issues further. RBC should be clear which risks are to be managed at corporate and service levels, ensure corporate risks in particular are clearly identified, prioritised, strategic, fewer in number with robust mitigations, and then manage those risks – both at corporate and service levels.

The peer team also heard that the council is risk aware, not least regarding its financial and corporate ambitions – or at least communicating those ambitions, as mentioned elsewhere in this report. The council should therefore strengthen its approach to risk at both corporate and service level, again through a potential joint central programme, project and performance function.

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

The peer team was impressed with RBC’s:

- clear, five-year MTFS to 2027/28
- robust financial planning process, reporting and scrutiny in the context of the council’s latest corporate plan

- prudent and measured management of its finances, its debt-free position, and plans to maintain its total reserves at around £12 million for the MTFS' duration
- credible plans to deal with its budget gap of £1.5 million in the last three years of the MTFS through in-year variations funded from its reserves.

External and internal auditor were equally impressed with RBC's management of its finances and its responses to audit recommendations generally. Both auditors said the council provided "substantial assurance" for design and controls of its main financial systems, and collecting and banking income from charging market traders, with just one 'low' finding related to each. These approaches would have contributed to RBC receiving a rare unqualified, scrutinised external audit letter for 2022/23.

RBC has allocated £1 million of reserves to assist capital programmes related to its corporate priority of environment – to be carbon neutral by 2030 - and flooding work. This work's project sponsor is a council deputy chief executive who follows the delivery of the climate change action plan. Given these significant plans and funding, central, aligned project, programme and performance management functions would help ensure everything required is delivered to time, quality and within budget.

The council has a positive, robust and considered approach to its finances, alongside its debt-free status. This is to be commended, especially in light of its successful delivery of many significant capital projects, housing allocations and its plans with strategic partners for the Ratcliffe-on-Soar site. RBC does however need to communicate its next round of ambitious corporate, financial including investment plans widely so residents, partners and other local stakeholders are reassured how the council is building on these successes. The council's desire to maintain its current financial standing is understandable but RBC should make the most of its available financial options and communicate its plans to generate future revenue streams, undertake proactive cost prevention and make further savings. The council could also make the most of funding across council and sub-regional priorities, for example by developing and delivering with partners a shared vision for growth, and combining work and deliverables around new and related housing, skills and environmental agendas. RBC should as part of this explore how to maximise any devolution related investment opportunities. It should also consider how to make the most of its rural context to continue leading the way in delivering its statutory

environmental duties, such as to protect and enhance biodiversity as well as deliver net gain. New financing initiatives need not decrease the council's finances overall if RBC plans and delivers them well. Indeed, activities and investment of this kind could replenish and boost RBC's future reserves, as key potential national risks present themselves, such as any negative impact of the forthcoming national business rates reset and other longer term funding issues.

The council should work with its councillors and officers now to test and develop their appetite to take on future debt if there is a strong business case to do so. This will ensure that if the need to take on debt ever arises, the council will have a clear, collective stance to make these decisions in a timely way.

At the beginning of a financial year, RBC openly presents and agrees any revised budget required alongside its original budget figures, and compares it with its outturn. This highlights amounts carried forward from the previous year, which RBC effectively manages in light of the original budget. Nevertheless, the peer team heard and would advise against using revised budgets as standard practice. This is because it provides managers with less incentive to stick to originally agreed budgets, which could lead to unnecessary budgetary problems over time. It also makes it harder to understand the level of variation from original budgets, which could make it harder to manage, scrutinise and agree future budgets.

The peer team feels that RBC could build in regular constructive, supportive challenge of its income generation and financial plans, and commission an external, independent review of its assets and their future commercial potential. This would help ensure the council considers all avenues to maximise its income, strengthen its future reserves, and manage its assets and finances even better, in its spirit of "complacency is our enemy". RBC is already planning to undertake a strategic asset review, which will help this suggested work.

Additionally, the council is working on its existing capital programme, which it should further develop and align with RBC's economic growth strategy once it has agreed the latter for 2024/25, with clear outcomes for both. The economic strategy aims to help the council better understand the diversity of its local economies, and where to focus efforts and resources to help businesses build resilience, adapt and improve productivity. RBC's capital programme allocates specific resources to key corporate

priorities including sustainable growth. Aligning the capital programme with the economic growth strategy, once the council has agreed the latter, will strengthen and highlight synergies between, and the importance of both. The council has healthy finances, which it could make the most of in related ways, not only to deliver its key priorities but to strengthen its finances further, generate income and so on.

#### **4.5 Capacity for improvement**

As outlined earlier in this report, the strong, positive role of, and engagement with ExMT throughout the council has created a supportive working environment for staff and councillors. RBC's 2023 staff survey results reflect this positive environment, with clear improvements made over the last decade. The council has also supported work on staff mental health.

There is also a range of good staff training, development and support mechanisms, whether people want to progress their career, do their current job better, or required bespoke, personal support, depending on their needs. Such a supportive and developmental culture may help explain why staff retention is good, with many officers having worked at the council for years and often decades.

Staff, not least via the council's employee liaison group and the trade unions, feel positive about the implementation of corporate actions relating to internal EDI work practices and initiatives. RBC is setting up an equalities group, with East Midlands Councils acting as a supportive 'critical friend'. The equalities group recognises it has fulfilled mandatory requirements, has identified neurodiversity as a new area of focus, and wants to further consider individual teams' needs. RBC now needs to support the group corporately to undertake the scale of work required to embed and inclusive culture across the council. Learning from this work can then be applied to other areas of corporate improvement such as resident and business engagement.

RBC continues to develop its approach to flexible working, not only for existing but for future staff through the Everyday Flex@RBC programme, due to be launched in 2024. Co-designed with managers, this programme offers a more consistent approach to flexibility across the council. The council is competing with neighbouring local authorities to recruit to vacancies. RBC therefore hopes by promoting Everyday Flex@RBC, it will attract new applicants and indeed recruits.

The council has also reviewed its approach to recruitment, identifying that curriculum vitae is a better way to engage with applicants. RBC supports service teams across the council to address recruitment issues and as a result, for example, has recruited staff rather than used agencies for its planning function. Where it is difficult to recruit, RBC should consider how further to increase resilience, including exploring more development and progression pathways and potential shared services.

As mentioned earlier, there is a clear 'golden thread' from RBC's corporate priorities to its service plans but not all staff know the council's key priorities nor their role in delivering them. So the 'golden thread' does not consistently extend to each member of staff via the appraisal system, on-going regular 1:1s, and other support to staff. The peer team therefore suggests RBC should strengthen the 'golden thread' to individual level. Following the council adopting its refreshed corporate strategy in December, individual appraisals are happening until the end of April, which should take account of the strategy and enhance its link to the individual level.

The council is a lean organisation. Many staff are working at full capacity, and if one member of staff is off work for any amount of time, it can put further pressure on remaining staff to deliver others' as well as their own work. Plenty of support is available to staff in an already supportive environment but there is the potential for this pressure to grow if any capacity issues are not addressed. Vacancies could put further pressure on remaining staff and exacerbate any situation further. RBC therefore needs to build its resilience, through its appraisal system, day to day management of staff, and bolster its succession planning consistently across all service teams to address and prevent any such pressures. This will ensure that its staff are best supported, developed and can continually give their best and deliver to residents, visitors and businesses of the borough. Succession planning is especially key where only one person undertakes certain tasks and may suddenly need to take time off, and when long-serving staff leave, taking their years of knowledge and experience with them, potentially leaving gaps in their teams to deal with. RBC's work to progress innovation and develop generative artificial intelligence to enhance customer and potentially other services, could significantly help support staff.

The council also needs to review its corporate values on the simple basis that the current 11 values are too many. This is making it difficult for all staff to remember, understand, differentiate between and ultimately live them all. Reviewing and

reducing RBC's values with staff, the trade unions and the employee liaison group, to a more focused and manageable number, five for example, would make the values far more effective and likely to be lived. This work could be further embedded throughout the council via an effective launch and continued promotion.

Staff from across RBC take part in national and regional programmes to share and learn from others. These include working with the District Councils' Network whereby RBC's Chief Executive is the region's representative, East Midlands Councils and Solace programmes, and other county-wide groups. The council participates in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire environmental schemes, and learns from other councils. RBC's Section 151 Officer attends the Society of District Council Treasurers. Along with its wealth of other strong partnerships, RBC is clearly working well 'with' a range of organisations. The peer team heard much less however about how the council learns 'from' others, especially at the sub-regional level, where significant work is happening. This means RBC could potentially miss out on new ways to work more efficiently and strategically as an already strong council that can make the most of such opportunities. The council should therefore promote its work and seek learning far more widely, as RBC could gain so much in doing so. This includes: increased morale and learning from celebrating the successes of such joint-working, wider recognition from others, which could encourage them - especially at sub-regional level - to work and share resources and learning with the council to further achieve and exceed its corporate goals.

A small but significant internal procedural risk relating to councillors was highlighted to the peer team. RBC's approach to internal procedures across the council is generally strong. Many councillors have already taken up relevant training but some have not, or are not consistently applying what is required. One small mistake could quickly cause a serious council-wide, if not wider incident, which could impact on stakeholders. The council should therefore look to address this issue as soon as possible, by ensuring, possibly enforcing, that all councillors undertake mandatory, essential or other training or refresher training required and abide by related protocols to best safeguard RBC's internal procedures.

#### **4.6 Environment**

RBC consistently leads the way locally in raising the importance of the climate

change agenda through its cross-boundary partnerships. Many neighbouring and sub-regional partners also look to the council for support on this agenda. The council's Chief Executive chairs the Nottinghamshire Environmental Strategy Working Group of local authority partners. This group shares learning and identifies strategic collaborative opportunities to reach operational net zero – the state in which greenhouse gases going into the atmosphere are balanced by their removal out of the atmosphere - by 2030. The Leader of the Council, who is also the Cabinet Member for Transport and the Environment on Nottinghamshire County Council, influences the county's agenda from Rushcliffe's perspective. RBC is also the partnership lead for environmental issues within EMMCCA's devolution programme.

The council is using its environmental partnerships to successfully lever in additional funding to support delivery. RBC has successfully acquired funding through these means for its green retrofit programme, whereby the council is already exceeding its targets for this programme and is “chomping on the bit” to achieve more. The council has also launched the county's Green Awards app for local residents, which RBC developed with local universities, the app's creator Jump and the eight other councils in Nottinghamshire to influence behavioural change towards net zero. There may be opportunities for the council to commit and attract funding to enhance the app to further achieve RBC's and its partners' environmental goals. RBC is also awaiting the outcome of its submitted bid to the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme, having successfully bid for Salix funding in the past to reduce carbon emissions. The council should therefore make the most of these successes and work, its strong partnerships and its enhanced ambitions through the annual or mid-term, light-touch refresh of its corporate strategy to attract further funding to deliver its key priorities across the whole council. RBC receives relatively little external funding. The council should therefore maximise financial potential via these partnership routes.

Through its already successful partnership work and influence, RBC should also ensure a clear commitment in the EMMCCA devolution deal to secure the scale of investment required to address the impact of transport as the main contributor to carbon dioxide. The council is developing a strategic growth narrative relating to climate change, again making the most of its existing knowledge and experience in this field, through its work with D2N2 - the Local Enterprise Partnership for Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. Skills delivery in particular provides

opportunities for RBC and its partners to support the delivery of a green economy. These activities will not only make the most of RBC's highly respected leadership and other roles, knowledge and experience with its partnerships but also ensure Rushcliffe's residents and other stakeholders' interests are best addressed through these wider agendas. The council should use its sizeable placemaking agenda to accelerate net zero delivery as part of its corporate priorities. RBC has already adopted supplementary planning policy and uses its own Abbey Road and other developments to promote good practice. The council should also consider partnering with developers to explore how together they could create sustainable heat networks – for which government capital grants funds are available - for new and existing communities. There may be further opportunities for RBC to consider an affordable housing programme and potential housing revenue account as part of all this.

The council plays a proactive and positive role in a variety of environment related work within the borough of Rushcliffe itself. RBC manages and maintains its clean and tidy local environment through its committed Streetwise (street scene) and waste services with partners. The council brought Streetwise in-house, which appears to have been a positive move, enabling a rebalance of the delivery of service outcomes alongside income generation. It is additionally changing its vehicle fleet's fuel from diesel to biofuels and is developing local area energy plans.

The Environment Act 2021's duties around biodiversity net gain (BNG) and conserving and enhancing biodiversity presents RBC with various positive options, which the council understands but should further acknowledge and progress corporately. This could be an area for potential investment - identifying additional land for carbon offsetting, as reception sites for BNG credits and so forth, when developers cannot provide increased biodiversity on their sites. This is harder for urban areas, where developers will pay for enhanced biodiversity to be provided elsewhere. RBC however, as a predominantly rural council, has a range of potential tree planting, agricultural land – including potentially good host sites – and other BNG receptor sites. It also has established relationships and specialist partners such as the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust. It is therefore well placed to offer sites to provide new habitats for neighbouring council areas that may struggle in this regard. Where this is taken up, this could also provide additional long term funding.

An increasing pressure is the need to continue and expand the current waste



collection offer, which is constrained by the limited capacity and condition of the Eastcroft depot. This pressure will only increase as councils prepare for forthcoming statutory weekly food waste collections across Nottinghamshire from 2027, as RBC continues to change its vehicle fleet's fuel from diesel to biofuels, and in light of the borough's growing population. RBC has explored options and locations for new or additional depot capacity within the borough, with partners, to address these issues. It concluded that the Eastcroft depot is the best option for the next five to ten years, and is already sharing with the best located authority. RBC is nevertheless open to ideas, which is where promoting more what the council is doing with partners and what it is looking to achieve could inspire new thinking and opportunities. The council could also consider further education and engagement activity with its communities in the lead up to the introduction of food waste collection in March 2026, such as the FoodSavvy campaign, which could decrease such waste from the outset.

All round, the council is undertaking a lot of environmental activity, has developed and is delivering against a climate change action plan through a corporate team, and there are many more options for RBC to explore and develop, not least through the Environment Act 2021. The council does though need to further articulate and promote this work, with the help of any emerging and aligned corporate project, performance and programme management function. This will clarify what RBC and its partners are individually and jointly doing and funding towards their own and partnership goals and priorities. Co-ordination of this sort could also measure, monitor and address performance of key deliverables. This would give the council a clear sense of what is making the most impact, which it can share and progress further with its partners, again making the most of those collective resources towards a joint, co-ordinated agenda.

Another key co-ordination point is that communities and businesses do not appear to be clear how they can contribute to RBC's climate change ambitions. Given that the actions of both cohorts are vital to this agenda and will impact on them as well, the council should look to clarify and promote what communities and businesses can do to contribute and incorporate those contributions into the co-ordination work suggested above. This would make those contributions clear, which the council could measure, monitor and enhance to further its environmental ambitions.

Additionally, RBC is working with local universities through the Environmental

Strategy Working Group, has a Big Business Carbon Club, and smaller businesses are engaged with community groups and the Green Rewards App. This work should also align with the council's climate change action plan if it does not already, to develop a shared understanding of priority actions and how to progress them to address climate change and share best practice to benefit all. RBC has had an energy audit of its assets, which has informed its carbon reduction plan. It could additionally consider developing a co-ordinated plan with partners to enhance energy efficiency of all these assets together, possibly through the [One Public Estate](#) programme. This would again enable the sharing and learning from best practice.

There is also more potential for RBC to use its development and growth agenda to reflect its ambition for environment and climate change. Once the council has developed and agreed its economic growth strategy for 2024/25, RBC could work more closely with its green businesses through that strategy to also support the council's environmental goals. The council could also explore delivery models such as a housing company that allow it to showcase exemplar net zero homes that it builds. Additionally, with the environment being one of the council's key priorities and can be addressed in many different ways, RBC should thoroughly explore each service area for related opportunities, and integrate these climate change ambitions within each service plan. These are just some examples of how RBC could take this whole priority agenda forward in its widest and most fulfilling sense.

## 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 CPC. The CPC process includes a progress review within twelve months of the CPC, which provides space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the recommendations from this report.

In the meantime, Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser for the East Midlands, is the main contact between your council and the LGA, and is available to discuss any further support your council requires via his email address at [mark.edgell@local.gov.uk](mailto:mark.edgell@local.gov.uk) or via telephone on 07747 636910.