May 2014

Dear Chris

**Buckinghamshire County Council - Corporate Peer Challenge**  
31st March – 3rd April 2014

On behalf of the peer team I would like to say what a pleasure and privilege it was to be invited into Buckinghamshire County Council to deliver the recent corporate peer challenge as part of the Local Government Association (LGA) offer to support sector led improvement.

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

- Pete Bungard – Chief Executive, Gloucestershire County Council
- Councillor Martin Hill – Leader, Lincolnshire County Council
- Claire Porter – Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Shropshire Council
- Catherine Staite – Director, INLOGOV, Birmingham University
- Siobhan Coughlan – Programme Manager, Local Government Association
- Paul Clarke – Programme Manager, Local Government Association

**Scope and focus of the peer challenge**

The peer team looked at the areas considered by all LGA corporate peer challenges in the context of your plans for the future:

1. Understanding of the local context and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and has it established a clear set of priorities?
2. Financial planning and viability: Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?

3. Political and managerial leadership: Does the council have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?

4. Governance and decision-making: Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?

5. Organisational capacity: Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

In addition you asked for the peer team’s observations and feedback on:

- Member-led governance: the work you are doing to develop a culture where officers have a clear understanding of the role of elected members.
- Demand Management work you are doing to prevent, reduce or divert demand away from high-cost council services, and whether you are going far enough.
- How well you are doing in meeting your commitment to seek value for money across the full range of services for residents and communities.

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement-focused and tailored to meet individual councils’ needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council’s own performance and improvement focus. 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 team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 4 days onsite at Buckinghamshire, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 100 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 30 meetings and additional research and reading, and a pre-challenge visit on 11th March.
- Collectively spent more than 250 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 7 weeks in Buckinghamshire.
This letter provides a summary of the peer team’s findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (31st March – 3rd April 2014). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

**Summary of feedback: overall observations and messages**

Buckinghamshire County Council is a strong, stable and self-aware organisation. It is clearly a well-run council with a track record of notable achievements. There is an array of impressive and notable practice. Overall resident satisfaction is increasing, and the Council has a good grasp of the strategic challenges moving forward informed by a strong understanding of the place and its priorities. There is much to celebrate and be proud of, but you are determined not to be complacent about the scale of the task ahead and are proactively planning for the future. We experienced a council that wants to move from ‘good to great’ and in doing so can be confident to push further and faster on its transformation journey and key priorities. Our feedback is delivered very much in the context of helping you do this.

There has clearly been effective management of the financial challenges at Buckinghamshire. The achievement of significant savings to date, prudent use of reserves, robust monitoring and scrutiny, and the effective management of over spends have combined to put you in a position of relative financial strength. A comprehensive medium term financial strategy includes well-developed plans to plug the future budget gap. Key indicators of financial performance suggest you are financially resilient compared to many other local authorities including county councils in particular.

The Council is working effectively in many areas through a range of partnerships, strategic relationships and service delivery vehicles to provide successful interventions and outcomes. We saw and heard about an array of effective examples including the work with districts on community safety, business-led economic development through Bucks Business First, and the Buckinghamshire Learning Trust. The deliberate plurality of delivery vehicles including outsourcing, community-based services, trusts, trading companies and contracts is clearly focussed on enabling more flexible ways of working and designed to help the organisation become more cost conscious and effective. This all stands you in good stead as you continue your focus on being a ‘commercially-minded’ council.

There is a widespread recognition, understanding, and acceptance across the organisation that the current operating model and ways of working will need to evolve further to meet the challenges of the future. We were impressed with the extent to which officers, members and other stakeholders were aware of a new
‘Future Shape’ operating model being developed. This provides a very strong position as you start to design the detail of the model and continue the work on developing the structure, culture and skills that will be required to make Future Shape a success.

The desire and drive to be a councillor-led organisation is very evident, and there is genuine passion, pride and belief in it across members and officers. The range of activities and work undertaken as part of the ‘Think Councillor’ programme have clearly enabled a great deal of progress towards the creation and embedding of a culture where officers have a clear understanding and appreciation of the role of elected members. The sound governance and decision-making arrangements that are in place, along with the good relationships and mutual respect that exist between members and officers, have contributed to this too.

As you continue to design and develop the Future Shape model there will be a need to carefully consider the various roles of elected members to ensure structures and behaviours enable effective involvement in strategic and corporate decision-making and commissioning as well as a focus on monitoring performance and holding to account. Being clear where the ‘power base’ lies in the new model will be important, ensuring that cabinet members and senior officers are able to debate and commission corporately and strategically. You understand the need for this cross-cutting focus, and many of the processes and structures to enable and promote it are already in place. However, we did see some signs of silo behaviour during our visit, and elements of the current Future Shape proposition may serve to reinforce this, rather than facilitate the collegiate behaviour required.

**Summary of feedback: priority setting, financial viability, leadership, governance and capacity to deliver future ambitions**

**Understanding of local context and priority setting**

The Council has a strong understanding of the area and its’ fit within the surrounding region. Members and officers speak knowledgeably about the dynamics and characteristics of the county, particularly regarding the economic drivers and constraints and the demographic changes and challenges. Engagement with the community and stakeholders, facilitated through a range of mechanisms such as the 19 Local Area Forums, regular surveys and forums, and service specific consultation helps to shape and inform Council’s priorities summarised in the Strategic Plan. The priorities – focusing predominantly on the economy, transport network, the environment and protecting vulnerable people - look relevant given the local context.

You are well aware of the challenges presented by pockets of deprivation, high house prices, and significant variation in life expectancy across the county. The
county has the fastest growing population of all county areas, and has an ageing population and increasing birth rate. Informed by these challenges and context, and the associated financial challenge, you are developing an impressive range of plans and approaches, particularly in terms of your focus and work on demand management. The ‘Prevention Matters’ programme, designed to reduce the anticipated increase in the Council’s expenditure on social care by 25% through to 2016, is a great example of this and is understandably attracting interest from other places (nationally and internationally) who want to learn from it.

As ‘Leader of Place’ the Council has demonstrated a willingness to respond to local issues and champion causes identified on behalf of the county’s communities and stakeholders. An obvious example of this is the opposition to HS2, where you have acted on what looks to be a good mandate from the community and helped to secure good partnership investment in the campaign.

You have a thorough appreciation of the challenges created as a result of poor roads and infrastructure. This is a key issue, not just in terms of resident satisfaction but as a key element of realising other ambitions and aspirations for the County, not least enabling and supporting economic growth. We know you are keen to invest and do more. You are for example considering plans to bring forward proposals for a bypass for Aylesbury and have already allocated additional resources into the highways maintenance programme. We appreciate the difficult challenge of injecting additional resource at a time of reducing corporate funds. But given the falling public satisfaction and the extent of parish and councillor concerns we posed the questioned of whether there are further options which could be considered to enable investment into this important local priority?

Financial planning and viability

There has clearly been strong and effective financial management to date. There is a continued commitment to financial stewardship with a good grip on the future challenges and their implications and impact on Buckinghamshire. The Council has achieved significant savings (£85 million) to date through efficiencies and service reductions. The External Audit for 2012/13 concluded there were good arrangements in place for financial governance, financial planning, and financial control. You have maintained a healthy level of reserves: the non-earmarked general fund is currently greater than 10% of the value of the net revenue budget (many authorities aim to hold a minimum of 5%). Compared to many other local authorities (county councils in particular) you are in a strong and resilient financial position.

Looking ahead, the Medium Term Financial Plan is comprehensive, shows detailed figures for services through to 2017/18, identifies relevant risks, and looks to provide well-developed and realistic proposals to deliver most of the £49 million savings required over the next four years. There is a clear ambition of the Leader that the
Council becomes more self-sufficient of Central Government funding. We have already mentioned your understanding of demographic changes and associated financial challenges being addressed through your work on demand management.

Elected members are clearly very involved and positively engaged in the budget planning process, and play a key role in monitoring performance against it. The Cabinet considers a quarterly Balanced Performance Scorecard and Joint Budget Monitoring Report, whilst scrutiny members have been engaged in a robust, thorough and comprehensive annual budget scrutiny process culminating in a comprehensive report and recommendations for Cabinet to consider on the 2014/15 draft budget proposals. The Regulatory and Audit Committee is also well regarded.

There are some key financial challenges which you have yet to fully manage or mitigate. For example, you are aware of overspend in Children's Services and we know you are beginning an in-depth exploration and analysis to understand what is causing the demand and cost pressures. We think this might be a good opportunity for more cross-council ownership and resolution. Currently the emphasis in these scenarios seems to be on individual portfolio holders and services to come up with mitigating plans and proposals.

**Value for Money (VFM)**

You have made an explicit commitment as a Council to provide excellent value for money (VFM) and there are many examples of how it is taken seriously and features in both member and officer led work across the organisation. This includes work such as the Environment, Transport and Locality Services Select Committee requesting a value for money review of Transport for Bucks, a scrutiny-led review of Section 106 agreements and the role of the Regulatory and Audit Committee in considering the External Audit Opinion and VFM conclusion.

The Council continues to be committed to looking at ways of becoming lower cost, more productive and generate a better return on investment. You have moved to a ‘corporate landlord’ approach and there are good examples of property asset management to release buildings, positive investment in County Hall refurbishment, and the purchase of surrounding ‘derelict’ public buildings such as the police station, and libraries. Commercial thinking and income generation are clearly features of how the organisation does business. The Energy for Waste contract has been challenging to implement, but has now effectively created a solution to the spiraling cost of waste disposal. The innovative financing of it will almost certainly deliver further financial benefits.

You have deliberately implemented a range of delivery vehicles including outsourcing, community-based services, trusts, trading companies and contracts which focus on being more cost effective and flexible working than the status quo.
Whilst this provides a complex commissioning and delivery environment, you feel it is challenging the organisation to be more cost conscious and find ways of continuing to deliver services and outcomes in a more cost effective way. Some of the delivery vehicles are innovative but we challenged whether the full potential of all opportunities is being maximised. The Buckinghamshire Care model for instance is impressive but only involves £9million out of £140million gross spend on adult services. There is no firm plan to extend the services to be delivered by the Trust. This appears over cautious and a missed opportunity to secure ongoing VFM.

The Council spends significant monies on commissioning and procuring goods and services (in excess of £290 million in 2012/13) and therefore as well as ensuring VFM, the Council has a duty to consider the Social Value of this spend. The Public Services (Social Value Act) was passed at the end of February 2012. The Council therefore is required to consider how the services they commission and procure might improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the area.

You recognise the increasing need to focus on VFM in light of the continued development of the organisation as a ‘commercial council’. The importance of contract management has been recognised and you are now putting in place the necessary plans to develop the required skills across the organisation as well as reviewing current processes and practice to make this more robust. We think you are right to do this and that you will also need to monitor progress to ensure this is embedded. We posed the question of whether ‘commissioning’ skills also need to develop further to ensure there will be effective challenge to existing spend and a focus on greatest need.

The Council is likely to see rapid change as a consequence of the Future Shape strategy that will, we think, introduce significant risk to some of the proposed Business Units. In particular Support Services appear vulnerable in terms of its position to offer value for money services that delivery units will wish to purchase. As the Business Units develop you will need to ensure there is a balance of enabling them to have appropriate freedom and flexibilities whilst staying aligned with Council priorities and policy.

Political and managerial leadership: Member-led governance and ‘Think Councillor’

The drive for ‘member-led’ governance has had a strong impact across the Council. It has successfully raised members’ profile and focus on their priorities. The ‘Think Councillor’ initiative is clearly working as a means of putting members at the heart of the organisation, and creating and embedding a culture amongst officers whereby they consider when and how to involve and engage members about policy proposals and decisions.
Staff and members we spoke to suggested relationships and mutual understanding between officers and members had improved as a direct result of the ‘Think Councillor’ programme. Relationships between members and officers are regarded as positive and appear based on mutual respect. There is frequent liaison and interaction between senior officers and portfolio holders through Leadership Advisory Group (LAG), regular meetings and away days.

Portfolio holders are well versed in their subjects and oversee performance of their service areas well. They are clearly committed and passionate about their role, and are very empowered to lead their portfolio through delegated decision-making. However, we heard little about cross cutting work and co-operation between disciplines and questioned whether in the absence of formal role descriptions there needs to be more clarity about how and when major decisions achieve comprehensive and corporate ownership. Linked to this is ensuring senior members and officers understand and appreciate the ‘sensitivity threshold’ for delegated decisions, i.e. what triggers a more corporate approach to considering future challenges and opportunities. Our engagement with both officers and members suggest this might benefit from further consideration and clarity.

Ensuring there is sufficient time and space for the portfolio holders to meet as a ‘Corporate Cabinet’ focused on a set of shared corporate outcomes will be particularly important we think as you progress your implementation of Future Shape. This is currently at a critical stage and will need driving hard to fruition. Its’ success will depend on cultural and behaviour change and should be a catalyst for such we suggest. As the financial challenges become more acute, Cabinet will need to act more ‘collegiately’ to ensure a focus on those cross-cutting ways of reducing spend such as demand management and strategic commissioning. It will also help ensure a focus on future change and transformation and wider public service agenda and strategic partnerships, as well the current strong grip on council service performance.

The Leader has a very high profile and clearly commits a great deal of time and energy to his role. He is well respected and has had some impressive success with the economic partnership lead. We think this is a good template for future public sector leadership across the county. Currently there appears to be few opportunities for members to engage in wider public sector debates and the wider leadership of ‘Bucks the place’, as well as ‘Bucks the council’. In particular, the health and social care economy is facing many future challenges, yet there appears to be no machinery for politicians to participate in either sensitive debates or joint commissioning. It might be timely to re-visit this. In short, senior members should be allowed the capacity to give a strategic lead for the council and county.

Members are well supported to provide local leadership to communities. There are a range of examples of how the Council is empowering members to lead locally and enabling them to be responsive to communities. The delegation of a large portion of
the highways maintenance budget to local members for instance has enabled members to be directly responsible for allocating £30million to local road schemes since 2011. The Local Area Forums (LAFs) are well regarded and appear very active as a means of community engagement – including participatory budgeting - and help to determine the allocation of the devolved locality budgets to tackle issues of local importance. Individual members value their ‘Community Leaders’ budget.

We were impressed at how member-led the councillor development programme is at Buckinghamshire. The cross-party Member Development Working Group has overseen the ‘Think Councillor’ initiative, and played a key role in shaping a comprehensive member induction programme which was well received by those participating in it. We liked the model whereby each member of the Group acts as an advocate and champion for member development and has a responsibility for promoting it with a specific group of members. The Working Group is now focusing on achieving the Member Development Charter later this year as a way of seeking external challenge and validation of its programme and practice.

**Governance and decision-making**

As part of the drive to put members at the heart of the organisation, there has clearly been lots of work to ensure clarity, understanding and transparency of the decision making processes. We have already mentioned ‘Think Councillor’, but also noted the work you are doing on the report workflow process – i.e. clarity on what goes where and when in terms of officer reports to members. Council, Cabinet and Select Committee meetings are now webcast as a way of increasing transparency, and residents being able to sign up for electronic alerts of Forward Plan decisions is another good example. We have referenced the robustness of the budget scrutiny process previously.

The Regulatory & Audit Committee is well regarded and considered to be working well. The Committee has a strong focus on the Council’s Constitution and is, we understand, due to start considering developments and changes that may be required to support the Future Shape operating model. We know that officers are looking at the Council’s approach to risk management in this context too.

Notable improvements have been made to the overview and scrutiny function. There was almost a universal consensus from those we spoke with that the Select Committees introduced last year are effective and enable non-executive members to be involved in key strategic issues and policy development. The work programme for the Select Committees, determined by members, includes for example reviews of Transport for Bucks, and educational attainment (narrowing the gap) – both important priorities for the Council. We know you are already considering how the scrutiny function will need to evolve to provide robust challenge and holding to account in the new Future Shape operating model.
All of the above serves to illustrate that governance is taken seriously by the Council. You are clearly committed to ensuring that structures and processes are fair and open, and are aware of the areas that need further development. This is recognised in part by the recent achievement of the LGC Corporate Governance Award which acknowledges the member involvement in leading service reform, managing performance, providing challenge and monitoring and driving policy development.

Moving forward we think it will be critical to ensure that systematic challenge and ‘healthy tension’ remains a key part of governance at Bucks. As the organisation continues to develop through Future Shape and tackles future strategic challenges, a culture that enables robust and constructive challenge – both internal and external - of decision-making and key policy and strategy will be needed. We know you appreciate this and are already considering how the design of the Future Shape can best enable opportunities for this to systematically happen.

**Capacity to deliver**

You are proactively investing in developing new officer skills required by Future Shape. The emphasis on commercial skill and contract management makes sense given the new operating model proposed. There is a comprehensive ‘Commercial Academy’ programme in place which looks to provide an effective basic introduction to contract management and commercial awareness. However, the Council may also wish to consider signing up to the Cabinet Office and LGA Commissioning Academy to help build better commissioning skills both within the council and in local partners. We understand the Member Development Working Group is already considering how member roles in the new model will need to evolve and the development and support required.

The county has a strong volunteer base and residents have been willing to take on and/or co-deliver public services as a way of ensuring the provision continues, for example community-run libraries, day care provision and youth services. This provides an excellent basis on which to harness community capacity and you are rightly keen to explore and expand these further. It will be crucial to continue developing your understanding of how future volunteer capacity will evolve – e.g. understanding the age demographic and incentives of volunteers - and how you can shape and support that development through a strategic approach to engaging new and diverse volunteers.

To do this, you may need to consider how to evolve your strategic relationship with the voluntary and community sector in the future. There are clearly excellent individual relationships and examples of effective commissioning and joint working. With such a diverse and large number of charities in the county there may be a
need to consider how the Council can encourage the development of a better co-
ordinated sector and consistent engagement with it.

The Council works through a range of effective partnerships and working
relationships to harness, leverage and pool capacity and resources to deliver
services and outcomes. The work on community safety with district councils, fire
and police and the economic development work through the Bucks Business First
are two good examples of this. There are of course many other examples. The
work you are leading and co-ordinating on Welfare Reform and ‘Families First’ are
excellent examples of a genuinely multi-agency approach for the benefit of shared
customers. Partnerships established on a service or thematic basis are strong and
effective, but we questioned whether there might be scope for a more corporate
approach to cross public sector partnership working. There does not seem to be a
mechanism for this at the moment.

You appear to have workable relationships with district/borough councils, albeit with
some tensions and challenges which are not unique to Buckinghamshire. We were,
however, surprised by the lack of joint working given that Buckinghamshire was a
two-tier pathfinder. For example, we didn’t hear of any plans to develop shared
services arrangements or major collaborations.

The current Better Care Fund (BCF) proposition proposes an ambitious jump to take
in all primary and community health care, and council social care. This probably
represents the best chance in a decade to remove barriers to integrated services and
unlock prevention opportunities. We encourage you to maintain a focus on this.
Many councils see this as the key tool for driving integration containing costs and
avoiding cost shunting. We believe you need to invest in both Member and officer
strategic governance of this relationship. Clear plans will be needed to support the
delivery.

**Demand Management**

There is a good understanding about what demand management means for Bucks. You see an opportunity for radical change in how the Council does business by
developing an understanding of service user needs and taking a proactive approach
to managing the demands on services. You are rightly focusing on preventing,
reducing or diverting demand away from high-cost Council services. You also
recognise that within the context of a ‘commercial council’ some service areas may
be seeking to increase demand in order to maximise income.

There is an array of innovative projects and initiatives that manage down demand for
high cost services, by more effective interventions, or prevention activity that reduces
or postpones the demand for a service. The Chess Medical Centre, Families First,
CATCH, Prevention Matters and Welfare Reform projects are all impressive and
starting to yield tangible results. There are many further examples. In short you are doing lots and are clearly committed to your ambition of encouraging and enabling people to do more for themselves. But we think you can push further and faster with this agenda, building on the excellent start you have made.

The challenge for the Council is not proving the concept, but how to comprehensively mainstream and embed demand management across the organisation as a whole. As one person put it, how do you ‘industrialise’ some of the projects and initiatives? The concept is not yet embedded nor fully understood across the organisation as a whole. We would argue that it needs to become the first consideration in the future design of services and budget allocation. We know you have established a working group, chaired by the Director of Finance, to look at scaling up and mainstreaming some of the demand management projects/initiatives and encourage this to continue at pace with focus and momentum.

You recognise that demand management covers preventing service demand (e.g. through early intervention), addressing service failure that leads to demand (presenting and channel shift), and reducing or containing existing demand and usage. You appreciate that all of this needs to be underpinned by a comprehensive understanding of your service users, customer insight and improved communications. With that in mind your ‘Think Customer’ approach looks good. There is, though, more to do in terms of developing a corporate wide in depth understanding of customers and their behaviours. Your communication planning seems geared up for this, but you will need to ensure the continued development and implementation of the Digital Strategy underpins the roll out of Future Shape.

In taking your demand management approach further we think there is a need for a more strategic approach. This will help to maximise the opportunity to better target resources to those who need them. The preventative and early intervention agenda could, for example, be enhanced by managing demand more creatively using the ring-fenced public health budget by investing in the wider determinants of health, and potentially less on the current clinical focused activity. Some authorities, including Gloucestershire County Council (through their ‘active together’ programme) are mainstreaming public health monies to do just this.

**Future Shape**

Having identified the current operating model will need to change to meet future challenges, the Council has a distinctive proposal, with a particular emphasis on a ‘commercial’ approach that also includes a reliance on demand management and strategic commissioning. The need for a new approach is owned at depth in the organisation – we were impressed with the extent to which officers, members and other stakeholders were aware of a new operating model being developed. The
business case for the 'Future Shape' model, recently approved by Cabinet, rightly includes structural change, cultural change and skills investment.

The proposed model is ambitious, but appears to represent a logical direction of travel for the Council given its track record and current strengths. It is not without risk though. We appreciate detail is still being developed, but even at a senior level there is currently inconsistent views as to where the 'power base' will sit, and what that power base is about. You are fully aware of the need to incorporate both strategic commissioning and demand management approaches into the model but we think there is a risk that these may be weakened by the strength of the commercial 'brand'. We recommend that you 'turn up the volume' of the fundamental importance of strategic commissioning and demand management as being central to the Future Shape journey.

We believe some clarity is needed so that the proposed Business Units are seen collectively to be the power base, i.e. the home of strategic commissioning. It is here that we suggest full engagement of cabinet members and chief officers (Managing Directors including the DCS and DASS) as the commissioners of cross-cutting outcomes should sit. There is a risk that the model as currently presented promotes silo thinking. This will require very different skills and behaviour from cabinet members and officers, including collegiate behaviour and a focus on changing the business, not just sharpening performance. It will also need a clear focus on the corporate good, i.e. the need to monitor and assess performance across the organisation as a whole as opposed to purely within each Business Unit.

We also suggest there may be a need for the language to move on from 'holding to account' and a focus on doing the right things through monitoring and management, to an emphasis on meeting proven needs within the County. The proposed HQ role may be overstated and certainly capable of misinterpretation, Rather than being about 'setting and monitoring outcomes', it might more effectively be the home of support, assurance, advice and council process – so it is seen as an enabler rather than enforcer.

Our recommendations: suggestions and ideas for your consideration

The peer team developed some key suggestions for you to consider. These are based on what we saw, heard and read. Drawing on our experience of the sector and knowledge of local government improvement, we have made several suggestions throughout the letter of things you may wish to consider. The following are things we think will help you progress the work you have embarked:

1. Use the observations presented in this letter to inform your thinking as you continue to develop the detail of the Future Shape operating model.
2. Develop a more corporate approach to better tackle cross cutting issues in both officer and member structures.

3. Continue to evolve the focus of ‘member-led’ so that it is becomes more about using your position of strength and excellent reputation to lead the county as well as the council: ‘Think Bucks’.

4. Continue to consider and/or re-consider ways to meet the funding gap and address key priorities (such as highways maintenance).

5. Be confident. Use your financial position and draw on proven track record and achievements to provide the confidence to push further and faster on your transformation journey. Continue to be risk aware but not risk averse.

**Next steps**

You will undoubtedly wish to reflect on these findings and suggestions made with your senior managerial and political leadership before determining how the Council wishes to take things forward. As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of continued activity to support this. In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with you and colleagues through the peer challenge to date. We will endeavour to provide further information and signposting on the above to help inform your ongoing consideration and thinking.

I thought it helpful to provide contact details for Heather Wills who, as you know, is our Principal Adviser (South East). Heather can be contacted via email at heather.wills@local.gov.uk (or tel. 07770 701188). She is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Hopefully this provides you with a convenient and continued route of access to the Local Government Association, its resources and any further support.

All of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish you every success going forward. Once again, many thanks to you and your colleagues for inviting the peer challenge and to everyone involved for their participation.

Paul Clarke - Programme Manager (Local Government Support)
Local Government Association
On behalf of the peer challenge team