

ST HELENS MBC REVIEW

Introduction and Methodology

1. The LGA was invited by St Helens Borough Council to undertake a review of the culture with particular regard to the way relationships are conducted between Elected Members and officers in the Council. The key purpose of the review was to produce a report which demonstrates clear and robust analysis of Elected Member/Officer relations and behaviours, clear findings and explicit recommendations which will help the Council to be confident that Elected Member/Officer relations are clearly defined, professional and productive. It will also assist in planning effectively for the induction programme for any new Members joining the Council in May 2019. Elected Member/Officer relations was an issue identified during the recent Peer Challenge in the Council carried out by the LGA which reflected that:

“Difficulties within the ruling political Group over recent years have given rise to instances of poor member behaviour which is having a negative impact on the Council’s business and partner and public perceptions, which may put at risk the good relationships it has established locally and across the region. Appointments to the senior management team have brought valuable new skills and experience, but mean that some managerial leaders are relatively inexperienced in managing in a political environment. The change in political Leadership in April/May 2018 coincided with changes amongst the senior officer team and was made more challenging by the unforeseen illness of the Chief Executive. These events occurring simultaneously were disruptive.”

2. The report went on to say:

Members need to take stock of this, quickly resolve the underlying issues and consider the implications of individual behaviours. Some members believe that decision making processes are not always inclusive. In part this is a function of the executive and scrutiny governance model. But this perception may be mitigated by more effective processes and discussion within the ruling Group and further enhancement of the role of scrutiny. Officers have had a challenging political environment to navigate in St Helens. This has been exacerbated by changes in senior staff and the inexperience of some members of the Corporate Management Team (CMT) in working in a political environment, notwithstanding their technical and professional expertise. A number of people – both officers and members – spoke of the need for a better understanding of the distinct but complementary roles of officers and members and how they can most effectively work together to take forward the Council’s ambitions and priorities. The issues among members, combined with the need to enhance the skills and experience of CMT in managing in a political environment, is contributing to a disconnect between members and officers. The peer team would suggest a programme of leadership and wider development for members and officers to improve joint working and help reset the Council’s culture. This should build on the LGA’s member development programme that has been delivered to the ruling group over recent months.”

3. We also looked at the Code of Conduct for Members, as set out in the Council’s Constitution, that includes the high level requirements:

“When acting in your role as a member of the Authority:

1.1 DO treat others with respect.

1.2 DO NOT conduct yourself in a manner which is contrary to the Authority’s duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct of members.”

4. In addition, we looked at the protocol for Member and Officer relations that states:

“The relationship between Councillors and Officers is an essential ingredient that goes into the successful working of the organisation. This relationship within St. Helens Council is characterised by mutual respect, informality and trust.”

5. Over 3 days in the Borough, we spoke face to face to 37 Members from across the political groups, including all three Group leaders. We also spoke to officers in the Council, held a Trade Union focus group and had telephone conversations with a further four Members. We very much appreciated the welcome we received, the openness, honesty and professionalism with which people engaged in the process and the support provided in the lead up to, and during the course

of, the review. All Members of the ruling group were invited to attend a face to face session so we also heard separately by email from a few Members who were unable to attend on the 3 days we were in the Council.

6. We approached the review in the context of the Council's commitment to learning and improvement and its strong desire to ensure that it is a supportive, respectful and productive place for people to work and where Members get the professional advice and support that they need. We have identified some additional points to those highlighted in the Corporate Peer Challenge and described and made recommendations for changes that the Council may wish to consider as well as highlighting strengths in the organisational culture that should be built upon.
7. The review was undertaken by Sarah Messenger and Andrew Campbell, both consultants at the Local Government Association.

Executive Summary

8. It is clear from the many people with whom we spoke that the recent history of St Helens Council has been unique and not normal. A long period of consistency had given way to a period of extreme political and considerable administrative volatility, with some blurring of political and administrative boundaries. The Council has yet to reset and settle down to a new way of working which Members and officers alike understand, sign up to and implement.
9. Relationships between Members in the ruling group were generally characterised as poor and have resulted in a failure to provide the strategic political direction that is needed.
10. The knowledge, skills and experience of officers are generally well regarded and valued by Members but there is a clear need for constructive and productive joint working with Members on policy development and implementation. This will entail senior officers developing and maintaining effective relationships with all Cabinet Members not just the Leader
11. At the same time, Members are concerned about senior officers operating within the political space and want changes that will enable the council to be truly politically led.

12. All of this has resulted in the Members and officers lacking clarity about roles and responsibilities, poor or inappropriate communication and a culture which is unhealthy, abnormal and which needs to change.
13. Everybody we spoke to was weary of the culture and wanted things to change. People were unclear about what the change should look like and were wary of making the first step but we were heartened by the appetite for change expressed during this review. The council has continued to enjoy success over recent times despite the turbulent environment within which it has been operating. It is exciting to consider how much more will be achieved when the organisational reset is implemented.
14. This report contains a number of recommendations to address the challenges that the council faces. All are important in resetting the organisation which can only be achieved by Members and officers working effectively together to set and then deliver the Council's strategic priorities, and to do so in a way that deepens the current protocol. As part of this re-set it will be important to put in place quickly a **practically focussed joint development programme for senior officers and Elected members, externally facilitated, which provides an opportunity to explore and agree a 'Ways of Working Accord' to enable the existing joint Protocol to operate effectively.**

Member to Member relations

15. A small number of Members told us that, essentially, relations within the Council were fine. They said that, while there were tensions, they themselves got on with all Members and that they saw nothing beyond the usual rough and tumble of political debate.
16. The vast majority said that relations between Members, especially within the ruling group were poor. This was a consistent view from Members across the political spectrum with a few describing the situation as "horrendous." The primary concerns were reputational damage to the Council and the impact the environment would have on new Members joining the Council.
17. We were struck by the extent to which many Members were hoping that an outside agency could solve these problems for them. The recent Corporate Peer Challenge report does offer some solutions and indeed, this review is a direct result of that. There may also be a role for the Regional Labour Party but fundamentally change needs to come from within the council itself.

18. The issues run deep. We did not find that the tensions are primarily ones of geography (where some wards being seen as favoured over others when funding and other decisions are made) or of political ideology. They are personality based with different factions finding it impossible to forgive others for their past behaviour; the situation is compounded by a sense that no-one will get to grips with it, that there is insufficient opportunity for Members of the ruling group to discuss and decide policy moving forward and an over-reliance on email as the main means of communication with the use of 'all Group' emails being particularly divisive.
19. Some backbench Members told us that they were extremely frustrated by poor flows of information from Cabinet Members to the wider ruling Group. They understood that there would inevitably be some limitations on the information available to backbenchers, but their perception was that they felt less informed and engaged than they had in the past; and were all the more irritated when the first they heard about the administration's policy or decisions was when they read about them in the press (or when they were not told in advance, even as a courtesy, about decisions affecting their ward). Being fair, the propensity for information to be leaked would limit an ability to share information. It is positive that a policy development day had been held but we heard it had been used to hand down information rather than focus on development. Members may wish to reflect on how time spent together can maximise information exchanges, engagement, debate and inclusive decision-making.
20. On the other hand, we were told of Members who tried to unpick or delay decisions being made by saying that they were not at a relevant meeting. More generally, the lack of party discipline meant that Members were picking and choosing whether they went to meetings or not, impacting on the quality of decision making and of scrutiny.
21. We understand why attempts are being made to control the availability of information. A number of leaks to the press have occurred that have been both politically and operationally damaging and few things are more damaging to the morale and cohesiveness of a politically led organisation than persistent leaking. It was suggested to us, in the context of the ruling group, that there should be a more effective strategy for internal communications. We welcome the communications review that the council has initiated with support from the LGA as a means of helping improve the flow of business and consider a revised Protocol and Ways of Working Accord as an opportunity to provide clarity on who should communicate what and when. Some portfolio holders mentioned to us that they have organised ad hoc briefings for Members on specific issues. This is a welcome development and one that we would support being developed across a wider range of the Council's business a) as a means of engaging with Members on important issues and b) encouraging face to face dialogue.

22. Although the Peer Challenge team found that arrangements for scrutiny in St Helens appeared to be generally effective and adequately resourced, they were also told that poor member behaviour could be detrimental to effective scrutiny, officers and sometimes members can feel inappropriately challenged in scrutiny. The Peer Review found that the underlying behavioural issues needed to be addressed in order for scrutiny to be more effective. We are also clear that effective scrutiny depends upon necessary confidentiality being respected within the Council by those involved.
23. We were given several examples of Cabinet portfolio holders working well with Scrutiny Chairs in order to focus discussion in an appropriately challenging way. We would say it is entirely appropriate for Cabinet Members and Scrutiny Chairs to work together to produce a scrutiny programme that informs policy and this should be encouraged. We were also told that the webcasting of meetings was also having an effect on the way business was conducted. The majority view was that this was leading to better behaviour, although one or two instances were cited of individual Members of the ruling group grandstanding on issues in the knowledge that the panel was being broadcast or that a journalist was present, despite this being unhelpful to the way in which the public would perceive the administration.
24. We have not formed the view that the scrutiny system or mechanism in the Council needs reform although the alignment of the Panels with the Executive structure may need consideration. We were told that scrutiny is becoming more, rather than less, effective. That said, it should continue to be reviewed by the Council, not least because there have been some recent instances of scrutiny panels being inquorate.¹ This is concerning and will need to be addressed if the trend continues. Also poor Member behaviour and inappropriate challenge should be 'called out' as it risks damaging the impact and effectiveness of scrutiny.
25. We heard from some Members the view that positions in Cabinet and as Scrutiny Chairs were hotly contested was due to a desire to accrue the Special Responsibility Allowances that accompany certain posts in the Council. We note that allowances in St Helens are generally lower than in neighbouring Councils. The basic allowance (payable to all councillors) is lower than that payable to councillors in other authorities we have considered.² The same is true, where information is readily available, for the Chairs of Licensing and Planning Committees. Cabinet members in St Helens receive an allowance of £15,864. This is slightly more than in some nearby authorities but less than in others (for example, Executive Members in neighbouring Wigan receive £16,961).

¹ The most recent example was the Health and Adult Social Care scrutiny panel, scheduled for 25 March. Only two Members were present. It was also put to us that it was inappropriate for this panel to be chaired by the husband of the Cabinet portfolio holder for Health and Adult Social Care, if only because the possible perception of a conflict of interest.

² Liverpool, Wirral, Knowsley, Wigan and Oldham

26. It seems to us that the allowances scheme in St Helens is not an outlier compared to other authorities and does not, therefore, provide a sufficient explanation, on its own, for the behaviours that have been identified during this report and the Peer Challenge.
27. It was also suggested to us that it would be beneficial for responsibilities to be widely shared within the ruling Group and that not to do so ran the risk of losing expertise and knowledge. We were not convinced by this argument. Of the 41 members of the ruling Group, 9 (including the Leader) are in Cabinet. There were a further 2 Whips when we began our review,³ 1 chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and 5 chairs of Scrutiny Panels. There are also chairs of the Licensing and Environmental Protection Committee, the Planning Committee and several appointments to the Merseyside Police and Crime Panel, the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority, the Merseyside Recycling and Waste Authority, the Combined Authority and the Merseytravel Committee – and the Mayor and Deputy Mayor. In other words, the majority of Members have positions of responsibility within the Council and/or act as representatives and ambassadors for the Council in the wider city region.
28. We have concentrated in this report on the attitudes and behaviours within the ruling Group – as all but 7 Councillors are from the Labour Party and the problems of factionalism are within the ruling Group. However, the problems within the ruling group are obviously apparent to other political parties who believe that the reputation of the Council is suffering as a result.
29. The Peer Challenge team suggested a programme of leadership and wider development for members and officers to improve joint working and help reset the Council's culture, building on the LGA's member development programme that has been delivered to the ruling group over recent months. We endorse this suggestion but reiterate that the ruling Group itself has to take responsibility for its need to change and that there is a need for a collective 'moving-on' from the issues of the past. It was also suggested to us that it would be worth considering the mentoring of new councillors by more experienced members, potentially, from other Councils where arrangements are more normal than is the case in St Helens currently. This is worth considering within the ruling and other groups. **But we do recommend that the Council provides induction and support for new Members**, of all parties, following the May elections, in order to help them perform effectively, enable early face to face contact with senior officers and advise them on the support and advice they can expect from staff as well as including a session on the code of conduct expected of Members and the protocol on Member/Officer relations. We believe more should be made of the Member support available through the LGA to support the Council with this. **We would recommend that all Members engage more with LGA training**

³ The Chief Whip resigned during the course of it and had not been replaced at the time of the completion of our review

programmes so as to better understand what is normal. There is a risk that poor behaviours in St Helens become learnt behaviours by others and this has to be avoided.

30. One Member mentioned to us that problems within the Group were most prevalent when there was a lack of collective direction on a policy issue and that, where there was, the divisions within the Group became less pronounced and the tensions reduced to those that were to be expected and were manageable. We say more about the need to set a new strategic vision for the Council in paragraphs 54-56 below.
31. It's important to state that despite all of the difficulties listed above, everyone we spoke to wants things to be different. The challenge is not a lack of appetite for change but rather uncertainty about where the change will come from and what it will look like. This is important because we believe that the underlying desire for change provides optimism that these difficulties can be addressed and overcome by looking forward.

Member and Officer relations

32. Members were generally very positive about the support and advice they received from officers. Those with experience of working with or in other Councils said that the quality of senior officers in St Helens was as good or better than elsewhere.
33. Several Members recognised that years of austerity and the cuts in council staff numbers had placed a heavier workload on the staff who remained and that some experience had been lost to the council. However, they remained positive about the quality of advice they received and the spirit in which it was given. The protocol requirements of mutual respect, trust and, to a slightly lesser extent, informality were generally regarded by Members as being met. Officers also generally felt that one on one relationships with Members were consistent with the protocol requirements but that wasn't always the case when working with Members in meetings and other settings.
34. Several portfolio holders, and the senior officers with whom they work, referred to productive and regular one to one meetings that allow them to question and challenge in a constructive way. In small groups, we were told, Members and officers could work together creatively (in contrast to more muted interactions in larger groups or when there was a perceived corporate line to follow).
35. Several referred to the recently introduced Policy Cabinets as a way of gaining greater understanding across the range of the Council's business and helping Cabinet Members and senior officers alike develop a more collective appreciation of their work. . At the moment, the Policy Cabinets are functioning primarily as a means of updating Cabinet Members and the senior management team on the

top immediate and emerging issues. This was recognised as valuable although some hoped that the Policy Cabinets evolve to allow a more in depth discussion, from time to time, of tricky and complex longer term problems and opportunities for the Council. It was expressed that this was the intention and that it would allow Cabinet to better engage the wider Labour Group but this way of working is new to St Helens and will need time to mature. We regard the development of policy Cabinets as a welcome means of enabling Members and officers to share information and ideas and look forward to their further development, as hoped for by a number of people with whom we spoke.

36. However, there were further changes that people would like to see. Officers expressed a view that they would welcome more direction from the political level as regards priorities. At a high level, this was a desire for a clearer set of strategic priorities, shared by politicians and officers alike, that would help with the forward direction of and resource allocation within the Council. At a more routine level, some officers said that they would welcome greater dialogue (including challenge and the discussion of ideas) with the relevant portfolio holder and the wider Cabinet. At times, the emphasis seemed to be on transactional business, such as prepping Members on points to make in meetings. Several Members, usually not currently in the Cabinet, held a similar perspective. In this narrative, inexperienced Cabinet members were held to be relying on officers and in this situation officers were effectively taking important decisions. They added that it was regrettable in principle that the authority was not sufficiently Member led; and caused even further concern when austerity had required experienced staff to leave the authority.
37. That said, one or two Members noted that some of their colleagues confused their role with that of officers by wanting to get involved in the operational management of the authority. They were very much a minority – albeit a confident, forceful and influential one – and just as likely to speak in the same way to fellow Members; they were not behaving in one way to officers and in a different way to their political colleagues but it is important that respectful and professional behaviours are modelled at all times by everyone. All of this illustrates the importance of the council clarifying the respective roles of the Members (both the Executive and backbenchers) and officers in the decision making process.
38. A number of Members felt that officers had lost respect for the political decision making process. A minority thought that officers reacted defensively to legitimate, factually based questions and that binary answers were given to questions rather than officers seeking to understand why the questions were being asked and responding accordingly. In the worst cases, we were told, questions from Members to officers were left unanswered (including on fundamental issues such as the role of). That said, most of these Members recognised that pressure of other work led officers to giving binary answers and, even then, said that relations were “courteous and respectful.” One or two others pointed to examples where

information had not been given to them when it should have been, or decisions were taken where politicians should have been consulted, but these were thought to be isolated and accidental examples rather than deliberate and malicious. All of this illustrates how important it is that the Ways of Working Accord and Protocol provide clarity over when and where decisions should be made and by whom, as well as defining how they should be communicated and by whom.

39. Some Members also thought that front line officers were insufficiently proactive in dealing with problems. The main criticisms were that they lacked empathy and understanding for the role of Councillors and were unwilling to put themselves out of the town hall and talk to, or support, residents. Examples were given of failure to engage with Members who were fronting difficult development decisions with residents on behalf of the Council through to thinking themselves into the shoes of vulnerable residents who needed help and support from the Council. In their view, the processes of the Council were slow and routine, when help needed to be given urgently if bigger problems were to be avoided. There was a sense that initiative and measured risk were being avoided and that different Departments of the Council were not sharing information effectively. This was not a majority view but it was a concerning one. The Senior Officers will no doubt wish to consider whether officers are being sufficiently proactive on priority issues for the Council. The Chief Executive told us that he was keen to explore creating a closer link between officers and Ward Members perhaps by allocating senior officers to engage with Members on understanding issues specific to their Ward. **We think this idea has merit and recommend that it should be explored further.**

40. Many Members with whom we spoke specifically mentioned the Chief Executive. He was highly respected for his commitment to the borough, his professionalism and expertise; his dedication to his post through a difficult period before his ill-health and then while suffering from the ill health itself and his strategic capability. Several recognised that one reason for his appointment had been to bring a new perspective to the Council and to say things that might be uncomfortable for Members to hear. It is not an easy remit to provoke debate in an organisational setting where discussion can quickly take a confrontational rather than constructive tone. Fundamentally this is about quality, constructive and timely conversations between the Chief Executive, senior officers and Members so we would encourage more of that to be done face to face rather than by email.

41. All members were clear that in terms of the day to day activities of the council, first and foremost it was the role of the Leader to set direction and to politically hold Members to account. Many expressed their appreciation for, and an understanding of, his need to exercise de facto political and managerial leadership of the Council for a time under the previous Leader.

42. Members were equally clear that circumstances had now changed. The Chief Executive himself recognises that there is a need to return the Council to one where the political level is setting the strategic direction and making important

decisions, advised by officers. Officers will then implement the policies and decisions provided to them so it is crucial that the majority group take ownership of the political decision making process. The alternatives are inertia and lack of direction or a vacuum which may leave senior officers feeling that they need to fill. We had a strong sense from everyone we spoke to, Members and Officers alike, that they want to normalise working arrangements to that St Helens became less of an outlier and more typical of other Local Authorities.

43. The revised version of the Protocol and Ways of Working Accord should reinforce the key responsibility of Group Leaders in setting and maintaining the culture of Member behaviour whilst acknowledging that in isolated cases, for example linked to the statutory duties of the Council, there may be a need for the Chief Executive or other senior officers to step in.

44. **We endorse the recommendation** of the Peer Challenge team, which has been implemented, that *“the Council should consider providing additional capacity at Assistant Chief Executive level to support the change programme and assist the Chief Executive to improve co-ordination of political and managerial decision making and management of the interface with members. This will release time for the Chief Executive to lead the management of the authority, enabling him to deal with a wider range of key issues as they arise and become priorities for attention.”*

45. **We also recommend that new officers**, particularly those working at senior level who are likely to have regular interaction with Members, should receive as part of their induction information, support and training about working in political environment. It would also be beneficial to consider refresher training to a wider group of senior officers. This training has been provided to senior officers recently and should be made available to Members also so they better understand the context officers operate in.

46. In our conversation with the Chief Executive, he described the Council as somewhere that ‘gets things done and cares’. He believes they have significantly delivered not only in terms of achieving a balanced budget (indeed there has been a small underspend) but also cited integrated health and social care as well as high levels of economic growth as successes and that these were priorities set with the endorsement of the political level. That said, he is frustrated by what he considers to be a lack of trust and clarity about roles and responsibilities within the organisation that is undermining decision making causing officers to be unclear about what the priorities are. Conversely some of the Members we spoke to felt that the Chief Executive had failed to move on from the period when there was an absent Leader and needed to adapt his role and style to allow political leadership to flourish and the Chief Executive himself stated this was necessary. Examples were provided by both the Chief Executive and Members to support their views.

47. What is clear is that the unique and difficult circumstances that have occurred in St Helens has muddied the waters of how the Council should operate and that a lack of trust in and understanding of the political and managerial roles and responsibilities on all sides is not healthy or productive. The ways of working need to be normalised so that officers can step back from being in any space they should not and so that members can 'step-up' into that space. This normalisation of arrangements needs to be co-designed to be effective. **Consequently we recommend a practically focussed joint development programme for senior officers and Elected Members is put in place quickly, externally facilitated, which will provide an opportunity to explore and agree a 'Ways of Working Accord' to enable the existing joint Protocol to operate effectively.** The intention is not simply to amend or replace the Joint Protocol; instead it should provide an opportunity for Members and Officers to discuss and agree what their respective roles and responsibilities are, how they will behave to ensure they are all operating in an environment which is respectful, supportive and productive and how business will be conducted to maximise the flow of information to all Members, improve engagement with residents, enhance the speed and quality of decision making and fundamentally enable the Council to deliver the right outcomes for the people of St Helens. This has to be a process and outcome shaped and owned by all.

48. The focus group with the Trade Unions was helpful in providing us with a perspective on the experiences within the Council of the wider workforce. Trade Union colleagues emphasised the heavy impact that cuts and restructurings had had on their members over recent years but did acknowledge that things had settled down over recent times. They felt that some of their members did come under pressure from some Elected members to break or flout rules on occasions and that most would be afraid of complaining about such behaviour but that overall the issues they were dealing with in St Helens MBC were not noticeably worse than they encounter in other councils. They were positive about the relationship with the Chief Executive and felt that generally staff were well-treated by managers and Elected Members. They would welcome, and consideration should be given to, more regular, informal catch-ups with the Chief Executive and relevant portfolio holders.

Officer to officer relations

49. The Peer Review has highlighted that the Council is largely traditional in the way it undertakes its work. We would concur with that conclusion and believe there is a need to modernise the Council and how it operates. To achieve this, all Members and senior officers will need to reflect on how they can contribute to modernising the way they work. This includes all senior officers developing constructive and effective working relationships with all Cabinet Members, not just the Leader.

50. At a time when the political volatility has prevented a consistent sense of a common vision and purpose for the Council, the turnover of senior staff and the unforeseeable absence of the Chief Executive for a while has prevented officers from doing likewise. Some saw the Council as old fashioned, rigid and hierarchical in the way it worked. The need for change was recognised and greater flexibility would be welcome but the 'Adaptive Innovator' tag had to date been insufficiently precise to offer a guide for the sort of change that was necessary. There was a risk that the much needed change would be seen as having failed to deliver.
51. Weekly meetings of the Senior Management Team were welcomed. As with Policy Cabinet, the discussions tended to be focused on current important or urgent updates, combined with press issues. As with Policy Cabinet, some wanted the weekly meetings to go further and identify shared vision and values for the organisation and develop collective actions to address the problems that were discussed.
52. Some officers expressed forcefully a need for greater clarity to help them, their staff and Members conduct business effectively. At a high level, this can be seen as a desire for the Council to introduce more coherent organisation wide systems – be they on performance management; how policies are made; what should be carried out centrally or collectively and what should be left to Directorates to progress on their own. Whilst we are pleased that work has begun on a performance management system, the absence of these systems, means officers, and Members, are constantly having to act on an ad hoc basis – with the result that boundaries are constantly being re-invented.

RE-SETTING THE ORGANISATION

53. There is no one easy solution. But we were struck by emphasis a number of people placed on the need to find once more a shared vision, shared by officers and Members alike, of the forward priorities for the Council, the need for an organisation wide and not just Departmental approach to performance and financial management and the need to break out of inward looking political processes to an effective and proactive communications strategy to residents. There is an opportunity for an organisational re-set, following the elections in May, that:
- a) Brings Cabinet and senior officers together to develop a set of shared priorities for the next few years and in a way that also engages all Members of the Council;
 - b) Is clear about implementation and how progress across these priorities will be measured and monitored;

- c) Is clear about how residents will be engaged in the development of priorities, and how progress will be communicated to them;
- d) Reminds Members and officers of their expected roles, where the boundaries between them lie, and the protocols and codes of conduct that people are expected to follow – and what happens when they do not;
- e) Establishes more systematic, organisation wide machinery for conducting business, reducing perceptions that there is an over-reliance on ad hoc decision making or processes.

Forward vision

54. Earlier in this report, we have recommended that there is a joint development programme for senior officers and Elected Members, externally facilitated, which provides an opportunity to explore and agree a 'Ways of Working Accord'. In part this is to address and eliminate existing tensions and confusion but the exercise will be important in enabling officers and Elected Members to begin to develop a forward vision for the Council

55. A number of people we spoke to bemoaned the lack of a clear forward vision for the place of St Helens and rightly felt this kept the Council too focused on the here and now. The same people were passionate about the opportunities that St Helens could exploit for the benefit of local people and communities but the many factors already described in this report have inhibited this from happening.

56. For a clear vision to emerge there will need to be significant Member/Member dialogue inclusive of all as well as Member/Officer dialogue and we believe that this is best achieved through a series of focused workshops. However, these will only succeed if Members and officers have agreed how they will work together moving forward.

Finance and Performance Management

57. We have given separate consideration to finance and performance management as it seems to us that attitudes to financial and performance management are good guides to the overall cultural health of the organisation.

58. A significant number of frustrations expressed to us by Members were about the progress on delivering financial savings. Relations between the Finance Portfolio Holder and the Finance Director were good. But backbench Members, and in some cases Cabinet members, found it difficult to get information from policy portfolio holders about progress in delivering the savings agreed by the current Budget 3-year Strategy or information on wider asset management issues. There is anxiety that failure to deliver anticipated savings will leave the Council having to make even more severe cuts to services.

59. The Peer Challenge team found that there was little evidence that the council is using performance data to effectively manage performance or to flag up potential areas of major concern. Although data was available, reports were not presented in a particularly meaningful or impactful way to Members that highlights key indicators or adverse trends, and were short of analysis to help members to make decisions about risk or the prioritisation of resources. We were told that there was often too much explanation of what had caused a problem and not enough focus on the actions being taken to get progress back on track. These findings were endorsed by many Members and officers with whom we spoke (for example, the risk register was described to us as “not fit for purpose” and concerns were expressed that there was insufficient probing of Internal Audit reports where no more than a limited assurance was given.
60. In our view, a climate of constructive challenge from Members to each other and to officers is essential to the success of any Council. An adverse OFSTED report on children’s services came as shock to the Council. In part, the failure was due to Members receiving assurances from the then lead officers at face value, rather than using data and evidence to challenge and probe effectively.
61. The contrary risk comes when challenge is seen as an opportunity for political point scoring (particularly on relatively minor issues) or is carried out in a way that appears designed to intimidate, rather than elucidate, or just postpone important decisions being made all is not well. Those being challenged react defensively and can seek to conceal information. All of these problems have occurred in St Helens.
62. A new, consistent performance management norm needs to be set. There are strengths on which to build. A sound reporting system is in place. One to one meetings between portfolio holders and strategic directors work well and already provide good fora for constructive challenge. As we have seen (above), scrutiny is generally effective – and seen to be improving.
63. The Peer Challenge report identified that performance reports would also benefit from including a more holistic view of performance, including delivery against major projects and political priorities, the performance of contactors, and the extent to which risks are being managed. We have two further recommendations for the Council to consider:
- i) Once a month, either in a Policy Cabinet, or in a supplementary Performance Cabinet, focusing a session on the performance against one of the Council’s priorities, based on the data and evidence of progress to date;
 - ii) The case for a central policy and performance unit. Currently, the corporate centre gathers performance information but is for individual Directorates and portfolio holders to use that data to manage performance

in the way they see fit. A central unit would engender greater consistency and would be able to help the Leader and Chief Executive identify the issues that would benefit most from a Performance Cabinet discussion. Any such Unit would liaise closely with the Leader and the Chief Executive in order to ensure that political and managerial priorities were addressed. One option would be for such a Unit to also have a policy role. For example, we were told that some important policies, relating to statutory duties, have fallen into abeyance. It would be part of the remit of a central policy unit to ensure that all essential policies were up to date and reflected political priorities. We were also told that there was insufficient horizon scanning capacity in the Council, for example, looking at how Government policies such as Welfare Reform, might impact on the residents of St Helens, their spending power and the shops and businesses in the borough. A central unit could help with this – and provide the Leader in particular with speechwriting and other executive support. This would require investment in what might be considered a non-frontline service but it is important to have.

Strategic Communications

64. At a time when the energy of Members is directed inwards it is all too easy to pay less attention to communicating outwards to the residents of St Helens. We heard much disquiet. The local newspaper was seen to be making the running in telling residents about the way the Council was operating. Sometimes, we were told, the reporting was inaccurate. Sometimes, it was based on papers being leaked by Members to journalists. People were talking to each other on social media about the Council, on which the Council had little or no presence. False rumours spread easily. The result was that the Council was seen as reacting ineffectively to press stories or resident concerns, whether about new development, bin collections or council tax increases, rather than being proactive. Members were concerned that the reputation of the Council was deteriorating despite the successes the Council had achieved, whereas the reputation of other Councils, where things had gone badly wrong in recent years, were improving amongst their residents because communications were effective. In short, there was political frustration that “We do good things but they are not communicated well.”

65. It is pleasing that, following the Corporate Peer Challenge, the Council has been proactive in engaging LGA support with strategic communications. A start has been made in recruiting to a new post with specific responsibility for social media. But the underlying issue for the Council is firming up the strategic narrative and messages that it wishes to communicate. We were told that the priorities of health and social care integration, economic growth and sound finances were those of officers and lacked Members’ ownership. We were told that the ruling

group should set the strategic objectives and top 3 priorities and then gear everything that is done around those objectives and priorities.

66. Following the May elections, there will be an opportunity for the Cabinet, and then the wider Membership to develop, with the senior management team, the strategic short, medium and longer priorities for the Council and the wider borough – and to have a common understanding of how those priorities are to be implemented and communicated to residents and partners and what results can be expected by when.

Immediate Actions

67. Some of the organisational re-set will take time to make its impact felt. In the interim, it will be important to reinforce and celebrate the positive achievements of the Council. For example, St Helens won the Municipal Journal Award for Health and Social Care integration in 2018. An annual staff awards session would be a good way of recognising the success of staff at all levels of the organisation. Part of the re-set button should be to identify and mark what the Council is doing well – as well as being honest about where the Council wants to improve.
68. The Council is best placed to determine other things it can do quickly and successfully to demonstrate that ‘things are changing around here’. We would emphasise that a review such as this only has real value if it leads to positive change that everyone notices or experiences. A major cultural shift will take time but anything that can be done quickly to demonstrate the direction of travel will be important in engaging Elected Members and the workforce to believe it’s a journey they want to make.

Conclusions and recommendations

69. There is much of which St Helens MBC is rightly proud and considering the turmoil the Council has undergone in recent times; it is commendable that it has achieved the successes that it has.
70. That said, this review has found that there are serious issues that need to be confronted in terms of the behaviour of some Elected Members and of how the majority Group operates, the interactions between the political Executive and backbenchers, the re-setting of the role and responsibilities of the Chief Executive following his needing to operate in an unusual space during a period of turmoil, and in how senior managers and politicians interact and the appropriate interface between them. The current situation is abnormal, due to circumstance, and nearly everyone we spoke to (members and officers) is unhappy with the status quo and worried about the future. That said people seem unwilling to take the first move to address this challenge so we hope this report can become the

first move, providing the basis for further discussion and shared political and managerial ownership of a new future for St Helens MBC.

71. We hope that this report provides an honest and reflective summary of what we heard from the people we spoke to and have the following conclusions and recommendations for the Council to consider to move things forward:

- a) **Members and Officers need to work in partnership, to deliver strategic priorities and services for the people of St Helens.**
- b) **The current and any revised Corporate Plan needs to be the focus of reports to enable Members and officers alike to understand how decisions being taken reinforce the golden thread from strategic priorities to day to day decision making.**
- c) **Policy Cabinets are a welcome development. They can and should be developed further to share things coming up in the long term programme and discuss the more complex issues – especially those that might need several airings before any decisions can be reached.**
- d) **Quality time off site for joint Cabinet and Officer away days to discuss strategy and big topics such as budget formulation should also be considered.**
- e) **The process of governance needs to be as transparent as possible to ensure every Members in the ruling Group (and opposition Members) have access to decisions made.**
- f) **Political priorities from the Leader's Annual Council speech should be incorporated into the next version of the Corporate Plan or be added to the work programme for Officers to work on delivery.**
- g) **A joint session for Members and Officers should be held to define clearly the complementary but different roles of Members and Officers. It is for the ruling Group to determine policies and political priorities for the Officers to carry them out. (We found no evidence that Officers dispute this.) Once defined, the distinct roles should become the normal way of operating within the Council. An open discussion on why a number of Members feel that officers have lost respect for the political decision making process, should be part of this learning session.**
- h) **Members and Officers should attend a further, separate, joint session to discuss their respective roles in the planning and development work of the Council and the legal position of the Council in this work.**

- i) Fundamentally, Members and Officers need to move on from the past and a new focus placed on the incoming Leader and developing the roles of Member and Officer leadership responsibility.**
- j) We endorse the recommendation of the Peer Challenge Team (which has been carried out) to appoint an Assistant Chief Executive to the Senior Management Team.**
- k) New senior Managers, where they are new to operating in a politically led organisation, should receive training as part of their induction about how to be successful in this environment. This training should be from an external provider and should be extended to existing managers, as appropriate.**
- l) Members and Officers need to be mindful and actively work towards creating a sense of trust for each other.**
- m) We recommend a joint development programme for Elected Members and Senior Officers, externally facilitated, to develop a new Ways of Working Accord.**
- n) Consideration should be given to creating a closer link between officers and Ward Members perhaps by allocating officers to work with a small group of Members on issues specific to their Ward.**
- o) The ruling Group would benefit from developing more open ways of communicating by sharing more in Group and less communication by emails.**
- p) Cabinet need to work with Officers to develop enhanced ways of communicating between Cabinet and the rest of the ruling Group, consistent with good practice.**
- q) The Council should provide induction and support for new Members of all Parties following an election.**
- r) All Members should engage more with training programmes on a variety of topics to enhance their skills and understand better what normal is within a Council context.**
- s) We support the Peer Review recommendations that the Council needs to modernise the way it operates for the benefit of St Helens. Senior Managers should prioritise at least two areas of the Council's business where they would like the Adaptive Innovator model to be applied, together with a statement of the indicative desired end goal resulting from the change;**

- t) The Officer Management Team have identified a need to work more closely together to deliver the Council's political priorities and it is recommended that the work of Directors demonstrates links back to the Corporate Plan and political priorities being delivered, wherever possible.**
- u) The Directors need to ensure that operationally there is clear vision for each service and that corporate systems are developed to support the Corporate Plan, political priorities and operational delivery.**
- v) Regular reports on progress with savings within the 3-year budget strategy should be submitted to Cabinet to ensure openness and transparency with the savings programme.**
- w) The Council needs to address the performance management deficit and develop better ways to provide data to Members and officers to ensure that the risk registers and audit reports are effective for delivery of the required improvements.**
- x) Officers should feel confident in sharing information openly and not be concerned about possible repercussions of this. Members need to use the information appropriately.**
- y) The Peer Challenge report identified that performance reports would also benefit from including a more holistic view of performance, including delivery against major projects and political priorities, the performance of contactors, and the extent to which risks are being managed. We have two further recommendations for the Council to consider:**
 - Once a month, either in a Policy Cabinet, or in a supplementary Performance Cabinet, focusing a session on the performance against one of the Council's priorities, based on the data and evidence of progress to date;**
 - The case for a central policy and performance unit which could be important in ensuring greater consistency and forward planning in the council. The potential role of such a unit is set out in paragraph 63 above.**
- z. Communications needs to be improved in terms of reputational management and getting ahead of the news agenda rather than reacting to it. The Directors need to take ownership of this. Communication needs to be focused at different activities including the delivery of the**

Corporate Plan and political priorities, celebrating successes and being adept at managing news events. A programme of activities should be developed to recognise and celebrate successes which involves both Officers and Members of the Council.

Next Steps

We recommend the following:

- 1. That the LGA authors of this report meet with the Leader of the Council to discuss the content of this report.**
- 2. That the LGA authors of this report meet with the Cabinet to discuss the content of this report.**
- 3. That the LGA authors of this report meet with all Members, as a Group, to discuss the content of this report.**
- 4. That the recommendations be taken forward within the context of the overall modernisation agenda where they relate to systems and processes.**
- 5. That Members and Officers reflect on how they create better working relationships as the Council moves forward.**