

# Lewes and Eastbourne Councils Corporate Peer Challenge July 2022

## Position Statement

### Introduction

1. In 2015 it was decided to combine the workforces of Lewes District Council (LDC) and Eastbourne Borough Council (EBC), through the 'Joint Transformation Programme' (JTP). The JTP concluded in 2019, successfully delivering new joint ways of working alongside significant savings for both councils (annually £3.2M saving was achieved through this programme). One staff team now delivers on behalf of the two authorities. The strap line 'Stronger Together' has been used to cement this.
2. In May 2019 both authorities had whole council elections. At EBC, the Liberal Democrat group retained overall control, whilst at LDC the Conservative minority administration was replaced with a 'co-operative alliance' of Green, Liberal Democrat, Labour and Independent Councillors in July 2019.
3. Given those changes, it felt timely for the two councils to request a joint Corporate Peer Challenge from the LGA. This was scheduled in March 2020. As a result of the pandemic that challenge was postponed and is now being requested to take place in September 2022.
4. The original reasons for the review were primarily about checking that the organisations were on track, having come together with a single staff team, across the two councils. However, the pandemic has subsequently created a range of additional issues for the councils which it feels appropriate to refer to as part of this challenge process. Both councils have experienced financial challenges through the pandemic, but Eastbourne in particular, has felt this due to its previous heavy dependence upon leisure and tourism income. As a result, the council found it necessary to seek central government support in the form of Exceptional Financial Support (EFS). More information regarding this can be found later in this document.
5. Finally, the councils are keen for the peer team to consider, alongside the 5 standard challenge components of the review, their approaches to sustainability/net zero and supporting the cost of living crisis.

### About Lewes and Eastbourne

6. Although the two councils do not share a boundary (see maps [Ref L1](#)) they are located in close proximity along the coast of East Sussex.

7. Lewes District is predominantly rural and renowned for its varied high quality environment and landscape. It comprises of a collection of distinct settlements which straddle several employment and housing market areas. The coast forms its southern boundary, the South Downs National Park encompasses 56% of the district and it is close to the vibrant university city of Brighton and Hove. The total population is around 97,000, 77% of whom live in the five urban areas of Lewes, Newhaven, Peacehaven, Seaford and Telscombe Cliffs/East Saltdean. The remainder of the population live in 23 predominantly rural parishes.
8. Eastbourne is a tourist resort on the Sussex coast, approximately halfway between Brighton and Hastings. One of the main attractions for the 5 million visitors per year is the town's immaculate and elegant seafront façade and beautiful Victorian and Edwardian buildings. There are many other attractions, including the Grade II\* listed pier, many and varied formal parks and gardens, and a recently extended shopping centre. Levels of tourism have been fairly quick to return since the Pandemic but are not yet back to previous levels. Eastbourne's population is around 103,000, which represents a 5% population increase over the last 10 years.
9. Both areas share many of the same challenges, the recognition of which formed much of the initial motivation for moving towards a shared workforce across the two Councils. These challenges include; high cost of living and high house prices, the demand for affordable housing and increases in homelessness, declining town centres the need for regeneration and the need to balance protection of the natural environment (part of both councils fall within the South Downs National Park) alongside the demand for housing and development.

### **About the councils**

10. Eastbourne Borough Council is made up of 27 councillors with the Liberal Democrats holding 18 seats, Conservatives 8 seats and one Independent. The council has a cabinet comprising 6 portfolios, all of which are held by Liberal Democrat councillors;
  - Councillor David Tutt (Leader of the Council and Chair of Cabinet), Cabinet member for responsibilities aligned with the Chief Executive.
  - Councillor Stephen Holt, (Deputy Leader) Cabinet member for financial services.
  - Councillor Margaret Bannister, Cabinet member for tourism and leisure services.
  - Councillor Alan Shuttleworth, Cabinet member for direct assistance services

- Councillor Colin Swansborough, Cabinet member for climate change, place services and special projects.
- Councillor Rebecca Whippy, Cabinet member for disabilities and community safety.

11. Lewes District Council is made up of 41 councillors with the Conservatives holding 18 seats, the Liberal Democrats 9 seats, the Green Party having 8 seats, Labour 4, and 2 seats being held by independent councillors. The council has a cabinet comprising 9 portfolios held by councillors from the political parties within the co-operative alliance;

- Councillor James MacCleary, Leader of the Council and Cabinet member for regeneration and prosperity (Lib Dem)
- Councillor Zoe Nicholson, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet member for finance and assets (Green)
- Councillor Matthew Bird, Cabinet member for sustainability (Green)
- Councillor Julie Carr, Cabinet member for recycling, waste and open spaces (Lib Dem)
- Councillor Chris Collier, Cabinet member for performance and people (Labour)
- Councillor Johnny Denis, Cabinet member for communities and customers (Green)
- Councillor William Meyer, Cabinet member for housing (Lib Dem)
- Councillor Stephen Gauntlett, Cabinet member for planning and infrastructure (Lib Dem)
- Councillor Ruth O'Keeffe, Cabinet member for tourism and devolution (Independent)

It should be noted that during the 4 year term of the current Lewes administration, Leadership has alternated on an annual basis between Cllrs MacCleary and Nicholson.

12. The Corporate Management Team (CMT) works across the two councils and is made up of:-

- Chief Executive - Robert Cottrill
- Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Regeneration and Planning – Ian Fitzpatrick
- Director of Service Delivery – Tim Whelan
- Assistant Director of Human Resources and Transformation – Becky Cooke
- Chief Finance Officer - Homira Javadi
- Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer – Oliver Dixon

13. Under CMT, the Senior Managers Group also works across the two councils. Details of this group and full organisational structure diagrams are provided ([Ref G](#)). The combined staffing of the two authorities totals 734 FTE.
14. The councils' staff have, since the pandemic, been mainly based from home. However, there is also limited provision for staff in the two main offices in Lewes (Southover House) and Eastbourne (the Town Hall) both of which also provide public access points. A further office at Devonshire Park, Eastbourne (the Point) also provides some staff accommodation, and an additional office base is currently under development in Newhaven (which will replace the Lewes office).
15. The councils intend to continue a regime of agile working following the pandemic. Laptops and other relevant technology are provided to all staff to allow flexible working. When based in the office, regular trains enable travel between the Lewes and Eastbourne offices in around 20 – 30 minutes (the railway stations in both towns are less than a 5 minute walk from the offices). In addition, video conferencing facilities at both sites, as well as from home, minimise the need for travel. With the increase in agile and remote working the council has also been able to be more flexible with recruitment options, potentially attracting those from further afield.

## **Understanding of the local place and priority setting**

### Corporate plans

16. Both councils produced new corporate plans following the full council elections in May 2019 which were adopted at the respective council's full Council meetings in February 2020. The Eastbourne Plan has subsequently been subject to a refresh in May 2022 on the direction of central government following a Finance Review undertaken in 2021 (see para 4 of this document). The two Corporate Plans are provided ([Ref B](#) and [C](#)).
17. Until the Pandemic, EBC's priorities and vision had continued, relatively unchanged, for a number of years, reflecting the stable and strong political leadership in the borough. However, as a condition of receiving EFS the council was subject to a finance review undertaken by CIPFA (on behalf of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) ([Ref R](#)). One of the key recommendations of that review was for the council to refresh its corporate plan in light of the pandemic with a view to diversifying its income base. The main focus prior to this had been on economic regeneration, tourism, commercialisation and innovation. The revised plan is more modest in outlook and emphasises the need for stringent measures to ensure future financial stability. A particular focus on tackling the climate emergency also continues to

be a key element of the plan, with a target of climate net zero by 2030 being set.

18. The Lewes Corporate Plan, adopted in February 2020, focuses on affordable housing, sustainability and addressing the climate emergency (with a climate emergency also being declared in July 2019) and community wealth building. A 'right first time' approach to customer service has also been a particular focus for this administration.
19. The development of both LDC and EBC's Corporate Plans, and the priorities expressed within them, have involved extensive discussion between the Cabinets and CMT, the wider organisation and local communities. In Lewes, the co-operative alliance engaged extensively with external partners, particularly around the climate change agenda (through the Sustainability Panel) to gain input into the setting of their priorities. In Eastbourne, the recently refreshed Corporate Plan has not been specifically subject to external consultation, given that the original document had been widely consulted on when established.
20. When the 2020 Corporate Plan documents were under development, consultation process briefings were held with the Senior Managers Forum (Heads of Service and equivalents) and 'lunch and learn' sessions for staff. The council's monthly newsletter – Hub News ([Ref M](#)) also carried information for staff about these key documents.

### Communicating Corporate Priorities

21. Over recent years, and particularly since the pandemic struck, the two councils have made increasing use of [social media](#) and other digital methods to enable communication with residents. However, being mindful of digital exclusion, traditional media and other non-digital channels have also continued to be used.
22. LDC produces a quarterly publication (District News, more recently rebranded as DN) which is distributed to all households. This carries information about council services alongside articles focusing on council priorities, such as new affordable housing developments, improvements to recycling and tree planting. This vehicle enables the council to engage with a wide audience on an ongoing basis regarding council priorities and achievements. The [most recent issue](#) focused particularly on the cost of living crisis.
23. In EBC there has continued to be, along with extensive use of press releases in the very well-read local paper - the Eastbourne Herald - a strong network of local engagement groups around particular interests such as sustainability,

disability, culture and faiths. These networks are used extensively to engage local communities on corporate issues, often face to face.

24. The councils have a shared [website](#) which also provides a key vehicle for communicating corporate priorities. As the joint website will be 5 years old this year, the councils have launched a project to update this and review future customer engagement and interaction methods.

### Transformation and efficiency

25. It became clear early in the pandemic that the councils would experience financial challenges as a result of the exceptional circumstances and the demands on the local authority to respond. For Eastbourne in particular, the pressures were intensified significantly by the lack of tourism related income brought about by the lockdowns.
26. To respond to this, in September 2020 the councils initiated a new corporate programme entitled Recovery and Reset ([Ref Q](#)). This combined an efficiency drive and new ways of working with workstreams to support the community through lockdown and beyond to economic recovery. The programme had 5 workstreams;
- Workplace 2021 - focused on moving staff to new hybrid ways of working
  - Digital transformation – continuing the councils’ journey to modern, aligned digital systems to support efficient working
  - Reshaping delivery – to create efficiencies within the workforce
  - Assets – reviewing the council’s assets and ensuring that the capital programme best delivers the council’s priorities
  - Restart – focused on supporting local community needs through the pandemic

In addition, in Eastbourne, the programme has been extended to encompass a workstream called ‘Assurance Review’ ([Ref R](#)) responding to central government’s recommendations arising from EFS. Also, in response to the assurance review, the programme has been extended in Eastbourne and renamed Recovery and Stabilisation. The council's initial response to the assurance review was submitted to Government in June 2022 ([Ref S](#)).

### **Leadership of place**

27. Both councils have a track record of good partnership relationships with other tiers of local government (including towns and parishes in LDC), other public bodies and with the business and community sectors. These partnerships help

the councils to have a good understanding of the needs of their localities and to plan for those needs in collaboration with other local organisations. The Leaders and Cabinet Members play a key role in community leadership and see the building and maintaining of key partnership relationships as central to this, alongside members of CMT and other key specialist Leads in the organisation.

#### Regional and countywide partnerships

28. One of the key benefits seen by Members in bringing Lewes and Eastbourne staff teams together was the greater strategic presence that could be created. It was seen that we could achieve two stronger organisations which could operate more strategically within the region, while still retaining the sovereignty of each council.
29. Being a two-tier area, relationships with East Sussex County Council are critical and the council works hard to ensure strong, constructive links are maintained across departments; in particular around economic development, highways, adult social care (given close links with our housing function), community safety, waste etc.
30. Given both councils' focus on economic regeneration, partnership work in this area has been particularly important. LDC participates in the South East LEP (SELEP) through Team East Sussex. Although not a member of the Coast to Capital LEP, Lewes also maintains close relationships with partners in that body and is a key player in the Greater Brighton Economic Board. EBC also participates in SELEP. Both councils have been successful in attracting funding into their respective areas through the LEPs. Further information about this can be found in the 'leveraging external capacity' section below.
31. Aside from the LEPs we have active involvement in a range of other regional, sub-regional and countywide partnerships including; Transport for the South East, East Sussex Waste Partnership, the Coastal Communities Team, Greater Brighton Economic Board and others.
32. The South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) is a key partner for both councils, as each has a part of the Park with its boundary. LDC provides the development management function for SDNPA and both councils have a councillor representative on the SDNPA board. The Park has provided both increased opportunities for tourism, whilst also creating some challenges around housing delivery.
33. Eastbourne and Lewes have combined their Community Safety Partnership which has proved an effective way to work collaboratively with police, fire, health and other partners across the two localities. Some effective cross-area

working around street homelessness has been undertaken in recent years, with the government funded Rough Sleeping Initiative being a particular innovation in this area.

34. Although there are many ways in which the two councils have been able to join up their approach to strategic partnership working, given the different characteristics of the district and the borough, different approaches are still taken when managing some local partnership relationships.

#### Local partnerships

35. At the start of the pandemic, in Eastbourne the existing Local Strategic Partnership was reconfigured into a local 'Cobra' group to enable a strong response to the Covid challenges. This was chaired by the Leader of the council and brought together key partners from statutory, voluntary and business sectors to ensure a coordinated response.
36. Other key partnership relationships in Eastbourne include; the Chamber of Commerce, Eastbourne Hospitality Association and the YourBID business improvement district partnership.
37. The more geographically diverse nature of the Lewes district does not lend itself to a single partnership forum. Instead, the council has focused on building more geographical and thematic partnerships together around relevant issues. During the pandemic, a core partnership body with the local voluntary sector was key vehicle for ensuring local community needs, particularly around food, were addressed.

#### Climate Change

38. An important area of partnership working for both councils has been the climate change agenda. Both councils declared a climate emergency in July 2019 and have gone on to develop strong partnership relationships with key organisations involved in sustainability and environmental issues in the locality and beyond.
39. In Eastbourne this has taken the form of a partnership with a local community interest company – the Eastbourne Eco Action Network – who bring together all the key partners in the town. In Lewes a variety of organisations have been involved including the Lewes Climate Hub and most notably Ouse Valley Climate Action (which is a consortium made up of OVESCO, Community Energy South, Sussex Community Development Association, 3VA (the local council for voluntary service), Railway Land Wildlife Trust, South Downs National Park Authority, Transition Town Lewes, Seaford Community Partnership and Active Travel). This body has been successful in attracting

significant levels of National Lottery funding into the district to progress sustainability related activities.

#### Cost of living crisis

40. With the massive increases in costs of energy and fuel, alongside rising food costs and other inflationary challenges, both councils declared a cost of living crisis in the Summer of 2022. The way this has been acted on at the two councils is slightly different, but both have established a grants programme to enable them to quickly disseminate funds to foodbanks and other key organisations who can reach those in need most effectively.
41. This is in addition to administering the central government council tax energy rebates and, in Lewes, introducing 100% level council tax reduction for those in most need. The councils are also administering the household support fund on behalf of East Sussex County Council, which has been further enhanced locally by LDC. Further, LDC have recently used their council newspaper, DN, to disseminate a range of information and advice to residents around cost of living issues.

#### **Organisational leadership and governance**

42. At the start of each four-year council term an extensive Member Induction Programme is delivered at both councils ([Ref N1](#) & [N2](#)). This aims to provide members with a good overview and understanding of their role from the outset. Contained within the constitution of each council is a Protocol on Councillor/Officer Relations ([Ref O1](#) & [O2](#)) and training on this is included in the induction programme. The protocol provides a framework within which officers and members undertake their respective duties.

#### CMT and Cabinet

43. There is a culture of close working between CMT and Cabinet members at both councils. In Eastbourne the 'Leadership Team' (ie CMT and Cabinet members together) meet informally 3 to 4 times a year to discuss strategic and budgetary matters. In Lewes, members of cabinet meet informally on a fortnightly basis ('Informal Cabinet'), with CMT or other senior officers being encouraged to bring matters for early informal discussion. Both councils hold a Cabinet Briefing meeting around 2 weeks ahead of each formal Cabinet meeting, at which forthcoming reports are discussed and approaches are agreed between officers and members. In addition, individual Cabinet members are regularly briefed by CMT and other senior officers on matters relevant to their Portfolios.
44. All members are provided with regular monthly written briefings on matters of organisational importance using the same document which officers receive

(Hub News). An on-going programme of training and briefing sessions is also provided to all members.

### Scrutiny and Policy Development

45. The Scrutiny arrangements at the two councils differ slightly. Eastbourne has a scrutiny committee chaired by the (Conservative) opposition which meets 4/5 times a year. In Lewes, the Committee is called the Policy and Performance Advisory Committee (PPAC) and is also chaired by the (Conservative) opposition.
46. At both Eastbourne and Lewes, the Committee receives quarterly performance reports ([Ref J](#) and [K](#)) which provide information about the performance of council key services and corporate projects. Both committees are encouraged to develop their own work programmes and to commission detailed reviews of particular issues – often setting up member scrutiny panels for this purpose.
47. Officers are encouraged to take policy development reports to Scrutiny (or PPAC in Lewes) ahead of Cabinet, particularly on more contentious or complex issues, to gain wider member understanding and buy-in.
48. In order to keep all members informed of wider council matters, they are included in a monthly electronic newsletter – Hub News – which is also issued to all staff.

### Strategic risk management

49. In 2019 Zurich Risk Engineering UK was commissioned to undertake a review of the councils' risk management arrangements ([Ref T](#)). This concluded that the importance of risk management is understood at senior level and that processes have improved over the last two to three years. It was noted that the risk appetites of the two councils differ and that as a result it is necessary to maintain two strategic risk registers. However, one recommendation from the review, which was implemented, was the alignment of the risk management frameworks across the two councils.

### Governance

50. Since the move to a shared workforce, Eastbourne Borough and Lewes District Council have retained their own governance documents and these are set out in the constitutions on the [website](#). It has been important for members to preserve the distinct sovereignty of the two Councils but, where possible, to align procedural rules in order to maximise the efficiency of the shared workforce.

51. Both councils reconfirm their democratic governance and delegation rules at their annual meetings. In-year, the monitoring officer has delegated powers to make technical amendments to constitutional documents in response to legislative changes. In 2019, both councils approved new aligned financial procedure rules.
52. Whilst both councils practice executive-style democratic structures, in 2020 LDC underwent a governance review where alternative models such as traditional committee and hybrid structures were considered. However, the outcome of the review was that the executive model be retained whilst re-branding and enhancing the scrutiny aspect (introducing PPAC, as mentioned earlier) to enable greater opportunity for non-executive and opposition members to have input into key matters proposed for decision by cabinet.

#### Staff engagement and internal communications

53. The councils have an intranet called The Hub which contains a range of information for staff about structures, processes, policies and practices. It also has a home page containing 'announcements', which staff are encouraged to check every day for key messages. Once a month an electronic staff newsletter 'Hub News' is emailed to all staff. The newsletter carries an introduction from a member of CMT each month highlighting key issues all staff should be aware of.
54. An employee engagement survey is carried out periodically to gauge staff views on a range of issues. The results of this are discussed with managers who then in turn discuss with their teams. An action plan is produced following this, which sets out how any issues arising from the survey will be addressed, and support for these actions will be provided by the team of trained Change Agents. The most recent survey was undertaken in the summer of 2022 with a pleasing 63% response rate, which is the highest response we have ever had. The detailed results are still being analysed at the point of writing this, however early indications are that improvements have been made since the last full survey in 2019 in a range of areas including senior management accessibility and clarity of vision. Some initial thoughts about areas to address in the action plan are around increasing the reach of communication regarding available office working space, and about how we effectively demonstrate our commitment to issues of equity, diversity and inclusion.
55. A Staff Consultative Forum meets regularly, chaired by the Assistant Director for HR and Transformation. The Forum is made up of staff from all grades and departments. UNISON, the recognised trade union, is also represented on the Forum. It provides feedback on corporate projects and is engaged on proposed changes to ways of working or policies and procedures.

56. As part of the Recovery and Reset programme, a Staff Experience Group and a Manager's Reference Group have been established to ensure staff engagement and feedback in all aspects of the programme.
57. Since the pandemic, and the significant increase in home working, the councils have also introduced 'The Watercooler'. This is a Facebook style on-line tool to enable staff to 'chat' about topics of interest which are not specifically work related. It aims to replicate the type of 'chats in the kitchen' that might have taken place when staff were more office based.

## **Financial planning and viability**

### Financial health

58. The councils have adequate levels of unallocated and earmarked reserves but have increasing levels of exposure to funding streams that are influenced by changing economic conditions. Operating demand-led services also means both income and expenditure streams can fluctuate. The Councils have increased their financial resilience by increasing their unallocated General Fund reserve and creating additional earmarked reserves to mitigate any emerging risks such as inflation, fuel and energy, bad debt and arrears.
59. Both councils are (at the time of writing) among 200 other authorities whose annual audits are yet to be completed and signed off. Both councils have previously achieved unqualified opinions for their statutory accounts and value for money audit. The Councils have received a renewed commitment from the external auditor (Deloitte) to put in place additional resources and capacity and are now expecting all outstanding audits to be completed by Jan 2023.
60. The minimum unallocated reserve levels at both authorities is set at £2million. Both councils have a policy of not relying on use of reserves to fund ongoing expenditure. Plans are in place to increase reserves levels to £4million by 2024. Both councils have made good progress and are on track to achieve their £4m targets: LDC GF unallocated reserve as at 31 March 2022 £3.7m- EBC unallocated reserve as at 31 March 2022 £3.3m

### Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)

61. Both councils have been committed to reducing the cost of service delivery through their transformation programmes. Going forward, transformation is an embedded part of future MTFS and service delivery plans. Projected savings from additional efficiencies are estimated to be about £4million. Both councils have successfully delivered and exceeded their savings target as set by the Recovery and Stabilisation Programme.

62. Increasing demand for housing services and homelessness has been a key budgetary pressure which has been mitigated through a number of immediate preventative measures, including; proactively managing demand for emergency and temporary accommodation, prioritising move on to the private rented sector, investing more in service capacity and resources, increasing council owned housing stock (both through the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and general fund) and investing in rent deposit schemes with private landlords. In addition to this we are seeking to launch a homelessness hub project to find new ways to work together with our partners to mitigate the impact of homelessness. We aim to create service model with partners who are co-located under one roof, initially allowing significantly improved joint-working relationships and interventions and working towards offering members of the community to access the support they need from multiple agencies, both statutory and non-statutory, via a seamless joined-up approach. This will allow housing related issues and other needs to be identified and resolved at the earliest opportunity, improving outcomes for our shared clients, avoiding repeat access to frontline services, and reducing the need for high-cost interventions at crisis point.
63. Both councils have a mixed commercial portfolio, reflecting the distinct areas they serve, and rental debtors are reported at each councils' Strategic Property Board in order to ensure Members retain an oversight and decisions on debt can be taken at an early stage. Retail property in particular was impacted by the recent pandemic, with a number of major chains putting Company Voluntary Arrangements (CVAs) in force. The Councils have been proactive in supporting other struggling tenants, for instance by agreeing payment plans for rent in order to keep vacancies at a minimum and reduce further cost/risk to the Councils from empty properties. The portfolio is generally made up of local businesses/smaller chains which has helped cushion the Councils from the downturn in the retail market.

#### Managing financial risks

64. In addition to the increased demand for services; in particular housing need and homelessness, another significant risk area is our increased reliance on business rate income which is inherently volatile and difficult to influence. The business rate pool scheme has been helpful in addressing this. We appear currently to be bucking the national trend as our town centre vacancy rate audit for the end of June 2022 was 10.17%, with the national average now at 11.2%. A further risk is our high dependency on locally generated fee income, as this can be influenced by changes in the local/ national economy as well as by local demography, mix of business, transport services and other factors. Awareness of these risks and mitigation where possible, is an important factor in the councils' financial planning process.

### The strategic financial planning process

65. We have a well-established business and financial planning process that has been aligned across Lewes and Eastbourne. At both authorities members and senior managers have strong and trusting working relationships which enable mature conversations around financial planning. This starts with early informal discussions and briefings with members during the summer and early autumn, leading to formal reports to the Cabinets before Christmas, meetings of Scrutiny focusing on the budget proposals in late January/early February and the setting of budgets by Full Councils in February each year.

### Budget monitoring

66. Our in-year budget monitoring processes are well established. We report on a quarterly basis to both Cabinets (preceded by Scrutiny/Policy and Performance Advisory Committee). In-year pressures and savings are identified. In addition, as part of the annual business and financial planning process, we require departments to submit their expected pressures and deliverable savings for the coming year during the autumn, so that these can be built into the overall budget presented to Full Council each February. The current range of emerging pressures (particularly around homelessness) together with increased dependence on uncertain/ unreliable commercial income and business rates have created added risk and complexity to this process. Both authorities are managing this risk by, for example, increasing visibility of financial implications when members are making decisions, and through more frequent monitoring.

### Capital and investment

67. We have combined investment of over £90M in housing across the two councils. Both councils' Housing Revenue Accounts' 30 year business plans have recently been revised to ensure they are fit for the future. We have undertaken a comprehensive review of the two capital programmes to ensure investments are aligned to corporate objectives and priorities. Alongside that, we have also undertaken a comprehensive review of the councils' capital financing requirements to ensure the programmes are affordable.

## **Capacity to deliver**

### Performance

68. Each council's performance is measured by a bundle of performance indicators with targets agreed with members each year [[Ref J](#) and [K](#)]. Targets are set being mindful of customer expectations and comparative performance of other

councils. Guidance on target setting is provided in the councils' performance management framework [[Ref P](#)].

69. Currently the councils are performing pretty well against their targets. The main performance challenges in recent months have related to; the speed of call answering, void relet times in housing and waste recycling rates. As our performance reports show, we are working actively to address these challenging areas, with some positive results.
70. The councils have introduced a particular approach for addressing performance issues in services; known as Solution Sprints. The Business Transformation Unit work with relevant services to problem-solve and address barriers to improving performance. This approach has delivered some significant improvements, for example in housing benefit processing times.

### Staffing matters

71. An employee engagement survey is carried out periodically to gauge staff views on a range of issues. The results of this are discussed with managers who then in turn discuss with their teams. An action plan is produced following this, which sets out how any issues arising from the survey will be addressed. The most recent survey was undertaken in the summer of 2022 with a pleasing 63% response rate, which is the highest response we have ever had. The detailed results are still being analysed at the point of writing this, however early indications are that improvements have been made since the last full survey in 2019 in a range of areas including senior management accessibility and clarity of vision. Some initial thoughts about areas to address in the action plan are around increasing the reach of communication regarding available office working space, and about how we effectively demonstrate our commitment to issues of equity, diversity and inclusion.
72. November 2019 saw us deliver the first combined Staff Conference, which gave the opportunity for all staff to network with colleagues away from the office, enabled us to deliver key messages in an informal way and celebrate the successes of what has been achieved since 2016. Almost all staff attended one of these sessions. 68% of staff who completed an evaluation of the conference rated it 8 or more on a scale of 1-10. Whilst we haven't been able to hold this staff conference in person over the last couple of years we do plan for these to now take plan on an annual basis and Corporate Management Team have been doing quarterly all staff briefings online which are recorded so that all staff can view these.
73. The staff sickness performance target is 8 days or less per year per employee (around average for the public sector). During 2021/22 we exceeded this only slightly as our absence was 8.86 days per full time employee. This was largely

as a result of the legislation and guidance regarding isolating following a positive test from Covid, plus also a high number of absences due to reaction to Covid vaccinations. We ensure that absent employees receive regular communication from their line manager, have welfare visits and that we obtain professional medical advice where appropriate. In addition, we have trained 18 staff to be mental health first aiders at work. These staff listen, reassure and respond to staff and their managers, even in a crisis – and even potentially stop a crisis from happening. They are able to empower others to access the support they might need for successful management of symptoms. There is a range of other support offered to staff whether they have been absent or not, including our employee assistance programme which supports employees with all sorts of work life issues providing guidance on a range of issues – 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

#### Organisational and workforce development

74. The main approach to organisational and workforce development across the councils is concerned with the development of organisational structures, ways of working, policies and procedures, alongside the human facets such as culture, morale, leadership and development.
75. We have developed systems, processes and technology to improve workflow, customer self-service and also individual and team performance and capability. The councils operate employee performance management within a competency-based framework which identifies the attitudes and behaviours we expect from our staff and is the mechanism for assessment against this as an indicator of performance levels.
76. We use workforce data to identify trends across the councils, for example, quarterly absence reporting, turnover rates, vacancies, starters and leavers. We strive to continually improve the level and quality of workforce information within the constraints of our existing reporting tools.
77. Change management has been a high priority in terms of organisational development. We need to evolve, improve and actively empower individuals and teams to engage in this – helping to steer the organisation collaboratively towards shared goals, vision and values. We need to be able to respond to an uncertain and volatile business environment and equip our staff to do so.
78. We recognise that talent management and succession planning are areas requiring further development. However, we have systems in place to ensure we capture knowledge transfer information when key people exit the organisation and some informal succession planning does already take place. We are aware of our shortage and hard to recruit areas and are making efforts to respond to these. Many new and existing staff have taken advantage

of the Apprenticeship Levy to benefit from further training and development and a recognised qualification across a range of service areas such as Customer First, Finance, Homes First, Planning and Legal Services.

79. We provide leadership and management development programmes which are delivered internally and provide a consistent approach to people management linked directly to our own policies and procedures as well as core and management competencies. Following the 2019 survey we committed to roll out Managing an Agile Team training to manager which we were able to deliver in 2021 and became particularly relevant during Covid and our transition to hybrid working.

#### Staff and member training and development

80. The councils recognise the important role of learning and development and are committed to making learning and development opportunities available to all our employees. What this means for our staff is that we are committed to ensuring that all staff are equipped with the skills, knowledge and aptitudes required to perform at the highest possible standards, aligning with our Vision and Values and competency framework.
81. Learning and development is a continuous process discussed at regular one to ones, and all staff are encouraged to complete a Training and Professional Development Record in the form of an ebooklet.
82. The HR team frequently facilitates and coordinates corporate courses and are part of a network called the Sussex Training Consortium which is 12 authorities in Sussex from whom we can access additional training for our staff. Internally we run a number of in house courses for all staff including a Management Development Programme. We also offer a range of well-developed online learning courses (including those bespoke to our councils), support specialist external training and, where appropriate, professional qualifications.
83. We have a Mentoring Scheme across the councils with a number of mentoring partnerships in place with both external and internal mentors. All internal mentors benefit from a half-day mentoring training course before embarking on a mentoring partnership.
84. Member training, as explained earlier, starts with a full induction programme shortly after each 'all out' election. This focuses on the basic skillsets and knowledge needed by all councillors as well as providing specific training for those taking up seats on particular committees (eg planning, licencing, scrutiny). Following on from this further training is offered periodically on particular relevant issues throughout the 4-year term. Individual member

development opportunities are also offered, particularly for cabinet members, to help enhance and develop relevant skills.

### Leveraging external capacity

85. Both Lewes and Eastbourne Councils have a strong history of working collaboratively with others, even before coming together in their current shared staffing arrangements, which has created significantly more capacity for both organisations.
86. Lewes District Council has been extremely successful in attracting funding from outside bodies to support the vision for the regeneration of Newhaven (and the surrounding coastal communities). Since 2014, Regeneration officers have worked closely with neighbouring authorities, Coast to Capital LEP and South East LEP to attract investment. This includes our work as a founder member of the Greater Brighton Economic Board, which indirectly led to the establishment of an Enterprise Zone in Newhaven – one of only 48 in the country – in partnership with Coast to Capital LEP. The strategic vision set as part of our EZ application has supported the Council to access further funding including, over the last eight years, Towns Fund, Future High Streets Fund, Levelling Up Fund, Local Growth Fund, Getting Building Fund and Coastal Communities Fund together valued at approximately £50m. The Towns Fund is an excellent example of cross-party and cross-sector working, with our Town Investment Plan developed by a Town Deal Board including Council Leaders, MP, business leaders, community and voluntary organisations, as well as other tiers of local government and the South East LEP.
87. The development of a Levelling Up Fund (LUF) Round 1 bid for Eastbourne Borough Council has built upon pre-existing relationships to work collaboratively to achieve common goals. This has culminated in the £19.8m LUF1 award for Eastbourne. The Council has a strong working relationship with business leaders and organisations, as well as with voluntary sector organisations. An excellent ongoing example is our work with the Eastbourne Education Business Partnership (EEBP), who deliver a range of initiatives including the annual 'Big Futures Show' (<https://www.bigfuturesshow.org.uk/>) which is the largest employability, skills and careers event in East Sussex.
88. There is a close relationship with our local voluntary sector, not just in the giving of grants (although both councils have continued to maintain generous grants programmes) but also through constructive dialogue with the third sector in how to respond to emerging issues.
89. Through the pandemic the 'community hub' approach brought the councils in close collaboration with local voluntary and community organisations. Indeed,

three staff members from the council were seconded to 3VA (the local Council for Voluntary Service) to enable requests and offers of help to be matched during the challenging first lockdown. Our close multi-agency working approach throughout Covid, with other statutory agencies, as well as the voluntary sector put us in a strong position to provide timely support to our local communities.

90. We also worked closely with business organisations across both areas, including a regular business conference call, to understand and respond to the needs of our local businesses and offer as much support and intelligence as possible, including regular updates on Covid-related business grants and other support available.

#### Learning from ourselves and others

91. Whilst bringing our two councils together, we have sought to embed a culture of innovation, creativity and learning. Staff are encouraged to think creatively and innovative ideas are welcomed and given serious consideration by management. We continually look to find ways in which we can learn and improve.
92. The two councils won the iESE Council of the Year Award in 2019 with a bid based around our innovative approaches.
93. Following the completion of the Joint Transformation Programme, we undertook an extensive end of programme review and lessons learned exercise. This was considered by CMT and a number of recommendations were acted on. In particular this has included recognition of the lack of change management expertise in the organisation. As a result, a 'change agents' programme has been established with the first tranche of 7 staff from within the councils being recruited and trained late in 2019. Further training for additional change agents was run in the summer of 2021 bringing the councils total to 12.

#### **Conclusion**

94. We continue to be a learning and developing organisation. We are keen to see how we can continue on this journey and welcome the opportunity to explore this through our forthcoming LGA Peer Challenge.