

# Corporate Peer Challenge **Malvern Hills District Council**

5-8 March 2018

Feedback Report

## 1. Executive Summary

Malvern Hills District Council (MHDC) has a strong grasp in understanding its area and needs. This is informed by the gathering and analysis of data from a range of sources. From this the council has set out a five year plan 2016-2021, which is also informed by the views of residents, partners and councillors. The council's corporate priorities are described as 'building stronger and healthier communities, driving economic prosperity and growth and making the most of our superb environment' and the strategy is refreshed annually.

Malvern Hills is a good place to live and work and this is an important feature to deliver on the priority of economic growth. The area was 17<sup>th</sup> best rural place to live in the Halifax Quality of Life survey (2017). It also enjoys a 90 per cent satisfaction rating from residents as a place to live (source: the annual county-wide Worcestershire Viewpoint survey). Alongside this there is relatively low deprivation with a ranking of 188 out of 324 local authorities in England. This, along with its central geographical location and good transport links, make Malvern Hills an attractive proposition for potential inward investment. Malvern Hills is also a key tourist destination and you have started to develop a long-term plan to market 'The Malverns' to increase visitor spending and support the retention of this important source of income.

Despite this there are issues that the council is keenly aware of and is seeking to mitigate. There is an ageing population above that of the England average. In MHDC the proportion of people aged over 65 years is 26.5 per cent whereas the England average is 18 per cent. This has implications for future housing and health needs especially given that 27.8 per cent of pensioners live alone.

In addition, the ratio of house prices to salaries is high at 12 times the average salary; reported as the highest ratio in the Midlands. This is not only a barrier to the local population but could also be an inhibiting factor for future economic growth where inward migrating workers may be unable to afford housing.

MHDC has a 'fourth option' style administration based on a politically balanced committee system. The annually appointed Council Leader works with a number of portfolio holders to oversee the strategic direction of the council's services. There are opportunities to consider a review of the governance arrangements to ensure that the annual appointment the Leader does not prevent timely decision making and maintains the support for the delivery of longer term corporate priorities. There is also a specific need to review the current planning committee arrangements to ensure a consistency and quality of decision making for the delivery of economic growth and housing.

The council's finances are in a good position providing you deliver against the current savings strategy and make the difficult decisions that lie ahead. This means that the financial pressures in future years appear manageable and provides a platform for the council to plan ahead and consider a range of options for the future. Reserves have been rebuilt over the last few years although you will want to build these further with the added pressure of making further savings of £950k by 2020.

Closer working with Wychavon District Council (WDC) has helped to provide savings for the two councils and is encouraging transferable learning to gain efficiencies. Since 2014 MHDC has shared the Managing Director with WDC – in the role of Chief Executive - and the relationship between the two councils has developed incrementally while retaining separate identities and sovereignty.

There is now a joint Senior Management Team (SMT) and a number of shared services. Despite this there are significant opportunities for working more closely together. For example, delivery of the shared corporate priority of economic growth could be improved by more joint working on economic development and tourism that would increase resilience and also increase sharing of expertise on specialist matters, for example on development viability, marketing and promotion.

Similarly, the two councils have comprehensive performance management arrangements and whilst these provide a lot of information and metrics, they are overly detailed and could be greatly simplified by moving to a single system. This process could also be streamlined by adopting the same style of service plans and, in due course, moving to a single corporate plan that sets out shared priorities and those that are specific to each council.

The council has strong partnership working arrangements across the county and is to be commended for being an active and responsive partner. An important outcome was the work of MHDC with Worcester City Council and Wychavon District Council to produce the South Worcestershire Development Plan. This provides a firm basis for the three councils to work together across a functioning economic and housing area to deliver shared economic growth and housing priorities.

The council is currently working closely with WDC but there is an opportunity for deeper working arrangements which would assist in delivering shared priorities on economic growth, tourism and housing. This could be achieved without compromising each council's identity or sovereignty.

## **2. Key recommendations**

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

### **Both councils**

- 1) Review the distribution of functions at SMT level to take account of existing and emerging strategic priorities, for example on economic growth and housing. Such a review could also consider the council's capacity for strategic resilience and whether this too needs to be strengthened.
- 2) Consider moving to a shared corporate plan for both councils. This could set out common priorities, for example on economic growth and housing, and

specify those that are uniquely different and could be achieved without diluting the distinctive identity of the two councils nor compromising their sovereignty.

- 3) Consider streamlining performance management arrangements, including a review of key performance indicators, and combining these into a single model for WDC and MHDC
- 4) Embed the prosperity and growth agenda priority across WDC and MHDC through further joint working on economic development and tourism. The benefits would include adding capacity and resilience and to sharing specialist skills.
- 5) Develop a South Worcestershire housing strategy incorporating clear identification of housing needs with a programme for delivery. Working across the same area as the SWDP would enable the three authorities to work collectively on planning housing delivery in support of economic growth.
- 6) Discuss with WCC the opportunity to establish a 'Development Team' model for working together at an early stage on large-scale developments and infrastructure projects
- 7) Take the opportunity to consider with Wychavon District Council joint future customer service arrangements and how these could be provided through further expanding digital platforms to offer improved customer access
- 8) Establish meetings of portfolio holders across the two councils to encourage closer working and engage all members on the progress of the partnership and the direction that this could take in the future. This could be developed further through taking opportunities for wider member engagement across the two councils.
- 9) Consider adding capacity to the Rural Communities Programme by working more closely with WCC adults' services and voluntary sector groups
- 10) Consider the training and support provision for the new cohort of members across both councils, following the elections in 2019, as a further means to encourage closer working arrangements across the two councils

### **Malvern Hills specific**

- 1) Consider a review of governance arrangements to ensure that the process to appoint an annual leader and portfolio holders allows a sustained focus on longer term corporate priorities.
- 2) Improve the current planning committee arrangements to ensure a consistency and quality of decision making across both committees that strongly supports corporate priorities for economic growth and housing.
- 3) Consider borrowing to enable investment in key corporate priorities.
- 4) Develop a clear strategy and plan for the future provision of information for visitors, to be omnichannel, targeted and set out the future function of the replacement for the existing Malvern Tourist Information Centre

- 5) Ensure that partners are engaged in delivering the priorities and actions to strengthen the visitor economy so that collective resources and capacity are co-ordinated and used effectively
- 6) Undertake a survey of accommodation occupancy rates when visitors stay overnight in Malvern Hills so that you know where opportunities exist to increase visitor income

### **3. Summary of the peer challenge approach**

#### **The peer team**

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge.

This peer challenge covered the two councils of Wychavon and Malvern Hills district councils, which have a shared Chief Executive/Managing Director with a number of shared services. Although the peer team worked across both councils it was agreed that each would receive a separate report.

Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Wychavon and Malvern Hills district councils were:

- David McIntosh - Chief Executive, Christchurch and East Dorset Councils
- Councillor Andrew Proctor - Leader, Broadland District Council
- Councillor Paul James - Leader, Gloucester City Council
- Paul Wilson - Corporate Director and Deputy Chief Executive, Derbyshire Dales District Council
- Jonathan Stephenson - Joint Strategic Director, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils
- Gill Ackrill - Head of Strategic Asset Management, Lewisham Homes
- Karen Edwards - Corporate Director, Rushmoor Borough Council
- Richard Cooke and Andrew Winfield - Peer Challenge Managers, LGA.

#### **Scope and focus**

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges. These are the areas we believe are critical to councils' performance and improvement:

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of Place: does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?
4. Financial planning and viability: does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
5. Capacity to deliver: is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In addition to these questions, the councils also asked the peer team to consider/review/provide feedback on:

- a stock-take on progress since your last Corporate Peer Challenges
- an assessment of your more recent joint working arrangements, particularly the balance between sharing services, where it makes financial or practical sense, and retaining each council's identity and independence
- feedback on progress on your councils' priorities, plans and performance
- strategy and planning, developing our economy (for MHDC and WDC)
- developing the tourism potential (Malvern Hills focus).

A response to the first three bullet points above can be found within the five principal corporate peer challenge themes and specific additional sections have been included to cover 'strategy, planning and developing the economy' and 'developing the tourism potential'.

### **The peer challenge process**

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focused and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council

and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 4 days onsite at Wychavon and Malvern Hills district councils, during which they spoke to more than 150 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders. In addition, they gathered information and views from more than 50 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of the on-site visit on Thursday 8 March. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things the council is already addressing and progressing.

## **4. Feedback**

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

MHDC has a five-year plan that is updated on an annual basis and has identified three corporate priorities. These priorities have been informed through consultation with councillors, staff, partners, the views of over 500 residents and a strong evidence base of data and information. These priorities are supported by a set of clear and purposeful actions and identified measures of success. The MHDC five year plan is closely aligned with the WDC corporate plan.

The South Worcestershire Development Plan was adopted in February 2016 and is a good example of successful collaboration across three district councils (MHDC, Worcester City and Wychavon District Council) to ensure that future development is planned and managed effectively. The plan provides a good platform for infrastructure planning and now provides a five year housing land supply to support this ambition. The SWDP is now being reviewed, for the next iteration, with this work supervised by a South Worcestershire Joint Advisory Panel.

The council enjoys high resident and business satisfaction level. The reasons for this appear to be good service provision and high level engagement on corporate planning and regular communications, including the council's annual report, the introduction of the residents' magazine and local meetings. Public satisfaction with how the council runs things is at a high level of 70 per cent and partners the peer team met were very positive on their engagement with the council. 90% of residents reported being satisfied with the district as a place to live.

There is a strong model of community engagement across MHDC and evidence of this can be seen in a number of service areas and through a range of initiatives and projects including democracy week, strategy consultations and community litter picks. This model appears to be embedded right across the workforce and is a real strength to ensuring that plans and priorities are driven by the needs of residents and that the community plays an active role in delivering key projects.

Another good example of community engagement is the role MHDC has played in enabling the development of a set of robust Neighbourhood Plans and has worked alongside parish and town councils, providing advice and guidance, to support the development and adoption of these plans.

The Malvern Hills District Health and Wellbeing Plan provides evidence of how the Council has worked closely with a range of partners to identify future challenges and develop a set of achievable priorities and actions to address these. The Plan is driven through a strong evidence base of data and intelligence and complements the county wide health and wellbeing priorities. A review of 2016/17 has shown that good progress has been made in delivering actions and activity to improve the health and wellbeing of residents.

Understandably for an area regarded as a good place to live there are community concerns about volumes of growth without the infrastructure to support it. This point was picked up by the peer team from meeting with representatives of town and parish councils. The council is actively working to address this through engagement with town and parish councils but it may be worth considering additional community engagement mechanisms that might be devised for proposed larger developments so that the community can be involved at early pre-application stage on transport, public realm, infrastructure and design matters. This should be looked in the context of the council's growth agenda and the proven need for housing.

The peer team also picked up an interest in the further devolution of services to town and parish councils and this could be an area worth exploring further. This was particularly the case where the same services were being delivered by town/parish and MHDC eg grounds maintenance services.

There are currently two separate but similar corporate plans for WDC and MHDC. Aligning corporate and service plans across the two councils and setting out common priorities, for example on economic growth and housing, and specifying those that are uniquely different, would not be too big a step to take as well as providing clarity for councillors, residents and businesses and more efficient corporate planning. This could be managed without diluting the distinctive identity of the two councils and without compromising sovereignty.

## **4.2 Leadership of place**

Throughout the time onsite it was clear that the council benefits from strong leadership provided by the Chief Executive and the joint SMT. This was reinforced consistently by discussions the team had with councillors, staff and external partners.

This has been an important feature for MHDC in effective strategic planning. The recent move to joint working arrangements with WDC has led to developing shared procurement opportunities, for example the recent evaluation, purchase and implementation of a new planning system and, separately, marketing testing of waste collection and street cleaning services.



There are good partnership working arrangements operating county-wide. Leaders meet at the Worcestershire Leaders' Board, with this also involving the Police and Crime Commissioner, the Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (WLEP), and health commissioners and providers. Alongside this is the Partnership Executive Group (PEG) which includes public sector representatives at chief executive level, including the Department of Work and Pensions.

Partners speak highly of MHDC. This is promoted through both strong political and Chief Executive /Managing Director engagement with county-wide partners, for example the PEG, the WLEP, Leaders' Board, and Worcestershire County Council (WCC) etc.

There is also an open and mature relationship with WCC. The importance of this relationship is highlighted by the South Worcester urban extension of 2,500 homes and 14 hectares of employment land. Rather than delay highway works until receipt of s.106 monies from the developer WCC invested in these works so as not to delay development. WCC will recover these costs through s.106 at a later stage.

There is an opportunity for MHDC – possibly along with Worcester City Council and Wychavon District Council as SWDP partners - to further strengthen partnership working with Worcestershire County Council to support the economic growth and housing delivery ambition. For example, the peer team were told that, in principle, WCC would be prepared to consider further highways involvement in pre-application discussions of complex major schemes. This would be a clear advantage so that highways issues would be dealt with at the outset rather than much later once problems start to arise. This approach amounts to establishing a 'Development Team' mode of working that brings together all key professional and partner inputs to consider proposed large scale developments.

The relationship with town and parish councils is active. There are 51 parish and town councils who receive a newsletter twice a year. There are regular parish forums with topics selected by the parish and town councils themselves. Recent topics included speeding, fostering and Neighbourhood Plans at the October 2017 meeting.

Some residents have highlighted difficulties in contacting MHDC through the existing customer service arrangements. The council has an opportunity to consider the future delivery of these arrangements as they have given notice of the intention to leave the customer services contract provided by Civica. WDC and MHDC are in a position to consider future customer service arrangements and how they may be able to work more closely on this to achieve future provision, possibly through further expanding digital platforms to offer improved customer access.

Businesses are supportive of MHDC and agree that the plans and priorities that are expressed through the Five Year Plan and the South Worcestershire Development Plan are valid. The concern from businesses was that MHDC now needs to turn this ambition into action and that this needs to happen at pace. The

current pace of change was described as 'glacial'. MHDC also needs to respond to businesses of all types and size not just those on the Science Park.

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

There is strong executive leadership in both councils which is highly regarded and widely recognised internally and externally. There is strong managerial leadership provided through the Chief Executive that is inclusive, decisive and promotes a culture of 'can do' across all staff. At the same time there is a track record of clear political leadership being shown by elected members.

There is a cohesive and motivated portfolio team. However, the annual appointment of a Leader and subsequent selection of portfolio holders provides a degree of instability at this point in the year and there was evidence from members and officers that this could provide a risk of changing priorities and delayed decision making. A strong and sustained focus on the agreed corporate priorities would help to mitigate this risk during this period.

Communications with members is a key feature at the council with this including the fortnightly 'Jack's Round-up' and local member briefings on specific issues. Opposition groups reported a good working relationship with senior officers with the group being briefed a week before every Executive meeting and before the budget. In the future this will be strengthened further with the plans to introduce a group leaders meeting. In addition, working arrangements within the council are characterised by strong working relationships between officers and portfolio holders.

Members are passionate about the area and keen to be involved. The large geographical area covered by the district, combined with Members' work commitments, makes it difficult for some councillors to attend meetings. Consideration should be given to the timing and location of meetings to improve attendance and engagement.

The relationship between MHDC and WDC is strengthening and the two Leaders have a good relationship that is built on a foundation of trust and shared values. This bodes well for future working.

The peer team felt that there would be value in arranging frequent portfolio holder meetings and member development across the two councils. This would mirror the Service Managers' meetings which have worked particularly well to enhance closer officer working. In addition to the Joint Working Advisory Board (JWAB) this could be a vehicle to engage all members to progress the partnership between the two councils and the direction that this could take in the future.

Similarly there is an opportunity with the elections in 2019 to consider the training and support provision for the new cohort of members across both councils as a further way to encourage closer working arrangements across the two councils.

Staff are motivated and engaged at all levels. Internal communications are very effective and two way, with this appreciated by the workforce. There is a weekly staff bulletin, team meetings, staff briefings led by the Chief Executive, a quarterly staff magazine - Team Talk - and staff appraisals. MHDC and WDC have adopted a shared set of values, including: 'great customer service'; 'openness and accountability'; 'innovation and improvement'; and 'fairness and respect' and these are starting to become embedded across the organisation.

There is a comprehensive approach to performance management and monitoring. However, these arrangements are over-engineered although the timeliness of reporting to Overview and Scrutiny is good. A more effective use of resources would be to move to a single performance management system that could be used by MHDC and WDC, with consideration of the requirements of different audiences using performance data. This would be an opportunity to harmonise arrangements across the two councils that would provide clarity without compromising sovereignty.

The quality of decision making through the Planning Committees was raised on numerous occasions as being inconsistent and not always aligned to the Council's stated aims and priorities for the area. Most vocal in this feedback were businesses who felt that planning decisions did not always support stated ambitions for economic growth and housing. The peer team did not necessarily feel that these issues stemmed from having two Planning Committees but are clear that if sustained progress is to be made the two Committees need to improve the way they function, discharge their duties and focus on agreed corporate priorities.

#### **4.4 Financial planning and viability**

MHDC has made significant improvements, has rebuilt its reserves and is now in a good financial position having generated savings of over £4.7 million since 2010/11. Moving to a joint SMT is estimated to have saved each council an annual cost of £235k. The council has general balances of £3m and has plans in place to secure further savings of £950k by 2020. A good example of savings that are being made is through the partnership with Civica to deliver the councils' revenues and benefits services to achieve significant savings/efficiencies of £200k per partner pa.

The council has purposefully pursued a 'mixed economy' of service provision which has enabled the council to reduce and control revenue costs. The range of this 'mixed economy' includes: shared services, contracted out services, other joint working arrangements as well as direct council provision. This has been important not only to achieve savings but also to ensure service resilience, but without compromising service quality.

MHDC is responding to local businesses by buying land that can be made available for a range of business premises. Examples include investment in the Malvern Hills Science Park, Tenbury Business Park and close to Blackmore Business Park. However, businesses have expressed similar concerns, and you

readily admit that the speed with which these sites are becoming available is too slow.

The council has indicated that it is interested in developing a new Housing Company with the intention of building/purchasing housing to rent to the private sector. Given that similar developments are underway in WDC it would make sense to explore the possibility for some form of collaboration to make the best use of resources, capacity and expertise.

There is an opportunity for both MHDC and WDC to work together on approaches to investment, linking the delivery of corporate priorities with developing an income stream. MDC can learn a lot from the well-developed approach that is in place at WDC and utilise the skills WDC has developed in this area. Although MHDC does not have the general balances that would enable this level of investment it could consider borrowing. If it were to do this it would require a thorough assessment of appropriate forms of investment and an understanding of the levels of risk. The LGA can provide Local Partnerships expertise or other technical support if this is needed.

MHDC has a record of budget underspends in recent years as annual savings needed to achieve the Business Plan have been achieved ahead of target. This has enabled the council to both rebuild its balances more quickly than anticipated in the MTFP, whilst at the same time invest in its priorities. This has included the purchase of strategic land at Qinetiq and Park Farm, as well as investing in the transformation of the waste and recycling service without the need for prudential borrowing or using reserves.

#### **4.5 Capacity to deliver**

MHDC has a longstanding record of using a mixed economy of service delivery models to achieve efficiencies, savings and service resilience. There is a clear and stated aim that services should be provided by whoever can provide the best mix of quality and price. This approach now includes shared services with WDC, services such as leisure provided by third parties, services provided to other councils and services delivered through a Worcestershire wide strategic partnership. This approach has gained savings needed whilst maintaining a high quality of provision for residents and businesses.

Staff at MHDC are motivated, committed and willing to go the extra mile. They welcomed the move back into the council building and felt this had strengthened working across teams internally. The 2016 staff survey is further evidence of a workforce that is committed to MHDC. 72.5 per cent stated that they would recommend the council as a place to work and 80.5 per cent said that they enjoy their job and find it rewarding. The survey also highlighted a 9% improvement in the relationship between officers and councillors and whilst this still only stands at 33% the feedback from officers and members that we spoke to indicated a much

improved dynamic. The council has arrangements for follow-up actions from the survey with this process being visible to staff. Internal and external communications are very strong with the use of fortnightly staff bulletins, staff forums and a quarterly staff magazine, Team Talk.

Service managers across the two councils are working closely together. MHDC and WDC Service Managers meet across the two councils every two months. The meeting is self-managing in the setting of its agenda and the meeting chair attends SMT to relay and feedback key messages. This is an important element in encouraging closer working, identifying issues that are then raised directly with SMT.

A workforce strategy is being developed to cover both councils. The peer team believe that this would benefit from being more aligned to future skills requirements. The recent paper on the '21<sup>st</sup> century public servant' picks up on some of these

<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/workforce-podcasts/21st-century-public-servant>

There are recruitment and retention difficulties, for example in planning, ICT and building control. There are a number of unfilled posts. Addressing these now and in the future may need the council to consider new arrangements. These could include more shared services with WDC to build up service resilience and/or shared post arrangements with WDC and possibly also with Worcester City Council.

The peer team also felt that now would be an opportune moment to review the distribution of functions at SMT level and the type of capacity needed to fill the existing vacancy. This could take account of existing and emerging strategic priorities, for example on economic growth and housing, and whether that strategic capacity is currently available. Such a review could also consider the council's capacity for strategic resilience and whether this too needs to be strengthened.

#### **4.6 Strategy, planning and developing the economy**

Economic growth is a key priority for MHDC and this has been articulated clearly through the Five Year Plan and supported by other strategic plans such as the South Worcestershire Development Plan. MHDC is now being pushed to turn these ambitions into action and provide the environment that will allow business to thrive.

The Malvern Hills Science Park is a significant asset for the District and employs over 350 people through over 30 businesses. The recently completed phase 4 has released a further 30,000 square feet of building space and was funded by the county council and MHDC. Further redevelopment is now underway with Worcestershire LEP investing £4 million and will provide a further 16,000 square feet of floor space. The close relationship with QinetiQ, which occupies land

adjacent to the Science Park, provides further opportunity to continue to build a strong science and technology based sector.

The development of a 5G test bed is an exciting collaboration between MHDC, the Malvern Hills Science Park, QinetiQ, Worcestershire College, Mazak and Worcester Bosch. This builds on the reputation of the area as being at the forefront of innovation in the technology sector, creating new and different jobs and providing a strong platform for further growth. MHDC has a key role in supporting and building this growth sector.

The council provides a full range of support to businesses (grants, advice and support around the planning process) however those businesses that the peer team spoke to were not clear about what the offer was from the council and how they could access this.

Small businesses are the backbone of the local economy with 90 per cent comprising 10 or less people. This will also form the future economy and for this reason it will be important to engage with small businesses to understand their needs and offer support for growth. The key issues that businesses identified to support this growth was the availability of suitable business premises and affordable housing for young employees.

There is an opportunity to embed further the prosperity and growth agenda priority across the two councils. Further joint working on economic development and tourism would bring a number of benefits including adding capacity, resilience and sharing specialist skills. This joint working arrangement could even be extended to include Worcester City Council – if the partners were minded to do this – and would provide an alignment of resources to deliver the SWDP. The benefit of such an arrangement would be to add capacity and resilience but could also be used to incorporate specialist skills that may not be readily available, for example on viability, asset management, housing enabling etc.

The SWDP is an important achievement for the three councils and will be key to addressing future economic growth and housing aspirations. Working across the three councils on the delivery of shared aspirations is another option for the future.

#### **4.7 Developing our tourism potential**

Before providing an assessment on this theme the Peer Team wanted to pose two questions back to the Council:

1. How much of a priority is tourism in the context of your overall economic development strategy?
2. Is growth in tourism a priority for councillors and residents?

The purpose of these questions is to highlight that it is likely that more resources will be needed to boost tourism and these resources could be better utilised in other sectors of the economy to promote growth. Alongside the issue of resources, the

Peer Team did not get a strong sense that tourism was a priority for residents or councillors, who will potentially need to make decisions to support growth through tourism.

The Malvern Hills District Visitor Economy Action Plan 2020 provides a focus for the Council, partners and businesses to increase visitor spending and the retention of this income within the local economy. The Plan has a strong evidence base and is aligned with the Visit Worcestershire Destination Management Plan. The aims and objectives within the Plan are clear and have been underpinned by a robust SWOT analysis and a number of changing trends have been identified which also inform the identified actions for delivery.

Malvern Hills is one of the most visited districts in Worcestershire and the Council has made significant efforts to establish 'The Malverns' as a recognisable brand. The principles for developing this brand given the unique attractions, events and scenery are good and evidence of the brand was seen a number of times through a range of marketing and promotional materials. Local businesses were also aware of 'The Malverns' brand and are supportive of further development and marketing.

Malvern Hills attracts 3.5 million visits per year and whilst only 164,000 of these were overnight visits this equated to nearly a quarter of visitor spend in the district (£26 million). A key strategy for the Council is to increase the number of visitors that stay overnight and thereby increasing visitor spend – the Peer Team felt that this is the right priority.

The recently developed tourism website has been well received and is a good platform to signpost visitors to a range of information. The site is easy to navigate and enables visitors to access up to date information to plan their time in Malvern Hills District. The Council is monitoring the use of the site so that it can continue to refine the content to best meet the needs of visitors. Another recently launched development has been a walking app which provides a guide to the best walks across the District. This is another good example of how digital tools can be used to enhance the experience of visitors to the area.

Partners and businesses are supportive of the Malvern Hills District Visitor Economy Action Plan 2020 and helped to inform the priorities that are identified. However, most of the actions within this Plan are being led by MHDC and it is not clear whether the Council has the resources in place to deliver these and within timescale. The Council should consider how partners can support the delivery of the Plan and in particular, seek clarity about how Visit Worcestershire is engaged. There is also an opportunity for a more co-ordinated collaboration with local businesses to mobilise a broader range of resources within a coherent approach. It was felt that further use could also be made of the expertise and skills that sit within Wychavon District Council and particularly those in tourism and communications functions.

You have identified that a key priority is to increase the numbers of visitors to the District who stay overnight and highlighted a clear action in your Plan to progress this area of work – to understand existing occupancy rates. However, you are currently considering whether it is viable to undertake such a survey. It is important if you are to make any progress around increasing the number of overnight stays that

you fully understand the range of accommodation already in place and the demand for this so that you can target resources effectively. You may want to consider prioritising this piece of work.

How visitors access quality information is a priority for the Council and there is a need for a strategy and plan for the future provision of tourist information that is clear about the markets being targeted and omnichannel in approach. This will build on the recent development of the website but will need to consider the function of Malvern's Tourist Information Centre.

## **5 Next steps**

### **Immediate next steps**

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Helen Murray, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are: email [helen.murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:helen.murray@local.gov.uk) and telephone 07884 312235.

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

### **Follow up visit**

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 2 years.

### **Next Corporate Peer Challenge**

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the council will commission their next peer challenge before March 2023.