

REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL

CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE



Report Reference	C-24-24
Meeting Date	13 th January 2025
Agenda Item	10
Prepared by	Town Clerk

1.0 BACKGROUND

In November, the Town Council undertook a Corporate Peer Challenge with NALC/LGA. This involved a three-day visit from the peer challenge team where they met with a range of stakeholders including staff, members, community representatives and partner organisations. In total over 75 people were spoken to.

The purpose of a peer challenge is to guide improvement; the peers used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read. The team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.

An initial presentation of the findings of the peer challenge was given at the end of the three-day visit. The final report was then received in December and is presented to this meeting. The Town Council is then required to agree an action plan responding to the findings which will be developed by the Corporate Peer Challenge working group and presented to the March meeting.

2.0 OVERVIEW OF CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE REPORT

2.1 GENERAL OVERVIEW OF REPORT

Section one of the Corporate Peer Challenge report provides an overview of the findings from the visit.

The report highlighted that the council's events programme is valued and that the council is respected with good examples of partnership working. Community organisations which work with the council feel valued and staff are proud of what the council delivers for the town with good morale. The Town Clerk and Town Mayor are well respected and the Mayoralty is valued. The council has good governance, effective budgeting and accounting systems and there is civility and respect in the chamber. Peers noted that the council has a lot to celebrate and there is a real commitment within the council, and from residents and businesses, to make the town a great place to live and visit.

The peers also found that the council's ambition was not matched with resource and that it has a tendency to take on projects before completing existing ones. It noted that the majority of actions under the strategic plan are overdue. The report highlighted the lack of capacity within the Town Clerk's role and the need to increase corporate resilience around this role. Peers felt that the visibility of members could be improved and there could be better member development to support their leadership of place and delivering effective challenge/strategic oversight in meetings. The issues around the Market Hall refurbishment and 60 King Street were noted alongside the need to have a more strategic approach to asset management and a better appraisal of strategic risk.

2.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM REPORT

Section two of the report outlines 9 key recommendations, which are summarised as:

1. Review the strategic plan priorities and duration
2. Undertake a staffing review
3. Enhance the resilience in respect of the Town Clerk/RFO role
4. Continue engagement with CEC regarding services and joint working
5. Develop an asset management strategy
6. Support the creation of a Business Improvement District
7. Develop a communications strategy to improve communications
8. Develop a procurement strategy to improve procurement
9. Commission an external health and safety review

Additionally, in section four of the report a number of additional recommendations are made:

10. Review the council's equal opportunities policy
11. Undertake equality impact assessments for activity
12. Increase the visibility of councillors
13. Improve support for councillors to develop their roles
14. Resolve issues with 60 King St and the Market Hall
15. Undertake improvements to the council offices
16. Promote election processes to see contested elections
17. Improve the clarity of decision within committees and link more strongly to strategy
18. Develop stronger challenge from councillors in meetings
19. Increase councillor/officer collaboration
20. Develop a strategic risk register
21. Improve the robustness of business plans
22. Invest in project management expertise
23. Implement lessons learned exercises

The Corporate Peer Challenge working group will be developing a recommended action plan to address each of the recommendations from the report and this will be presented to the March council meeting. This will include recommendations on the priority of each recommendation, the specific actions required to address the recommendations, and which committee would have responsibility for ensuring delivery.

To enable proposals to be considered ahead of the approval of the budget, the December Personnel Committee meeting considered recommendations for revisions to the council's staffing which were incorporated into the draft budget presented to this meeting. The revisions include creating three new part time roles, increasing the hours of two officers, retitling two roles and some changes to where responsibilities lie. The changes increase office staffing levels by 2.1 FTE and the changes will be implemented subject to the approval of the 2025/26 budget.

The working group has further recommended that a budget of £2,000 is added to the 2025/26 budget to fund an external health and safety review. This is covered in the relevant item.

3.0 NEXT STEPS

This item is principally to formally receive the report and to provide an opportunity for members to raise any comments or give any direction to the working group as it develops the action plan.