

# Knutsford Town Council Corporate Peer Challenge

Feedback from the peer challenge team

Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> November 2024



# The peer challenge team

- Mark Williams -Town Clerk – Falmouth
- Councillor Steve Walker – Chair - Waddesdon Parish Council
- Anders Hanson - Member Services Manager – NALC
- Jill Scarr - Peer Challenge Manager - LGA
- Onyekachi Abajingin - Project Support Officer - LGA

## The purpose of peer challenge

Peer challenges are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet a council's needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. 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.

## The process of peer challenge

- Peers reviewed a range of information to ensure we were familiar with the council, the challenges it is facing and its plans for the future
- The peer team gathered information and views from more than 24 meetings, in addition to further research
- We spoke to more than 75 people including a range of council staff together with members and external partners



# Scope and brief for the peer challenge

We have considered the core components looked at by all corporate peer challenges, namely:

1. Local priorities and outcomes
2. Organisational and place leadership
3. Governance and culture
4. Financial planning and management
5. Capacity for improvement



## Overall messages and observations

- There is a lot to celebrate –
  - the council is well respected
  - there are good examples of partnership working
  - well engaged with the community
  - highly regarded Town Clerk and Mayor
- Councillors and staff are clearly committed to Knutsford and enthusiastic about the council
- Strong staff team with good morale



## Overall messages and observations

- Capacity doesn't reflect the ambitions of the council
- Issues with key assets need to be resolved as a priority
- Councillors need to be visible and demonstrate leadership of place
- Focus on finishing projects before starting new ones

## Quotes

Finish what you've started

Lots of support from the Town Clerk who goes above and beyond

Don't know any councillors – no interactions

Knutsford Town Council is a more trusted custodian of community assets than Cheshire East Council

The Town Council is receptive to community groups and supports them

Enjoy doing things that enhance the town

They over promise and under deliver

Represent their residents very well



## Local priorities and outcomes - strengths

- The council has an ambitious long-term Strategic Plan which reflects local priorities
- Budget reflects priorities with additional £100k to create a Community Services reserve
- Desire to take on services from Cheshire East Council to protect and improve local services
- Neighbourhood Plan adopted in 2019
- Assets transferred from Cheshire East Council have been improved e.g. Cemetery
- Events delivered by Knutsford Town Council are well supported and valued by residents and businesses. There is good promotion for events
- Organisations receiving grants feel appreciated

## Local priorities and outcomes – areas for consideration

- The Strategic Action Plan for 24-25 is over-ambitious and there needs to be an element of realism in the prioritisation of what can be realistically delivered
- Equality Impact Assessments need to be considered for service delivery and events
- Review the Equal Opportunities Policy to include service delivery and reflect the protected characteristics

# Organisational and place leadership - strengths

- Well respected, experienced Town Clerk
- There is a sense of pride from those working for the town council
- Staff feel supported in their role
- Positive working relationships between officers and partners across the town and beyond
- Community engagement to develop the Strategic Plan and Neighbourhood Plan
- Active volunteer network to deliver some priorities e.g. events, consultation around planning
- Work by Town Centre staff is valued by residents and businesses

# Organisational and place leadership – areas for consideration

- Councillors need to be more visible and pro-active to demonstrate their place leadership role – support to do this will help build confidence
- Town Clerk needs to focus on strategic issues and delegate operational matters
- Lobby Cheshire East Council in relation to its responsibilities in the town
- External communications needs to improve to ensure all residents and partners have access to information and are kept updated about projects e.g. BID, Market Hall, Pedestrianisation
- 60 King Street & Market Hall – resolve the issues with these assets
- Look at ways of improving the council office building which is in a state of disrepair and not conducive to a positive and healthy working environment

## **Governance & Culture – Strengths**

- There is civility and respect in the council chamber
- Governance and administrative systems are effective
- Staff morale is good and team meetings are valued
- Mayoralty is seen as an important part of the council
- Flexible working arrangements are valued and generate goodwill amongst staff

# Governance & Culture – Areas for Consideration

- Cross-cutting decisions decided in one committee that have an impact on the work of other committees need to be addressed
- Challenge by Councillors in meetings needs to be encouraged
- Develop a strategic risk register to cover high risk/high impact projects and plans including the Strategic Plan

# Financial planning and management - strengths

- Budget monitoring is well established through the Finance Committee
- Effective budgeting and accounting systems

## Financial planning and management – areas for consideration

- Contingency planning is needed in respect of any absence by the Town Clerk
- Ensure that aims and objectives in the Strategic Plan are linked to the Council's decisions
- Business cases need to be more robust and ensure all costs are included and are realistic before projects are agreed – could the loss of the £560k from the Community Ownership Fund have been avoided?
- A strategic review of all assets should be carried out to assess the maintenance implications and prepare a plan to manage these assets which will include both capital and revenue costs



## Capacity for improvement - strengths

- Staff morale is good and everyone wants to do their best for the town
- Willingness to improve e.g. participating in this peer challenge



# Capacity for improvement – areas for consideration

- Review the staffing structure to ensure there is the capacity and skills to deliver the strategic objectives and there is built-in resilience to cover key staff absence/vacancies
- Invest in project management expertise for existing and future projects
- Look at the procurement of machinery, IT, equipment etc. to ensure that purchases are fit for purpose and replaced in a timely manner
- Review how both internal and external communications can be managed in a more effective way
- Carry out a 'lessons learned' exercise to investigate what went well and what could have been improved on projects

# Recommendations

1. Review Strategic Plan, its priorities and effective duration
2. Consider a complete staffing review to ensure the council has the capacity and skills to meet its current and future aspirations
3. Enhance the resilience of the council with regard to the role of the Town Clerk/RFO
4. Continue the dialogue with Cheshire East Council regarding service standards and future joint working
5. Develop an Asset Management Strategy for the council and each individual asset to ensure the council's assets are managed and maintained



## Recommendations

6. Support the creation of the BID which complements the town centre management function
7. Revisit internal and external communications and develop a Communications Strategy
8. Develop a strategic approach to procurement to ensure that all purchases are fit for purpose and replaced in a timely manner
9. Review health and safety throughout the council

## Next steps

- Opportunity for questions and discussion now
- Public feedback report to follow shortly
- Council to publish an action plan in response to the report within eight weeks of the CPC reports publication
- Within 12 months a check-in to be scheduled – an opportunity to discuss progress and next steps