



**KNUTSFORD TOWN COUNCIL  
CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE 2024  
POSITION STATEMENT**

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# INTRODUCTION

## ABOUT KNUTSFORD

Knutsford is a market town with a population of c.13,500 located just 15 miles south of Manchester in north Cheshire. Knutsford sits on the doorstep of Tatton Park, one of the most complete country estates in the country, and the town boasts varied interesting historical connections including to Elizabeth Gaskell, Henry Royce and General Patton. The Knutsford Royal May Day festival has been held since 1864 and is the largest event in the town's calendar and a key part of its heritage and the Town also contains over 100 nationally listed buildings alongside five designated Conservation Areas.

The town is currently undergoing its greatest expansion in 50 years as the major development sites allocated in the Cheshire East Local Plan (2017) come forward. As of 2024 construction has started on two sites delivering 426 homes with a further 535 likely to come forward during this plan period. An expansion of the Parkgate Industrial Estate has recently been completed and a new business park is planned for Manchester Road. It is expected that the next Local Plan, which Cheshire East Council will commence work on shortly, will allocate further housing in the town.

Knutsford Railway Station is on the mid-Cheshire line, connecting the town to Altrincham, Stockport and Manchester to the north and to Northwich and Chester to the south. The town is also served by regular but infrequent bus services to Macclesfield, Wilmslow, Altrincham and Northwich as well as a single weekday bus to Warrington.

Four state-funded primary schools provide education to children up to 11 and secondary school provision within the Town is provided by the Knutsford Multi Academy Trust; neighbouring towns provide opportunities for other forms of secondary school education, such as grammar schools; fee paying independent schools; a 6th form college; and colleges for 16-18s with vocational courses.

Knutsford's main play area is located centrally at the Moor, with smaller play areas on Southfields, Longridge and a new one recently created on Lawrence Way as part of a new development. The town has a number of informal open spaces including two kickabout pitches (Longridge and Barncroft) and a large common, the Heath. Knutsford has a number of public rights of way which connect the town to the wider countryside. The town's open spaces assessment notes that the south east and south west parts of Knutsford are beyond the recommended distance from play areas.

The town has a range of sports clubs and leisure facilities. The leisure centre, operated by ESAR, includes a swimming pool and facilities for indoor sports. There are a number of private gyms and Knutsford Sports Club and Egerton Youth Club provide further indoor sports courts and outdoor pitches. The town has three allotment sites with a fourth opening in 2025; waiting lists are heavily oversubscribed.



Knutsford has one of the strongest town centres in Cheshire, with a low vacancy rate and variety of independent operators complemented by a small number of national chains. The town is well served by coffee shops and restaurants and has a three-screen cinema operated by Curzon.

The town centre is also home to Knutsford Heritage Centre which currently opens three days per week. The historic nature of the town centre, with its one-way streets and narrow pavements, give the town its charm but also make it challenging for pedestrians and parking.

The town centre is complemented by small neighbourhood parades of shops at Longridge, Parkgate Lane and Mansion Drive which provide additional convenience shopping, takeaways and beauty services.

There are three GP surgeries, operated by the Knutsford Medical Partnership. Two own their premises whilst the lease for the third is due to expire imminently. The partnership aspires to create a central combined surgery on the site of the community hospital.

Knutsford has a diverse array of third sector organisations from friends groups looking after open spaces to charities providing gardening services and lunch clubs. Organisations such as Knutsford Hosts, Knutsford Rotary Club and Knutsford Lions provide volunteers to support these various groups in their work.

Demographically, the town has a higher proportion of over 65s and single pensioner households than the national average. It also has an area of localised deprivation in the St John's Wood ward, this being amongst the 30% most deprived communities in the UK contrasting to other areas of Knutsford being amongst the 10% least deprived.

## **ABOUT KNUTSFORD TOWN COUNCIL**

Knutsford Town Council was established in 1974 as a successor to the Knutsford Urban District Council (1895-1974).

Since 2011, the Council's responsibilities and assets have grown considerably. Through asset transfers from Cheshire East Council, we took ownership of public toilets, the market hall, allotments and the Council Offices as well as taking back management of its cemetery and chapel. The council also owns small open spaces/amenity land: Wallwood, Higher Town Green and the Obelisk and green.

The council delivers a community events programme which includes delivering an annual music festival, Christmas light switch on and two-day Christmas market. Our programme also includes Halloween and Easter themed trails and a community picnic in the park as well as other ad hoc events. The Town Council also hosts a number of civic fundraising events for the mayor's chosen charities.

In 2015, the Town Council introduced the Town Ranger service, providing responsive and proactive town maintenance including cleaning road signs, clearing litter and repairing street furniture.



The Town Council has delivered a range of projects from installing blue plaques to commemorate the town’s history, creating a centennial war memorial and leading extensive tree and wildflower planting programmes. The Town Council delivers town centre flowers and planting in partnership with Knutsford in Bloom, a volunteer body that maintains a number of flower beds and planters.

The council actively participates in the planning system with a committee reviewing all applications in the town. The council led the community in developing the Knutsford Neighbourhood Plan (commended in the RTPi North West Planning Excellence Awards) which was approved at referendum in 2019 and will be reviewed c. 2027 when the borough completes a new local plan.

The council’s budget is in the region of £750-£800k with non-precept income of c. £180k.

We part fund the town’s CCTV system and fund the provision of a Citizens Advice service in the town. We provide an annual grant to support the operation of Knutsford Heritage Centre and also provide grant funding to community organisations to support projects.

The Town Council holds Quality Gold accreditation under the Local Council Award Scheme.

## COUNCILLORS

The Town Council comprises 15 councillors elected across five wards with the last elections being held in May 2023. The 2023 election saw the council change from being majority Conservative to majority Independent; only one ward was contested (Cross Town), all other councillors were elected unopposed. Whilst there are ‘political’ councillors, this is not apparent in council business and all councillors work together collegially.

Councillor	Since	Ward	Current Roles / Other
Colin Banks (I)	2023	St John’s Wood	Town Mayor
Peter Coan (C)	2007	Cross Town	Assets and Operations Committee Chair, CEC Borough Councillor
Lesley Dalzell (I)	2019	Cross Town	Personnel Committee Chair
Jennifer Forrest (C)	2023	St John’s Wood	Community Committee Chair, Events Committee Deputy Chair
Stewart Gardiner (C)	2008	Bexton & Town Centre	Personnel Committee Deputy Chair, CEC Borough Councillor
Christopher Gray (C)	2014	Norbury Booths	Town Centre Committee Chair, Planning Committee Deputy Chair, Assets and Operations Committee Deputy Chair
Bryan Hartley (I)	2023	Nether	Events Committee Chair, Community Committee Deputy Chair
April Johnson (I)	2023	Bexton & Town Centre	Town Centre Committee Deputy Chair, Environment and Community Committee Deputy Chair



Scott Lowe (I)	2021	Nether	
Rex Mears (I)	2023	Cross Town	Environment and Community Committee Chair
James McCulloch (C)	2019	St John's Wood	Deputy Town Mayor, Planning Committee Chair
Matthew Robertson (C)	2019	Norbury Booths	Finance Committee Chair
Su Russell (I)	2023	Norbury Booths	
Gus Watson (I)	2023	Bexton & Town Centre	
Matthew Wood (I)	2023	Nether	Finance Committee Deputy Chair

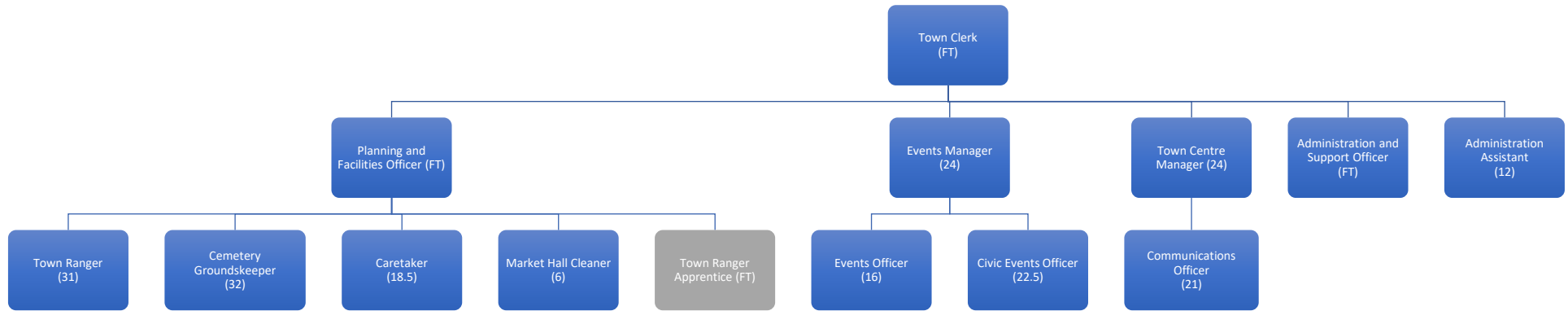
## STAFF

The Town Council currently employs a total of thirteen staff of which nine are office based and four are operational. The majority of staff are part time – only the Town Clerk, Planning and Facilities Officer and Administration and Support Officer are full time roles. Some roles (e.g. Events Manager) were full time but split into two part time roles. In total the FTE is 9.6, of which 6.2 are office based and 3.4 operational. An organogram is shown on the next page.

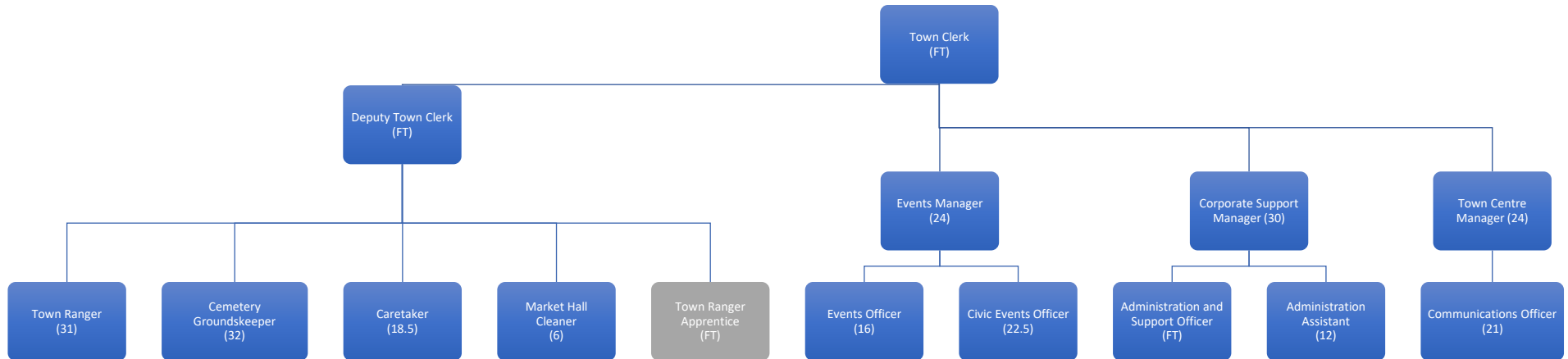
In September 2024, the Personnel Committee approved changes to the staffing structure subject to any feedback from this review and we would welcome the views of the review tea on the proposed change. The changes change the Planning and Facilities Officer to Deputy Town Clerk and create a new senior officer role of Corporate Support Manager. The objective of the change is to provide greater corporate resilience as it was recognised that the organisation would struggle if the Town Clerk was indisposed for any reason.

The Town Council intends to employ an Apprentice Town Ranger in 2025, this will be the first apprenticeship offered by the council.





*Current Staffing Structure*



*Planned Staffing Structure*



## THE REASON FOR A PEER CHALLENGE

There are a number of reasons that we feel now is a good time for a peer challenge.

- The Town Clerk has been in post since 2013/14 and it is considered that after ten years it is healthy to have an external look at how the council is operating and what can be improved.
- Since the 2023 elections, over half of the members are new. Eight new councillors were elected in 2023, one was elected in 2021, three in 2019 and three have served for ten years or more. The peer challenge will provide useful guidance for new and experienced councillors.
- Our principal authority, Cheshire East Council, is in significant financial difficulty. We reasonably expect to take on additional services/functions that may be dropped by the borough council or to meet unmet needs following service changes. We want to ensure we are in the best position to do this.

More generally, we want to better understand if the way we are operating is optimised to deliver for our community.

# LOCAL PRIORITIES AND OUTCOMES

## OUR CORPORATE STRATEGY

The Town Council adopted a new strategic plan in 2023. The plan covers a ten-year period and sets out six strategic aims:

- Knutsford Town Centre will be a thriving and unique destination for residents and visitors alike.
- We will enable residents to choose to reduce their reliance on cars by improving the desirability of walking, cycling and using public transport.
- Knutsford will have a diverse network of green spaces, a biodiverse natural environment and a reduced carbon footprint.
- Knutsford's heritage will be understood, conserved and celebrated.
- We will lead a strong, connected community with a thriving community spirit and civic pride.
- Knutsford residents will have access to the services and facilities they need to live happy and healthy lives.

The plan was developed following a number of community workshops and the draft plan was put out to consultation before adoption. Each strategic aim has a number of specific objectives.

The council produces an annual action plan detailing the specific actions it will undertake to contribute to the delivery of the strategic objectives. These are prepared by the Town Clerk and approved by committees. The council did not deliver all actions in 2023/24 and is behind on set targets for 2024/25 – the planned Corporate Support Manager role will help address this from a capacity and management perspective.

## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND APPRAISAL

All staff receive regular employee development reviews (appraisals) and council managers promote an "open doors policy" of encouraging any issues/suggestions for improvement to be raised at any time. The council recognises and values the benefit of continuous professional development and encourages all staff to consider how the council can support their development, be that through external training, in house training/in work learning etc and the council supported the Town Clerk in attaining the Community Governance BA.

The council's commitment to training extends to its members. All members are given an induction on how the council operates and basic law/procedure. Members of the planning, finance and personnel committees are given more detailed in-house training on these subject areas and the council requires committee chairs to have had chairmanship training. All members are encouraged to attend ChALC/NALC training events, uptake is mixed but most

members attended the basic training sessions offered by ChALC and some have attended briefings/topic based NALC/CPRE webinars. The council surveyed members in late 2023 to identify if there were any areas they felt additional training or support was required and no significant issues were raised.

## **CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

The Town Council does not seek to stand still and consistently works to develop its offer and deliver for the community and this is evidenced by the commitments set out in our strategic plan. The council's strategic plan actions are monitored by committees at each meeting to review progress and discuss any challenges.

Officers regularly informally discuss and review how services are delivered to respond to any issues or opportunities which arise, for example implementing improvements to the information provided to bereavement services customers in response to frequently asked questions. All staff are encouraged to identify and propose improvements to systems/processes.

All council events are reviewed through a post event review to catalogue successes, failures and challenges to assist with future event planning. This involves input from volunteers, members, officers and contractors.

The council seeks Green Flag accreditation for its cemetery, enters the North West in Bloom competition and has attained Quality Gold accreditation under the Local Council Award Scheme. These have been done both to highlight and support the council's commitment to delivering quality services and engender community pride.

## **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY**

Equality and diversity is not an overt priority for the council, though there are some areas where it has a particular interest in furthering equality objectives and we would respond appropriately should we be alerted to any issue affecting different parts of our community.

Part of the town (largely the St John's Wood ward) is within the 30% most deprived communities, contrasting strongly with other areas which are in the 10% least deprived. There is some perceived separation for this part of the town from the rest and the Town Council has a strategic objective to reduce this and enhance opportunity for residents in the ward.

The council is conscious that Knutsford also has an above average older population. Our grant funding policy has a priority for supporting projects which serve older residents and we have delivered some projects designed to support older people e.g. "take a seat" campaign and our decision to take on public toilets was partly driven by consultation showing older residents preferred public toilet access to community toilet schemes.

At the same time the council is also conscious that there is little provision for young people within the town and we are keen to develop services and facilities to support young people and give them greater opportunities. In work such as our Green Spaces Strategy, we will be giving consideration to research from, for example, the Make Space for Girls campaign.

The Town Council has also long been conscious of the inaccessibility of the town centre. This forms a key part of developing a town centre masterplan and the council will be looking to develop an accessibility forum to help strengthen and channel the voice of residents with additional needs to both inform the council's own work and to help influence other stakeholders.

When undertaking consultations the council seeks to obtain demographic data from respondents (age, ward and gender) to help with data analysis both to identify if there are significant differences in demands/wants and to understand if parts of the community are underrepresented.

## **ORGANISATIONAL AND PLACE LEADERSHIP**

### **PLACE LEADERSHIP**

The Town Council is increasingly keen to provide strong leadership for Knutsford and actively work to address the challenges the town faces. We worked with the community to develop a Neighbourhood Plan (made 2019) and our strategic plan has a clear focus on stepping into a wider range of areas to use our position and resources to influence other stakeholders in delivering for Knutsford and take a leading role in planning for the town's future. We particularly recognise that Cheshire East Council is not in the position to provide the leadership we feel our town needs.

At the same time, we are increasingly frustrated by the lack of influence with Cheshire East Council which "holds the cards" for a number of areas we are keen to work in, such as improving our town centre. The limited resources at the borough council retard progress on some matters and the council and wider community does not feel that Cheshire East Council knows Knutsford well enough. The Town Council is also frustrated that the approach from Cheshire East Council to its challenges is not treating local councils as partners but instead as a source of funds; in general, we would rather take on a service/function than commit to funding multiple.

The Town Council is uncertain what change future devolution to Cheshire and Warrington will bring (it appears likely that a Mayoral Combined Authority will be created) but we wish to be in a position to be seen as a partner to both Cheshire East Council and the combined authority as well as *the* voice for Knutsford.

We look to support and work collaboratively with local organisations, this includes appointing members to a number of local groups to act as a conduit between our organisations.

## **COMMUNICATION**

The council seeks to communicate as effectively as possible. It has launched a regular community e-newsletter (which we aim to produce monthly, though currently its less frequent) and we regularly provide press releases on activity to the local newspaper. We utilise social media (including responding to comments in groups etc to try and foster communication and show that the council is following matters across the town) and have a good website. The Town Mayor and Town Clerk alternate writing a column for the Knutsford Guardian.

That said, as is common across the country there is a generally poor understanding of local government and frequent confusion of the role of the town council vs Cheshire East Council. We frequently get the message that “we didn’t know about that” and acknowledge more can be done to reach residents.

We are keen to develop stronger community engagement, though recognise that meaningful consultation can present resource challenges. A number of our actions under our strategic plan will start with or involve consultation to ensure they are built on the community’s views, but at the same time we are often disappointed by the number of responses we get (rarely above 500).

## **ORGANISATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

The Town Clerk leads the council’s officer team which has responsibility for day-to-day managerial and operational decisions within the council and the implementation of the council’s strategies. The Town Clerk works supports senior officers in decision making within their remits and he is supported by working groups or committee chairs as appropriate. Staff surveys have consistently scored well on the measure of “I am well supported by my line manager” and “I am given sufficient freedom to decide how to do my work”. The officer team works very collegiately both in delivery of services and troubleshooting issues or challenges.

The Town Council does not appoint a leader, the primary leadership from members is part of the office of Town Mayor. The Town Mayor is expected to meet regularly with the Town Clerk to discuss council business, maintaining an oversight of the council’s activity. Committee chairs also provide member leadership within the subject areas of their committees.

## **GOVERNANCE AND CULTURE**

## ORGANISATIONAL VALUES

In developing our corporate plan, the council set out the following organisational values to guide members and officers.

- We work to make Knutsford a better place to live, work, visit and do business.
- We are committed to openness, transparency and strong democratic engagement.
- We set out to be community leaders and serve as the voice of Knutsford.
- We deliver high-quality services which represent value for money and efficient use of our share of council tax funds.
- We work collaboratively to strengthen the whole Knutsford community.
- We ensure our staff feel valued and empowered

## GOVERNANCE AND DECISION MAKING

In 2023, the Town Council adopted a new corporate strategy covering a ten-year period. Concurrently, we redesigned our committee system to better align it to this plan. Our committees have broad delegated authority to make decisions within their policy areas and budgets. Our committees are:

- Assets and Operations (meets every two months)
- Community (meets every two months)
- Environment and Transport (meets every two months)
- Events (meets quarterly)
- Finance (meets quarterly)
- Personnel (meets quarterly)
- Planning (meets every three weeks)
- Town Centre (meets every two months)

The Town Council has a CIL Projects Advisory Committee formed of 50% councillors and 50% non-councillors to guide decisions on using any CIL receipts. Whilst to date our CIL income has been small (c. £40k) we anticipate receiving up to £1m in the near future and were keen to widen the decision making on how that is spent.

We also have a standing sub-committee (Council Offices, to look at a project to renovate the building) and a sub-committee for personnel procedures (e.g. appeals). The council uses working groups as both task-and-finish groups to develop/steer projects and on a standing basis to provide guidance to officers / review matters.

Operational decision making (e.g. day to day delivery of services) is delegated to officers.

Council meetings are livestreamed via Zoom and Facebook and virtual public participation is invited. Public attendance at council meetings is intermittent. It is more common at Planning Committee meetings but generally most meetings do not have any public in the audience (in person or on Zoom) but meetings are watched via Facebook.

All but the simplest of items at meetings are accompanied by written reports from officers which facilitates effective decision making.

## **ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT AND AUDIT**

The Annual Governance Statement and Accounting Return is prepared by the Town Clerk (who is also responsible financial officer) and presented to Full Council, ordinarily in late May / early June. Members are provided with the Internal Auditor's report in advance of the AGAR being presented.

There were no 'except for' matter raised last year's (2023/24) external audit report. There was a minor issue raised in the 2022/23 report (treatment of credit card balances at year end) following a change in proper practices being overlooked which was addressed in the preparation of the 2023/24 AGAR.

The council's Internal Auditor undertakes two reviews, an interim review in January and a final review in April. Reports from the Internal Auditor are presented to the Finance Committee with an action plan for any arising recommendations.

A working group of two/three members of the Finance Committee undertake quarterly tests of internal controls and report to the Finance Committee at each meeting.

## **CULTURE**

The Town Council adopted a revised Member/Officer protocol in 2023 which, alongside the values set out in its Strategic Plan, sets out more clearly the expected working culture for officers and members. There is a mutually supportive culture, especially within the staff team but also across the whole council working to deliver for "team Knutsford".

There have been no code of conduct complaints against councillors in the past seven years and only one in the past ten years. Members and officers understand their respective roles and there have been few (and only minor) issues requiring correction; the growth of the council in the last ten years has helped reinforce this and separate out more of the operational from strategic at meetings.

The council is open to challenge (which is why we are going through this process) as we recognise that that is how we can learn and develop. We strive to be open and transparent, we video stream all formal meetings to widen access to democracy and use our website to proactively publish information as much as we can. We are always open to discussing issues with residents and other stakeholders and taking the time to explain why if we are unable to assist with an issue.

## MEMBER AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

### STRATEGIC RISK MANAGEMENT

#### MEMBER / OFFICER RELATIONSHIPS AND ROLES

The Town Council adopted a new Member/Officer protocol in 2023 which provided greater clarity over the roles and expectations of members and officers. The policy also includes role descriptions for the Town Mayor, Members, Committee Chairs and Personnel Committee Members to provide stronger guidance for members of what the council expects of them.

The role of members is reinforced during councillor inductions and members generally understand the parameters of their roles.

The council intends to hold a twice-annual forum for staff and chairs of committees to discuss council business – this was held once in 2023/2024 but will be held every six months in 2025. The objective of the meeting is partly to build relationships between councillors and officers (particularly those who do not regularly come into contact) but also to provide a review and forward look at council activity to discuss concerns, ideas and thoughts.

#### STAFF ENGAGEMENT AND INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

The Town Clerk issues a weekly summary briefing to all members and officers every Friday. The “Week in Brief” summarises activity within the week submitted by officers, provides links to published news items and circulates other useful information.

Officers have a weekly team meeting where they share priorities for the week and other useful information. The Town Clerk also briefs the team on decisions/discussions from recent council meetings.

## FINANCIAL PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

### OVERVIEW OF COUNCIL FINANCES

#### OVERVIEW

The council’s current year budget is £849,537 which includes £34k of Shared Prosperity Fund funded projects with income of £239,194. The table below shows the last three years of income/expenditure and the current draft figures for 2025/26.

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
<b>Budget Income</b>	185,653	201,915	181,416	239,194	215,561



<b>Budget Expenditure</b>	654,456	650,731	706,467	849,537	951,969
<b>Precept</b>	455,421	437,944	571,184	719,511	764,047
<b>Taxbase</b>	5793.51	5832.80	5870.87	5999.20	6,140
<b>Band D</b>	78.61	75.08	97.29	119.93	124.44
<b>Band D Change</b>	-10.69%	-4.49%	29.58%	23.27%	3.75%

The precept was elevated in 2020/21 due to the loss of a tenant in 2019 which led to a significant debt write off which is why two years of reductions followed. The 2023/24 budget primarily elevated due to revised pay scales being implemented in 2022. The 2024/25 precept included the creation of a £100k Community Services reserve.

The council's Tax Base is steadily increasing due to the commencement of three major developments (two housing estates and one retirement living building), which in total is delivering 461 houses. The first significant increase was in 2024/25 and a further increase is envisaged in 2025/26 and 2026/27. Further development is likely to commence c. 2026.

The council has not routinely undertaken medium term financial planning and predominantly budgets on an annual basis. Budgets are prepared alongside development of action plans under the strategic plan to seek to align the budget with the council's strategy. The council recognises it would be beneficial to allocate time to develop an MTFs.

The council has a good Internal Auditor (JDH Business Services) which provides a robust internal audit.

## RESERVES

The council's current (2024/25) reserves are detailed in the table below. The general reserve is approximately around 20% of net revenue expenditure which is below its target of 25% primarily due to the increases in council expenditure not being matched by increasing the reserve level so as not to add further pressure on the precept, this could be addressed in the 2025/26 budget (as is factored in above). The council's general reserves are, however, complemented by a number of earmarked reserves which provide some additional flexibility. The council reviews its Reserves Policy annually as part of setting the budget.

Reserve	Purpose	Value
General	General Reserve	123,150
Capital Receipts	Separation of Capital Receipt income (from sale of a building in 2018)	153,290
CIL Receipts	Separation of CIL income.	23,588
Allotments	Surplus from allotment rents, used to fund improvements.	5,157
Elections	To fund the cost of approximately two by-elections. Reserve being replenished to £14k. Will likely change in revised policy to develop funds for introduction of full cost recovery in the 2027 ordinary elections.	10,500
Rental Reserve	10% rents from two commercial units are allocated to the reserve to cover any vacancy/costs associated with re-tenanting.	4,384
Market Hall	Trading surplus from Market Hall, used to cover any loss / contribute to investment.	34,622

Play Areas	Sinking fund for future contributions to play area schemes. Commitment of £1k pa.	4,500
Infrastructure	Sinking fund for replacement of infrastructure (e.g. mowers, IT etc). Commitment of £5k pa.	5,000
Neighbourhood Plan	Sinking fund for planned review of Neighbourhood Plan in 2027/28. Commitment of £10k pa.	10,000
Community Services	Funds to enable decisions to be made in-year to support community services, particularly in light of borough council financial challenges.	80,000

## **BUDGET MONITORING**

In-year budget monitoring / financial management process including approach to underspends and overspends

Budget performance is monitored by budget holding committees at every meeting. Committees are presented with a report from the finance system detailing year to date income/expenditure against budget across the cost centres they hold responsibility for. The Finance Committee also reviews a summary of all committees.

The Council adopts a pragmatic approach to budgetary control with the principle that committees can overspend specific budget lines provided overall cost centres/committees are within budget, any significant planned overspend would require Full Council approval. The council's budget setting process commences in August/September from when the RFO begins to track forecast year end positions. The council does not carry forward unspent provision unless it is explicitly reallocated in the new budget, or expenditure from the budget has been specifically agreed (but not incurred).

## **FINANCIAL DECISION MAKING**

The Finance Committee maintains and reviews the council's financial policies including Financial Regulations. Most day-to-day financial decision making is delegated to officers who procure inline with guidance in Financial Regulations and the overall objective of delivering value for money. Project or significant expenditure is authorised by the relevant budget holding committee.

In practice, the majority of spending is approved by the Town Clerk before commitment by other officers. All invoices are submitted to the Town Clerk for authorisation prior to being processed onto the financial management system. Payment schedules are sent to members of the Finance Committee every three weeks giving opportunity for members to query any proposed payment, subject to agreement from the Finance Committee Chairman, BACs payments are then authorised by the Town Clerk and added to the council's banking system for dual-member authorisation.

The council has not previously undertaken any public engagement in respect of financial decisions i.e. no consultations on budgets nor on project, primarily due to the nature/funding of the projects it has undertaken.

## **CAPITAL AND INVESTMENT PLANNING**

The council does not have formal capital programmes for built assets and this is an identified area of weakness it intends to address through the development of asset management plans for all assets in early 2025.

The council has begun developing an infrastructure reserve for future planned/unplanned replacement of equipment.

The council spreads its reserves across multiple (currently four) institutions including the CCLA Public Sector Deposit Fund in which it also places the majority of its current funds to accrue interest, this is all directed by the council's Investments Policy which is reviewed annually. The council has a mix of instant access and fixed term / notice accounts (currently ranging from 32 days to six months). Changes are determined by the Town Clerk in consultation with the Banking and Investments working group and movement of funds (excepting the movement of current funds) is subject to the standard approval process for payments.

## **FINANCIAL RISKS AND CHALLENGES**

The key financial risks and challenges to the council at present are:

- a) The ability to take on, fund, deliver or expand services to safeguard services in light of reductions in services by the borough council
- b) The ability to finance capital improvements to buildings, including its Grade II listed Council Offices and renovating the Market Hall to bring it back to sustainable operation.
- c) Securing the future of 60 King Street, a Grade II\* listed vacant property

# **CAPACITY FOR IMPROVEMENT**

## **HOW THE COUNCIL ADAPTS, LEARNS AND IMPROVES**

The council aims to have a culture of collegiate working between members and officers where a frank discussion can be had when things go wrong to learn for next time. This is part of the objective of the member/officer forums but there is also general practice, particularly within the officer team, of critical reflection on activity. Where applicable, this would be reflected through personal development plans and performance objectives and a standard question in appraisal is to reflect on failures/challenges/successes in the period. The weekly officer team meeting also provides a forum for group reflection and learning.

The council maintains a range of professional/corporate memberships to provide support to members (principally ChALC) and Officers (SLCC, ICCM, NABMA, National Allotment Society) as well as having retained HR support. The council strongly supports member and officer development.

## **ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY**

The last full staffing review was in 2019 and there have been minor amendments to the staffing structure in the years following. In 2024, changes were approved (implementation subject to any feedback from this review) to create a new Corporate Support Manager Post to increase capacity within the Town Clerk and the (to be renamed as) Deputy Town Clerk roles. Part of the objective of this change is to unlock additional capacity within the Town Clerk's role to enable a greater focus on strategy and development across the organisation.

The council has not majored on member capacity development beyond induction and basic training, this is an area for possible improvement.

The council utilises a range of software to maximise efficiency. Like many organisations, since Covid it has utilised Zoom for some external and working group meetings and it uses WhatsApp groups for efficient internal communications with members (e.g. with working group members and committees for sharing of information etc). We have recently started making greater use of MS Teams for officer communications and co-editing documents (e.g. event management plans) but could make better use of the system, particularly in progressing actions under the strategic plan. We have a number of software systems that make various tasks simpler (cemetery management system, mapping system, financial management system).

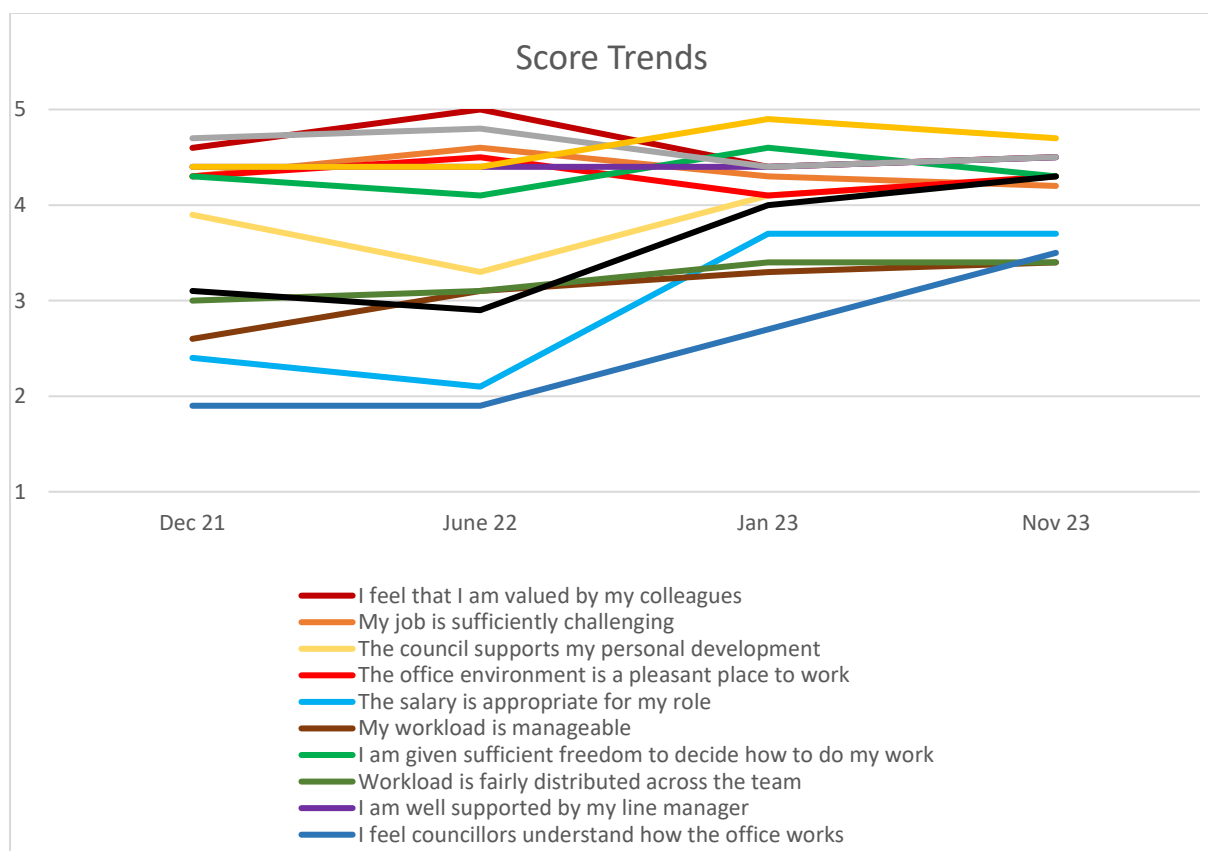
## **KEY PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS**

The council prepares an annual action plan as part of its strategic plan setting out its planned delivery for the year. Additionally, it has a Cemetery Management Plan which details further

multi-year planned action and will have further detailed strategies developed in time (e.g. Green Spaces Strategy); it will need to ensure the actions identified in these plans is incorporated in the annual strategic plan action plans as currently its cemetery management plan actions are not.

## WORKFORCE INFORMATION

The council undertakes an annual staff morale survey to track changes in satisfaction and identify any issues which require resolution. When this was introduced in 2021 a number of areas scored poorly but there have been improvements across poor performing measures following changes being implemented following the results.



The council has a low sickness absence rate. A total of 40 days were lost due to sickness in the 12 months to 11<sup>th</sup> October 2024 which is a rate of 1.83%.

## COMMUNITY CAPACITY

The Town Council is committed to developing the detailed plans and strategies for improving Knutsford with the local community. The Town Council successfully delivered a Neighbourhood Plan (2014-2019) through a committee and working groups which engaged a

variety of residents and stakeholders and its CIL Projects Advisory Committee continued this ethos of involving wider residents in decision making on the future of the town.

Our strategic plan sets out a number of objectives to develop strategies for the town and that these will be built on community engagement. Early example of this have included a consultation of young people delivered in partnership with a local housing association and a consultation green spaces to inform a green spaces strategy. The council plans to develop further strategies, such as an active travel infrastructure plan and heritage strategy through consultation and engagement. The council intends to develop a community-led climate action plan. The most significant objective is to develop a Town Centre Masterplan that delivers a solution to the various conflicting demands of town centre users around pedestrian accessibility, parking and changing high streets.

The Town Council regularly works with local community groups to support / co-deliver. For example, it helped to establish two Friends groups for woodlands, works with various Friends groups on minor projects to improve spaces seeks to use its communication channels to publicise community group activity. It has recently supported the establishment of a new community group to develop a community garden and provided support in submission of grant applications. Its town centre floriculture is delivered in partnership with Knutsford in Bloom and allotments are managed in partnership with the Knutsford Allotment Society. The Town Council also works closely with the business community and appoints members to serve on a number of local bodies.

The Town Council aims to be responsive to suggestions and comments from local residents.

We are keen to further develop community capacity and, where possible future candidates for election to the council itself. For the 2023 elections we held a number of briefings to promote candidacy, but elections were still largely uncontested.