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LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Knutsford Town Council

5th – 7th November 2024

Feedback report







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1. Executive summary

Knutsford is a historic market town which falls within the boundaries of Cheshire East Council as the principal authority. Knutsford Town Council was established in 1974 and replaced Knutsford Urban District Council. It is close to Manchester and Manchester Airport is located just across the boundary. Tatton Park lies within its boundaries.

The population of Knutsford is around 13,500, with 94.4% identifying as White in the 2021 Census. There is also a high proportion of the population over 65. There are new housing developments on two sites which will deliver nearly 1,000 new homes by 2030. Knutsford is perceived to be affluent but there is one area of localised deprivation in St John's Wood ward which is amongst the 30% most deprived communities in the UK.

In May 2023, Knutsford Town Council changed from a Conservative majority to Independent. Only one ward was contested. Out of 15 Councillors, 8 were newly elected in 2023.

There is an ambitious long-term strategic plan (2023-2033) which was developed with the community. An Annual Action Plan is produced which sets out the delivery of priorities for that year. The current action plan for 2024/25 is over ambitious with 47 actions out of 100 overdue against target dates. 13 actions have been completed. There was a similar picture in 2023/24. The council needs to look at the number of priorities that can realistically be delivered with the current capacity and capabilities in the workforce. A review of the strategic plan, its priorities and duration is recommended. It would be advisable to focus on finishing projects before starting new ones. The budget reflects the priorities and includes additional funding of £100k to create a Community Services reserve. This reflects the desire to take on services currently delivered by Cheshire East Council to protect and improve services. Assets already transferred have been improved which residents have welcomed including the cemetery and public toilets.

A range of events are delivered in the town and in other wards which are well supported and valued. These include the annual Bunny Hop, Picnic in the Park and The Pumpkin Path. Events are promoted well through social media. Businesses in the town are supported through the Discover Knutsford brand and website and by the

Town Council.

Community organisations, including Knutsford in Bloom and The Scout Association, feel valued and supported. A number of organisations also receive grants from the council including the Citizens Advice Bureau and Knutsford Heritage Centre.

Volunteers are also part of the events delivery and the enhancement of the town.

The council is well respected and there are good examples of partnership working with businesses in the town, the Tatton Estate and Great Places. Engagement with the community is good and there was active involvement in the development of the Strategic Plan and the Neighbourhood Plan. There is a cohort of knowledgeable professional residents who support the town council on strategic and local planning issues.

Staff are proud of what the Town Council delivers in Knutsford. Morale is good and they are well supported in their role. The Town Clerk is well respected but their capacity to focus on strategic issues is limited by operational involvement. Delegation to other members of staff will help release capacity and increase the skills and knowledge of the staff. The Town Clerk is also the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) and it is recommended that resilience needs to be enhanced in regard to this role.

Councillors need to be more visible and pro-active. As over half of councillors are new there needs to be some support for them to develop their leadership of place (Leading place is about creating an organisation that's interdependent and cooperative with local communities. More than anything it relies on a deeper understanding of local people and their identity and personality¹.) A significant number of issues were raised by different groups during the peer challenge about the services provided by Cheshire East, including traffic management, highways, management of open spaces and car parking. The Town Council should seek to engage constructively with Cheshire East Council to explore collaborative solutions to identify areas of concern. This could also include exploring the potential for shared priorities and strategic goals.

Communication is generally good, but a more strategic approach is recommended for both internal and external communications. Residents and businesses would like

¹ [A stronger place | Local Government Association](#)

regular updates on what is happening in the town particularly around the progress of the establishment of a Business Improvement District (BID) and the Market Hall.

It is also recommended that the council continues to support the BID proposal as it complements the town centre management function.

Two key council assets were mentioned in almost every group: 60 King Street and the Market Hall. 60 King Street has been vacant for 5 years and there are on-going costs for maintenance and repair. The Market Hall redevelopment has stalled due to delays in planning consents and the final cost estimated at over £250k more than expected. As a result, the £560k grant towards the redevelopment from the Community Ownership Fund has been lost. The council is trying to find solutions for both properties but they need resolving as a priority. The council offices are also in need of significant repairs and maintenance as working conditions for staff are not ideal. It is recommended that the Town Council develop an Asset Management Strategy for the council and each asset to ensure that the council's assets are managed and maintained. In addition, it is also recommended that there should be a council-wide health and safety inspection by an external, qualified professional to identify any risks and provide guidance to ensure a healthy and safe environment for staff, volunteers and the public.

The Town Council's governance is effective and there is civility and respect in the council chamber. The Council's committees are aligned to the Strategic Plan, but consideration needs to be given to how cross-cutting issues can be addressed where a decision in one committee may impact on another. The Council also needs to link resolutions to strategic aims and objectives.

Councillors work on a collegiate basis but there needs to be confidence in being able to challenge in meetings, particularly around the non-delivery of priorities.

The Mayoralty is valued by residents and seen as an integral part of the Town Council. There is a busy schedule of events and support for local charities through the Mayor's events, including school visits, opening new business premises and summer fairs.

Strategic risk is under-developed, and the council would benefit from a strategic risk register particularly around the Strategic Plan and assets.

There are effective budgeting and accounting systems and councillors are regularly updated on the budget, income and expenditure through the different committees.

Procurement of machinery, IT and other equipment needs to ensure that it is fit for purpose and replaced in a timely manner. It is recommended that a more strategic approach is taken to procurement.

Capacity to deliver the council's priorities is a challenge, and a comprehensive staffing restructure is recommended to ensure the council has the skills and capabilities to reflect its ambitions.

Knutsford Town 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.

2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

2.1 Review Strategic Plan, its priorities and effective duration

The Town Council has an ambitious Strategic Plan covering 2023-2033 with a large number of priorities. The Action Plans for 2023-24 and the current year show a significant number of the actions related to the priorities were not complete or started. It would be helpful to review the plan and the priorities and ensure that the council can achieve them within the required timescales. The Plan may benefit from a shorter duration and less priorities unless capacity was increased.

2.2 Consider a complete staffing review to ensure the council has the capacity and skills to meet its current and future aspirations

The current staffing structure does not have the capacity or skills to deliver all the Town Council's objectives. There needs to be a match between what the council wants to deliver and what skills and capacity are required both now, and in the future, to do this.

2.3 Enhance the resilience of the council with regard to the role of the Town Clerk/Responsible Financial Officer (RFO)

A complete reliance on the Town Clerk in his role of RFO is a risk. The Town Council needs to look at how resilience can be built into the structure.

2.4 Continue the dialogue with Cheshire East Council regarding service standards and future joint working

As a result of financial issues with Cheshire East Council, there are difficulties around service standards and the possibility of services being reduced. The Town Council at both political and officer level should seek to engage constructively with Cheshire East Council to look at potential solutions.

2.5 Develop an Asset Management Strategy for the council and each individual asset to ensure the council's assets are managed and maintained

There are a number of assets owned by the Town Council that are in a state of disrepair. The development of an Asset Management Strategy will help the council going forward to ensure that assets are not allowed to deteriorate. Each asset needs to have its own plan for maintenance so costs can be incorporated into future budgets.

2.6 Support the creation of the Business Improvement District (BID) which complements the town centre management function

The process for the development of a BID in Knutsford has begun but support and pressure are needed to bring this to fruition. The management of the town is seen as very positive, and the BID will enhance this.

2.7 Revisit internal and external communications and develop a Communications Strategy

A number of people are involved in both internal and external communications and there needs to be a Communications Strategy for the council. Roles and responsibilities also need to be clearly defined, and any communication is delivered in a timely way.

2.8 Develop a strategic approach to procurement to ensure that all purchases are fit for purpose and replaced in a timely manner

Procurement needs to have a more strategic approach. The purchase of materials, equipment and machinery needs to be planned with a clear replacement policy. The quality of purchases also needs to be considered to ensure that they are robust and meet the requirements of the job.

2.9 Review health and safety throughout the council

Health and Safety is everyone's responsibility within the council. A good starting point would be a council-wide health and safety inspection by an external, qualified professional who can identify risks and provide the council with clear advice and guidance on what it needs to do to ensure a healthy and safe environment for staff, volunteers and the public.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1 The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected members and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

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

3.2 Scope and focus

The LGA and the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) corporate peer challenge offer for local councils utilises the strengths and experience of the LGA's

expertise, working with peers from the town and parish council sector, and with the engagement and support from NALC. For this peer challenge, the team spent three days onsite engaging with a range of stakeholders.

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to council's performance and improvement.

- 1. Local priorities and outcomes** – Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
- 2. Organisational and place leadership** – Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
- 3. Governance and culture** – Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
- 4. Financial planning and management** – Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
- 5. Capacity for improvement** – Is the organisation able to support delivery of council priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

3.3 The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals and is based on a Position Statement provided by the Town Council. 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 that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information. The team then spent 3 days onsite at Knutsford Town Council, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 24 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.

- Spoke to more than 75 people including a range of council staff together with members, partners, businesses and residents.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

4. Feedback

4.1 Local priorities and outcomes

The council has an ambitious long-term Strategic Plan (2023-2033) which reflects local priorities and was developed with community involvement. There are six strategic aims:

- Supporting a thriving town centre
- Promoting active travel and public transport
- Protecting Knutsford's Heritage
- Improving open spaces and the environment
- Leading a strong community
- Ensuring access to services and facilities

The Strategic Action Plan for 24-25 is over-ambitious and at October 2024, 46 actions had not started and 47 were overdue against target dates. 13 projects had been completed. The Strategic Action Plan for 23-24 showed a similar situation with 58% of actions completed and 42% incomplete at the end of 23-24.

There needs to be an element of realism in the prioritisation of what can be realistically delivered with the capacity and capabilities of the Town Council. It is good to be ambitious for the town but this needs to be matched with the ability to deliver.

The Town Council's budget reflects the priorities in the Strategic Plan with an additional £100k included in the 2024-25 budget to create a Community Services reserve. This matches the desire to take on services from Cheshire East Council to

protect and improve the local area, particularly parks and open spaces.

The Neighbourhood Plan for Knutsford was adopted in 2019 and was commended in the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) North West Planning Excellence Awards. The plan is due to be reviewed in 2027 on the completion of Cheshire East Council's Local Plan.

A number of assets have been transferred from Cheshire East Council in recent years including the Market Hall, Public Toilets, Allotments and the Cemetery and Chapel. Improvements, particularly in the cemetery have been valued by residents of the town.

A range of events are delivered by Knutsford Town Council and are well supported and valued by residents and businesses. There is good promotion for the events by the Events Team and through social media. Annual events include an annual Bunny Hop at Easter, Picnic in the Park, Taste Knutsford, Christmas Market and the Pumpkin Path around Halloween. The Pumpkin Path is supported by local businesses as a way of encouraging children into the town and to prevent trick or treating. The Maker's Market was seen by both residents and businesses as successful.

The Picnic in the Park event was held in one of the most deprived wards to ensure that the ward felt valued and an important part of Knutsford. Some residents of the ward see Knutsford as a separate place to where they live. Work is continuing to encourage more involvement from this community.

A number of organisations receive grants from Knutsford Town Council including the Citizens Advice Bureau, Scouts Association, Knutsford Heritage Centre, The Welcome and Knutsford in Bloom. Those organisations receiving grants feel valued by the council.

There are also good working relationships with other community groups and partners including Tatton Estate and Great Places who all contribute and work together to improve the town.

The Equal Opportunities Policy was last reviewed in 2019, and this should be reviewed. It does need to reflect the protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010 and the public sector equality duties as a council which includes service delivery.

Equality Impact Assessments also need to be considered for service delivery and events. The peer team were told that certain groups were considered including those with disabilities and older people but there was no specific mention about other groups such as LGBTQIA+ or faith groups.

4.2 Organisational and Place Leadership

There is a great sense of pride and commitment in the town council from both staff and members. It is seen as a good place to work by staff, and they enjoy what they do for the town. Staff feel supported in their role.

There is a well-respected, experienced Town Clerk which is recognised not only by staff and councillors but also other partner organisations both within the town and beyond including community organisations supported by the Town Council and in his role as Chair of the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC). However, the Town Clerk's capacity is limited and there needs to be an acceptance that some of the work they presently do should be delegated to other members of staff. This would enable the Town Clerk to focus on strategic issues rather than operational. This will also broaden the experience of the staff. There are capacity issues in the council, and this will be covered later in the report.

Councillors need to be more visible and pro-active to demonstrate their place leadership role and this will require support to do this which will help build confidence. Many of the councillors have only been in office since May 2023 and are still on a learning curve. Councillors should be encouraged to become more involved in strategic issues not the minutiae. Consideration could be given to having forums or surgeries, that could be general or thematic and could include other community partners and agencies. This would enable councillors to be champions for council plans and projects and hear first-hand community views.

There is a core group of councillors who regularly attend events, but more could be done to encourage all councillors to attend whenever possible. The council could have a stand at events where councillors can meet residents, and this will provide another way of increasing visibility.

Only one seat was contested in the last elections in 2023. Whilst the council did undertake some activity to promote the elections in 2023, the council should further

encourage engagement with the election process and support a range of prospective candidates. Councillors and prospective councillors should come from a diverse range of backgrounds and have various enthusiasms and interests that will match the work of the council.

There were a significant number of issues raised by residents, staff and businesses around the services provided by Cheshire East Council and its responsibilities around traffic management, highways, management of open spaces and car parking. The Town Council should seek to engage constructively with Cheshire East Council to explore collaborative solutions to identified areas of concern. This could also include exploring the potential for shared priorities and strategic goals.

The Town Council are keen to take on more services from Cheshire East but there needs to be an on-going discussion about what this will look like, whether it is on a partnership basis or a transfer of assets. The impact of taking on assets should be fully assessed in terms of both capacity and cost.

When developing the Strategic Plan and Neighbourhood Plan there was good community engagement at both the development and consultation stages. There is strong engagement in planning issues from local residents who have professional expertise in a range of areas including heritage and the environment. These professionals were also involved in developing the Neighbourhood Plan and contributed to Cheshire East Council's Local Plan.

Knutsford Town Council has an active volunteer network to deliver some priorities including events and open spaces. This is in addition to the expertise outlined above around planning.

The Town Council took up the opportunity to bid for a feasibility study around a BID with support from the UK Government Shared Prosperity Fund. It is not clear what the next steps are and how the BID will proceed to the development stage.

The work by Town Centre staff is valued by residents and businesses. Those involved in this work are proud of what they do and go 'above and beyond' to ensure there is a vibrant, clean and appealing town for residents and visitors.

External communications need to improve to ensure all residents and partners have access to information and are kept updated about projects e.g. BID, Market Hall,

Pedestrianisation. Residents and businesses were concerned that projects begin but they are not updated about progress and often hear what is happening from elsewhere or not at all.

Knutsford Town Council has also taken the leading role in supporting local businesses. The 'Discover Knutsford' website was launched in October 2024 and funded by the UK Government Shared Prosperity Fund. The website showcases Knutsford as a destination and includes information about the area, retail and hospitality in the town. It builds on the Discover Knutsford brand which was unveiled early in 2024.

Throughout the peer challenge the peer team heard about two of the Town Council's key assets; 60 King Street and the Market Hall.

60 King Street has been empty for 5 years and it is a key Grade II* landmark building in the town which both residents and businesses would like to see brought back into use. The on-going repair and maintenance of the building is a cost to the council. It is acknowledged that the lease of the property is currently subject to negotiations with an external party, and it is hoped that an agreement can be reached soon.

The Market Hall is a building with a number of tenants including a well-established butcher, fruit and vegetable stall and a coffee shop. It has, in the past, been a starting point for small businesses until they become established and are in a position to rent retail premises in the town. It was due to be refurbished with £560k funding contribution from the Community Ownership Fund. There were delays around planning consents and when the tenders for the work were eventually received the cost was £250k more than expected. Consequently, the work was unable to be carried out in the timescales necessary for accessing the Community Ownership Fund. The council are now looking at a revised scheme using the balance from the Shared Prosperity Fund and council reserves.

As a key priority the issues with these two assets should be resolved as quickly as possible.

Another of the council's main assets is the Grade II listed council offices, formerly the Prison Governors' House. The building is impressive from the outside and this gives a false impression of it as a workspace. The internal space is in a state of disrepair and accessibility is poor. For wheelchair users, access is at the rear of the building

through a yard. Members of the public can only access staff by ringing a bell in the main hallway. There is no dedicated reception area. The peer team observed surplus equipment in various locations and storage of materials is on shelves in corridors. Staff also commented on the working conditions including poor toilet and kitchen facilities and open plan working space not being conducive to their work. The council should look at ways of improving the council office building or sourcing more suitable accommodation to provide a positive and healthy working environment which is fully accessible and welcoming to visitors.

4.3 Governance and Culture

There is civility and respect in the council chamber which is to be commended. There have been no code of conduct complaints against councillors in the last 7 years. Council meetings are live streamed through Facebook and Zoom to promote openness and transparency.

The governance and administrative systems are effective. The Committee system was redesigned to align with the Strategic Plan. There are 8 committees which meet either every 2 months, quarterly or in the case of Planning every 3 weeks.

Due to the way the Committees are structured there are issues where some cross-cutting decisions are decided at one committee but have an impact on the work of other committees. This needs to be addressed to prevent silo working by committees. The Town Council should also ensure that the aims and objectives in the Strategic Plan are linked to specific decisions made by committees and the Council

Chairs of committees should also be clear at the meeting what exactly is being moved and voted upon. Residents said it was often not clear to them at meetings what was decided.

Councillors work collegiately but a degree of challenge in meetings needs to be encouraged particularly around performance and the non-delivery of items in the Action Plan.

The officer and councillor relationship is generally good but there could be more opportunities for greater contribution and collaboration.

The Mayoralty is seen as an important part of the council, and this is valued by residents. The current Mayor has a busy schedule of events including school visits, opening new business premises, summer fairs and annual balls for community organisations. A number of local charities are supported through the year including Just Drop In and The Welcome.

Staff morale is good, and the peer challenge team heard that team meetings are valued. Staff felt it was good to take a break from their work and discuss what is happening in the council despite saying that workloads are high. It would be helpful to include non-office-based staff at the team meetings, or at least once a month to ensure that those working outside the offices are part of the discussions. Access to training when required is supported.

The flexible working arrangements are valued and generate goodwill amongst staff who are happy to do more when needed.

There is a comprehensive operational risk register but not a strategic risk register to cover high risk/high impact projects and plans including the Strategic Plan. The development of a strategic risk register is recommended to cover these areas.

4.4 Financial Planning and Management

Budget monitoring is well established through the Finance Committee with regular income and expenditure accounts presented to each committee. Effective budgeting and accounting systems are in place and the external auditor reported no causes for concern in relation to sections 1 and 2 of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR).

The Town Clerk is also the Responsible Financial Officer. While this is not unusual in town councils, there does need to be a contingency plan in place in respect of any absence of the Town Clerk.

When preparing business cases for future plans and projects they need to be more robust and ensure all costs are included and are realistic before projects are agreed. Risks should also be assessed as part of this. A good example of this is the loss of £560k from the Community Ownership Fund. Could this have been avoided if a comprehensive business case, with expert guidance had been prepared and

considered?

The condition of assets has been raised earlier in the report which highlighted issues around repairs and maintenance. 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.

4.5 Capacity for improvement

There is a willingness by the Town Council to improve e.g. participating in this peer challenge. The council already holds the Quality Gold Award for Local Councils awarded by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). This is the highest award and signifies that the council attains excellence in governance, community leadership and council development. Councils who hold this award are beacons of the highest standards achievable within the local council sector.

Having the capacity and skills to deliver the strategic objectives is critical for success. The council has proposed a new staffing structure to increase capacity and to include a Deputy Town Clerk (this is a retitled existing post with some changes to duties). However, a more fundamental 'root and branch' review of the staffing structure should be considered. The starting point would be to look at what needs to be delivered, what skills and capabilities are needed to do this, identify any gaps and create the structure when all this is known. This would also provide an opportunity to develop leadership capability across the senior team and to make the organisation more resilient.

One particular area where the peer challenge team felt there should be investment was in project management expertise for existing and future projects. This could be a post in the structure or project specific expertise could be bought in. This would ensure that projects were managed by skilled and experienced project managers.

The procurement of machinery, IT, equipment etc. should be reviewed to ensure that purchases are fit for purpose and replaced in a timely manner. There were concerns about machinery being bought that was not long-lasting or of a commercial specification for the work required.

Communications are generally good, but they may not be managed in a strategic way. Staff told us that a number of people were involved in the production of communications in the council from the Town Clerk to the Communications Officer as well as other staff on an ad-hoc basis. Social media and the local press are used to promote events and for public information. Some staff also told us that they heard about things affecting the council by reading the local newspaper. The Mayor and the Town Clerk also alternate in writing columns for the local press, the Knutsford Guardian. Notice Boards are situated across the town but these need to be regularly checked and updated. The Council produces an e-newsletter and interested parties can sign up to receive this. However, there will be some people who do not have IT access, and the council should think about how these people can be reached. A review of how both internal and external communications can be managed in a more effective way would be advisable.

As part of any improvement journey there needs to be a review of plans and projects both during the plan/project life and the end. These 'lessons learned' exercises to investigate what went well and what could have been improved will support future work.

5. Next steps

It is recognised that the political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

The CPC process includes a Progress Review, which will provide space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

It is important that the preparation of the action plan and follow up review is an inclusive process, drawing on the assets and strength of knowledge within the organisation and amongst elected members.

In the meantime, NALC is able to discuss any further support that the council may require by contacting Anders Hanson, Member Services manager anders.hanson@nalc.gov.uk.

In addition, Falmouth Town Council has offered to maintain a dialogue as another mechanism for support.