

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Huntingdonshire District Council

15<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> May 2024

Feedback report



**Corporate Peer Challenge**



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# 1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance and governance information and then spending three days at Huntingdonshire District Council to provide robust, strategic, and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of Sector-led Improvement (SLI) put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are: Responsible for their own performance, accountable locally not nationally and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

CPC assists councils in meeting part of their Best Value duty, with the UK Government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years.

Peers remain at the heart of the peer challenge process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

This report outlines the key findings of the peer team and the recommendations that the council are required to action.

## 2. Executive summary

Huntingdonshire is a large (900 square kilometre) district within Cambridgeshire. Predominantly rural, 40% of the population live in four of the largest market towns, Huntingdon, Ramsey, St Ives and St Neots. With 180,800 residents, 36,500 over age 65, 22,400 born outside the UK, approximately 16 per cent registered disabled, 8,000 businesses and excellent transport links by road and rail, the district has many opportunities.

After almost five decades under a Conservative administration, the council returned a no overall control result in 2022. A new Joint Administration (JA) was established between the HDC Independent group, Liberal Democrat Group, Labour Group and Green Group. There were 29 new members, a new Cabinet, some of whom had also never been a councillor, or with any political leadership experience. The JA got to work, embraced learning and development, focused on learning on the job and have successfully navigated the political landscape for two years.

The chief executive retired in May 2023 and after a period of interim arrangements a new chief executive was appointed in September 2023. The Corporate Peer Challenge comes just eight months after her appointment and two years into the JA four-year term of office. The timing of the Corporate Peer Challenge provides an opportunity to pause, take stock of achievements to date, receive external feedback on current and future plans, and to strategically support the organisation for the next two years.

Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) is an ambitious council with long-term aspirations for its place and communities. The Corporate Plan clearly sets out the Council's three priorities and seven outcomes alongside the mantra of "Do, Enable and Influence". Awareness of the Corporate Plan and influencing approach was high amongst staff, members and partners; however, when asked about priorities, there were differing views dependent on who was spoken to. To ensure the Council delivers on the priorities in the Corporate Plan, a single narrative should be developed and effectively communicated so that everyone is clear what the priorities are, how they are being delivered and the timescales. Publication of an annual delivery plan to sit alongside the Corporate Plan would help to prioritise actions, focus the work of officers and members over the next two years and support the

development of a single narrative.

Peers found HDC to be a well-resourced council with the ability to make choices around how to deliver services. Peers noted some difficult decisions have recently been made around charging for garden waste which has helped balance the budget this year. It was recognised that there are some pressure points, but overall capacity is in line with similar sized organisations. Peers recommend that the budget and workforce are aligned, suggesting a review of the organisational structure to ensure the right skills and capabilities are aligned to the priority operational and service areas. More can be achieved on delivering political priorities with targeted effort and refocused capacity, finance, communications and leadership.

Staff at HDC are very dedicated to their jobs and spoke positively about working for the council. Peers were struck by the good practice in services such as housing and operations where staff received regular opportunities to discuss their performance, training and personal development through 'one to ones' and appraisals with managers. This practice was not commonplace amongst other services with some managers complaining of being too busy for individual conversations with their staff. This inconsistency in practice and adherence to policy appeared across a number of areas creating some evidence of silo working alongside a number of examples of good practice.

The Council has been working on a new Workforce Strategy over the past year, consulting with all staff on regular occasions around the three pillars supporting the strategy - attraction and retention, engagement and wellbeing. In every conversation the Peers had with staff, pay was the top issue they wanted addressed. HDC is not part of the National Joint Council (NJC) pay scheme and sets its own locally agreed pay bands and awards. It was clear a lot of emphasis is being placed on delivery of the Workforce Strategy to provide solutions to this and other issues and Peers recommend this is delivered at pace to address the feedback raised by staff during consultation and throughout the Corporate Peer Challenge. Peers were assured the strategy would also address the inconsistency in policy and practice and bring services together to support a one council approach, where best practice is shared across services and fairness and equity is at its core.

There is a strong will to deliver robust public services for communities and to

continuously improve. The council has welcomed external support to help it identify areas for improvement and to learn from others. The Corporate Peer Challenge was just one example of this, with a previous Audit Peer Challenge and Governance Peer Challenge already delivered and more targeted support programmed.

The momentum and positivity being driven by the administration and senior leadership is clear to staff, partners and stakeholders, but there is still work to do. Whilst Peers heard of some really good partnership working for example through the Place Board, there was also some frustration that work on delivering the Huntingdonshire Futures Place Strategy appeared to have stalled and insufficient progress was being made on the “five journeys.” To meet the council’s ambitions for enhanced partnership working, peers recommend the council reviews the skills and capacity needed to support this work with senior stakeholders and partners.

Some of the businesses and development partners peers spoke to, saw issues within the council’s current planning policy framework and practice and cited this as one of the main difficulties for them. In particular not being able to amend applications or have discussions outside of pre-application meetings. Peers understood some policies had been implemented to help support the council in clearing a historic backlog of planning applications but that this pressure had now eased. If HDC wants to deliver on the ambitions within the Place Strategy, there needs to be a holistic approach and understanding across the council about the importance of this. Peers recommend a review of the planning service to ensure within the planning policy framework the councils' priorities are being delivered and embedded specifically in the areas of climate action, environment and inclusive growth, to maximise the opportunities that exist within the locality of Huntingdonshire and its place in the wider region. Any review should also take into account the new labour governments proposed changes to national planning policy.


It was noted that during conversations with staff, that few related their work to delivering for residents. The exception to this were the customer facing services of operations and leisure where the opposite was the case. Specific consultation on issues such as Huntingdonshire Futures and the Local Plan did involve residents, but there wasn’t a clear council-wide strategy for seeking more general views. Peers recommend the council develops an engagement strategy which ensures the voice of residents/service users are at the heart of decision making.

Alongside this there is an opportunity to strengthen and unify the HDC brand and strategic narrative. Peers were struck by the number of services delivered, which are not clearly, branded, marketed, or promoted as being council led and funded. HDC is selling itself short in this regard and should direct resources into ensuring residents know how much of what they enjoy on a daily basis is funded by the council. For example, some staff working in leisure centres didn't view themselves as working for HDC and considered that they worked for "One Leisure" and saw this as an entirely separate organisation. Peers recommend the good practice demonstrated across multiple services is harnessed and resources are redirected to develop and deliver a Communications and Engagement Strategy which defines the HDC brand and strategic narrative. This is a great opportunity, at minimal cost to improve public and service user awareness of the range of services HDC provides.

Considerable effort, learning and development has supported the council's improved governance approach. Peers felt much of the work completed now positioned the council as an example of best practice. Of the 17 recommendations from the Audit Peer Challenge 13 have been completed, including adopting a new terms of reference for the Corporate Governance Committee (CGC), undertaking a self-assessment and skills audit, recruiting two independent persons to the CGC and reviewing the roles and responsibilities of members and officers. All five recommendations from the Governance Peer Challenge are in the process of being delivered and Peers were pleased to see capacity being added to the risk function.

In order to continue delivering good governance and compliance, Peers recommend the council reviews the constitution, provides additional capacity for the Monitoring Officer (MO) and Deputy Monitoring Officer (DMO) roles, and ensures sufficient investment and resource for member development. The newly established Constitution Review Working Group is the vehicle for reviewing the constitution. Additional capacity within the MO roles is essential, if the chief executive is to withdraw from this space. Finally, additional funding for member development should be prioritised as the current allocation is insufficient to support the level of personal development required and equip members with the right tools to do their jobs.

The council operates a pre-scrutiny process which is favoured by members, although they feel the time between Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet is not long enough to support constructive challenge and influence. Peers heard conflicting



accounts of agendas being too long, to agendas not containing enough information. A happy medium must be found, and Peers recommend the Scrutiny Committees are supported by a member of SLT to develop a member led work programme which prioritises areas where they can add value, contribute to policy development, and help mitigate risk.

There are a number of differing views on what transformation means for HDC. Whether it is transformation, change or continuous improvement, Peers recommend the council defines what it means by this and communicates the approach across the organisation. Peers also urge the council to continue driving efficiencies and value for money across the organisation through service improvement and contract management to enable focused delivery on political priorities.

The cross-cutting foundations (technology, workforce, structures, culture, communications) need to be put in place to prepare the organisation for holistic service transformation rather than reinforcing silos. Peers were concerned that if the council only adopts a deep dive approach into individual services, there are risks some of the enablers for change such as technology, staff and structures could be developed for each service, which will cost more money and prevent the council adopting a corporate approach to each of these.



## 3. 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:

### **3.1 Recommendation 1 - Align finance and workforce to deliver the agreed political priorities including a review of organisational structure.**

A single narrative needs developing and communicating so that everyone is clear what the priorities are, how they are being delivered and what the timescales are for this. The council needs to ensure its officer structure enables delivery of the political priorities, that officer capacity is directed to the priority areas and the finances are aligned.

### **3.2 Recommendation 2 – Strengthen the internal approach to engagement which ensures the voice of residents/service users are at the heart of decision making.**

Building on the good practice shown in consulting on Huntingdonshire Futures, develop different engagement mechanisms to gain the views of residents/service users on their experience of the council and how these can be responded to.

### **3.3 Recommendation 3 - Develop a resourced Communications and Engagement Strategy which defines the HDC brand and strategic narrative.**

Promote the services the council delivers. Don't undersell the impact being made in the community by leisure, parks and open spaces and operational services. Ensure everyone knows these are delivered by HDC. Be clear about who leads external communications to prevent confusion of messages and brands.

### **3.4 Recommendation 4 - Review the planning service to ensure that within the planning policy framework the council's priorities are being delivered, for example climate, environment and inclusive growth.**

Create understanding across all council services that there needs to be a holistic approach to deliver the councils growth and development ambitions. The planning service is a major contributor to fulfilling the longer-term outcomes of the council, but the results will benefit and impact on the whole council and it is important the service

is appropriately positioned and supported to deliver these ambitions.

### **3.5 Recommendation 5 - Deliver the imminent Workforce Strategy at pace – including addressing staff concerns.**

The extensive consultation on the new strategy has raised awareness and staff have high expectations of what it will deliver. Ensure the strategy addresses the inconsistency in policy and practice and brings services together to support a one council approach, where best practice is shared across services and fairness and equity is at its core.

### **3.6 Recommendation 6 – Continue to strengthen the council’s approach to governance, compliance and risk.**

To support the councils improved governance approach:

- Review the council's constitution.
- Provide additional capacity for MO and DMO roles.
- Ensure sufficient investment and resource for member development.

### **3.7 Recommendation 7 - Support and develop a member led scrutiny work programme and prioritise areas where they can add value and help mitigate risk – SLT support.**

Ensure there is adequate time between Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Cabinet for members to add value to the process. Support them to shape agendas and work plans and contribute to policy development.

### **3.8 Recommendation 8 - Define and communicate your approach to transformation/continuous improvement.**

Put in place the cross-cutting foundations (technology, workforce, structures, culture, communications) to prepare the organisation for holistic service transformation rather than reinforcing some silos and risk services continuing their own custom and practice.

## 4. Summary of peer challenge approach

### 4.1 The peer team

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

- Lead Peer, Kate Ryan – Chief Executive, New Forest District Council
- Member Peer, Jim Mckenna – Cornwall Council (Ind)
- Member Peer, William Nunn – Breckland Council (Con)
- Senior Officer Peer, Donna Reddish – Service Director Corporate, Chesterfield Borough Council
- Senior Officer Peer, Caroline Brom – Head of Transformation and Change, Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
- Shadow Officer Peer, Sebastian Burch – Strategy and Policy Officer, Warwickshire County Council
- PCM, Kirsty Human - LGA
- PSO, Onyeka Abajingin – LGA

### 4.2 LGA Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' 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? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
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? What is the relative financial resilience of the council like?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

As part of the five core elements outlined above, every Corporate Peer Challenge includes a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance, and assurance.


In addition to these themes, the council asked the peer team to explore the following questions:

- Do internal and external mechanisms provide the capacity to deliver against milestones?
- Partnerships - what is working well?
- Performance - first full year of a new framework – Is this the right approach?
- Corporate Governance – Does this support agile ways of working and decision making?

#### **4.3 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. 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 in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. This included a position statement prepared by the council in advance of the peer team's time on site. This provided a clear steer to the peer team on the local context at Huntingdonshire District Council and what the peer team should focus on. It also



included a comprehensive LGA Finance briefing (prepared using public reports from the council's website) and an LGA performance report outlining benchmarking data for the council across a range of metrics. The latter was produced using the LGA's local area benchmarking tool called LG Inform.

The peer team then spent three days onsite at Huntingdonshire District Council, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 35 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 160 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

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.

## 5. Feedback

### 5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

The council set out its vision and priorities for Huntingdonshire in a new [Corporate Plan 2023 – 2028](#). With three main priorities and seven outcomes:

- Improving quality of life for local people
  - Improving the happiness and wellbeing of residents
  - Keeping people out of crisis
  - Helping people in crisis
- Creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations
  - Improving housing
  - Forward thinking economic growth
  - Lowering carbon emissions
- Doing our core work well
  - Delivering good quality, high value for money services with good control and compliance with statutory obligations

The phrase “Do, Enable, Influence” is key to delivering the Corporate Plan, with the council committed to playing a more enabling role, working in partnership and empowering people to reduce demand for traditional public services. They aim to work with people rather than doing to them to ensure Huntingdonshire is a place where residents can have a good life and take advantage of the options that benefit them.

The Corporate Plan is well recognised, as is the phrase “Do, Enable, Influence” within the council. However, it appeared staff and partners were less familiar with the actual priorities the council was delivering. There was some uncertainty within the council and with members as to what the top three priorities were, with different answers provided to Peers during numerous meetings. Everything appeared to be a priority and each portfolio holder described priorities for their area of responsibility, which didn’t necessarily align with those in the Corporate Plan. Peers felt this wasn’t supporting delivery of the Corporate Plan and strategic objectives.

Peers recommend the council aligns its finances and workforce to deliver the agreed political priorities including a review of organisational structure. Producing an annual delivery plan, linked to the Corporate Plan priorities, service plans and budget would help to develop a golden thread through the organisation. It would also allow for a strong narrative to be developed and communicated ensuring everyone is clear about what is being delivered, where and when and what outcomes are expected. Finally, reviewing the officer structure to move capacity around the organisation, into priority delivery areas will put the council in the best position to succeed.

Extensive resident, partner and stakeholder consultation took place to develop [Huntingdonshire Futures](#) a statement of shared aspirations for the future of Huntingdonshire – a 30 year growth strategy. Consultation on the Local Plan took advantage of the mobile libraries to reach those more seldom heard members of the community and primary and secondary school visits gathered the views of young people. Consultation with service users is less developed, for example there is no resident survey or regular canvassing of the customers experience. Peers recommend the council develops an approach to engagement which ensures the voice of residents/service users are at the heart of decision making. Building on the good practice shown in consulting on Huntingdonshire Futures, develop different engagement mechanisms to gain the views of residents/service users on their experience of the council, how these can be responded to and how they can contribute to developing future priorities. This work will also help to build a sense of purpose for staff, who can see how their work is making a difference to the people and communities they serve.

HDC has a good understanding of the current and future needs of the district – particularly around place and economy. However, this could be strengthened if the council had a better understanding of the diversity of the district and how this impacts on the services delivered. For example, there was reference to 92 per cent of the district identifying as “white” and three per cent “Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh”. Within the “white” ethnic group, Peers heard that there are many non-English speaking, English not their first language and Gypsy and Traveller communities. Also, that the district has an estimated 16 per cent disabled residents. This diversity also extends to council staff, with some non-English speaking operations staff. How the council meets the needs of these residents and communicates with them is really

important if the council is to meet its public sector equality duties. Peers suggest the council evaluates itself against the [Equality Framework for Local Government 2021](#) to satisfy itself it is meeting the required standards. The Workforce Strategy offers an opportunity to explore how the council responds to the differing needs of its workforce.

Peers were very impressed by the delivery of affordable housing in the district. In 2023/4 the council facilitated with Registered Providers (RPs) and developers the delivery of 703 homes – 450 specifically for social rent. This helped the council to keep its housing waiting list at a manageable level, prevent excessive use of temporary accommodation for the homeless and support the numerous asylum programmes. Working closely with environmental services, the housing team was able to negotiate with hosts on the Homes for Ukraine programme to ensure no families presented as homeless, rematching was successful, and some super hosts supported two/three families. Many Ukrainians have now moved into the private sector rental market. While Huntingdonshire does have some asylum dispersal provision, a high proportion of asylum seekers following successful decisions move to other areas of the country to be with family / friendship groups following initial support in the district.

In 2024/25 the affordable housing programme will deliver less homes, but it is widely recognised the housing pipeline is not linear and in future years there will be opportunities again to build an increased number of homes, particularly as some of the major growth sites begin to build out. Challenges remain with the inflated cost and availability of materials and skilled craftspeople, but the team have good relationships with the 30+ RPs working in the district and sub region and hold regular forums with them.

The council underwent a stock transfer in 2000. In this time the stock has been managed by a number of RPs but is now under the ownership of “Places for People”. The council recognises the difficulty in maintaining a good relationship with the Places for People given its size and operating model. As the largest RP in the district with around 6000 homes for which HDC has nomination rights, officers are working hard to identify regional leads to strengthen the strategic relationship.

Lowering carbon emissions is an outcome the council wants to achieve through its



corporate priorities and actions in the Corporate Plan. The council adopted a [Climate Strategy](#) in February 2023 which sets out a commitment to achieving a net-zero council by 2040, exploring ways for the council and district to reduce carbon emissions. Passionately championed by the current portfolio holder, Peers heard of great initiatives reducing carbon emissions and increasing green energy production at the leisure centres, piloting the use of Hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO) in fuelling the waste fleet and developing biodiversity projects within country parks and open spaces. For the strategy to be successful Peers advise climate and biodiversity actions need to be embedded across the council, prioritised and resourced. Successful pilot projects need funding to become the mainstream, and everyone needs to recognise their individual responsibility to delivering on this agenda.

### **5.1.1 Performance**

HDC adopted a new [Performance Management Framework](#) in November 2023 to set out how the council manages, reports and scrutinises performance. Peers took part in a performance focus group with staff and were impressed with the progress made in just one year. The capacity invested in business intelligence and performance is supporting a good practice approach to performance management and oversight. Power BI software is enabling good presentation of data, which is easily read and understood by members and where possible the council benchmarks against others, using Oflog's [Local Authority Data Explorer](#) and [LGInform](#).

Headline performance measures compare favourably with CIPFA near neighbours, and the [LGinform report](#) shows few outliers in terms of poor performance. The most notable are around GCSE grades, further education and skills which are areas the council can only play an influencing and enabling role with partners. This is one of the five journeys and twenty pathways identified within Huntingdonshire Futures. It is also an area of focus for the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority of which HDC is a constituent member.

The Performance and Efficiency Board, chaired by the chief operating officer was set up to monitor, address and benchmark performance and escalate issues to the senior leadership team (SLT). Peers considered this board to be a real asset to the organisation and could see the value the officers involved were bringing to driving improvements in performance, for example using performance data has driven

significant recent improvement in council tax and National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) collection.

Political oversight of performance is thorough, with monthly portfolio holder meetings to consider service-based performance, quarterly reports to SLT, the two Scrutiny Committees and CGC. A [summary overview report](#) is supported by more detailed appendices structured around the Corporate Plan priorities and shows performance against the [Corporate Plan](#), operational plans and [programmes/projects](#). Each report is easy to read, some [graphical](#), some tabular, some RAG rated and some containing more [text-based evidence](#). Members were very positive with the way this information was presented, supporting them to provide robust oversight and a basis for challenge to their respective portfolio areas and overall council performance.

The team is always looking to improve and recently completed the [LGA data maturity index](#). Achieving level 3, the council is now focused on being better at making evidence-based decisions. To this end a new contextual measures outcomes dashboard has been established. This is looking at 75 indicators that the council can influence/have some involvement in. This dashboard will focus on the harder to measure performance measures and outcomes and Peers were very interested to see how this work progresses.

In recognition of the need to engage with service users on their customer experience, Peers advise some satisfaction measures to be incorporated and a focus is maintained on appropriate insight, challenging targets and benchmarking which is used to drive better outcomes for residents and communities.

## 5.2 Organisational and place leadership

After almost five decades under a Conservative administration, the council returned a no overall control result in 2022. A new Joint Administration (JA) made up of HDC Independent group, Liberal Democrat Group, Labour Group and Green Group took over the running of the council with a Liberal Democrat leader. Of the 52 members elected, there were 29 new members, a new cabinet of nine, some of whom had also never been a councillor, let alone in a leadership role. It is widely acknowledged that the new members had a steep learning curve, but they adjusted well, learned on the job and undertook learning and development opportunities where they could. The JA have bought about a change in leadership style at the council with officers reporting a

kinder environment since the JA took over. Peers also observed the passion members demonstrated in serving their place and their communities.

In September 2023 a new chief executive was appointed. Her appointment has brought about an energy and positivity that has been well received internally and externally. Together the leader, executive and chief executive have outlined a strategic vision and generated drive and enthusiasm. Peers heard, *“the collaborative style of the leader is really effective” “the new chief executive is a breath of fresh air.”* There have also been changes within the officer top team with a recent appointment to the role of corporate director (place). The imminent retirement of the director of finance will add another new face to the team. Peers advise some facilitated top team development would assist the new team in building relationships, understanding leadership styles and create space for strategic visioning.

Officers also reflected that *“the change in administration made us sharpen our pencils.”* A healthy reminder to officers not to be too comfortable and to embrace a change in leadership and direction. This change appears to have landed positively and Peers heard of constructive respectful relationships between members and officers.

HDC are seen as good partners, with the leader and chief executive singled out for their work in promoting the council regionally, sub regionally and nationally. Partners commented that, *“Hunts has stepped up in system working at a political level.”* There are strong working relationships with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA), the ICS North Place Partnership, sub regional housing partners and neighbouring local authorities including the County Council.

The economic development team were praised for the proactive approach they take with businesses, providing support and signposting. Leisure services are keen to work in partnership to develop the collaboration potential. They are already working in partnership with health agencies to deliver prevention programmes, care home offers and the job centre to widen their recruitment pool. The housing team work collaboratively with RPs and sub-regional housing partners to deliver a pipeline of affordable housing, an RP forum and [Home-Link](#) choice-based lettings service. A visit to the council's depot also discovered a partnership between the operational services team and the police and fire to share HVO fuel.

In contrast the community and voluntary sector (CVS) feel there is more they could do in partnership with the council if they knew who to approach. In fact, Peers heard from a number of partners that the “*council structure is impenetrable.*” The CVS acknowledged the good work carried out during covid, specific projects in places like Oxmoor and with migrants and asylum seekers, however, felt the third sector could be improved. This is clearly a very vibrant and committed sector who would appreciate a single door into the council to assist them in sharing data, ideas and allow the council to follow through on its enabling and influencing mantra by empowering others to take the lead in some areas.

Peers also heard from some town and parish councils, who value the annual forum meeting and would like to see their frequency increased. They requested part of the meeting be given over to agenda items set by the parish and town councils and were keen to see further communication and engagement building on council initiatives such as the newsletter. The representatives who spoke to Peers were positive about the elections team and the support they provide but would welcome more opportunity to hear from the wider council on strategic and local issues of interest.

The partnership landscape is complex, and some stakeholders find it difficult to navigate. The council is clearly delivering lots of services and there are many officers operating in the partnership space, communicating to the public through multiple channels which can be confusing. Creating and communicating key points of entry into the council for partners and stakeholders would significantly help the council to develop its partnerships and generate opportunities to enable and influence.

The councils current Local Plan was adopted in 2019 and runs to 2036. In 2023 the new administration agreed to the preparation of a full update to the Local Plan to set out how the district will grow over the next two decades – it is also key to delivering the long-term ambition of Huntingdonshire Futures. Externally it is perceived that momentum has slowed on delivering the five journeys and 20 pathways contained within the Place Strategy. Businesses and stakeholders support the direction and recognise the council cannot deliver it alone. They want action, to see delivery and for there to be better alignment across the planning service with the councils’ priorities for place and economic development. Peers suggest Huntingdonshire Futures needs a programme approach with dedicated resources reallocated from across the council to work with partners and stakeholders to go beyond the vision

and conversations and start delivering. This is a further example of how ensuring resources are aligned to organisation priorities are important.

In addition, Peers recommend the council undertakes a review of the planning service to ensure that within the planning policy framework the councils' priorities are being delivered. There is a feeling externally that current planning policy and practice is hindering strategic growth and investment, specifically around pre-application advice and rules around amendments to applications. However, it was recognised that the Planning team has been on a journey of improvement which has led to a significant reduction in the backlogs. The economic development team have a strong relationship with businesses and will be able to provide insight into this issue. The planning service is a major contributor to fulfilling the longer-term outcomes of the council, but the results will benefit and impact on the whole council and all staff and services need to understand how they contribute to the vision for growth.

HDC shares some services with Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council. The building control, legal and home improvement agency (HIA) appear to work well and there are positive examples of best practice. The HIA are seen as experts in the region because of their size. Similarly, the information governance team collaborate across Cambridgeshire and are as influential as the county council due to their size and experience. The advanced delivery of the council anywhere project in 2019 enabled all staff across the three councils to work from home when the pandemic hit. Finally, there has been interest from other councils outside of the county in joining the building control service.

Partners were less positive about the ICT shared service. It was clear the other partners want to use ICT to deliver efficiencies and enable the transformation of services. The way the partnership was set up and structured along with significant recruitment and retention issues is hampering progress and capacity to deliver for them. The shared service agreement is currently undergoing its five-year review and there is an additional deep dive review of ICT taking place. A lack of clarity on the direction HDC wants to take with regard ICT and its role in the council's continuous improvement journey is putting strain on the partnership. Peers recommend the council defines and communicates its approach to transformation/continuous improvement in relation to how it makes best use of technology. Develop a digital roadmap and be clear about what you want to achieve and when. Without this, Peers

feel the ICT shared services is at risk of falling behind the expectations of the other partners.

### **5.3 Governance and culture**

The JA has now been the administration for two years. Everyone agreed, the timing of the Corporate Peer Challenge provided an opportunity to pause, reflect and be clear on priorities before embarking on the next two years. Peers observed good joint working between the SLT and Cabinet with regular away days helping to build relationships, provide space for constructive challenge and facilitate strategic conversations around the future operating model of the council.

There is positive leadership and a drive for continuous improvement, with HDC requesting peer support in the early days of the JA, individual mentoring, personal development and organisational wide external challenge through separate Audit and Governance Peer Challenges, a strategic visioning exercise and early discussions around a review of the planning service.

The council is self-aware and identified a range of improvement areas in its 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement (AGS). There were also 17 recommendations from the LGA peer challenge of internal audit arrangements in 2023, the CGC's self-assessment against CIPFA's audit committee good practice principles, and the CFO's self-assessment against CIPFA's Financial Management Code, all of which Peers were pleased to see were making significant progress and actions monitored closely by the CGC.

The focus on corporate governance has strengthened the CGC and there is an improving internal governance structure which follows the [LGAs Improvement and Assurance Framework for Local Government](#). To support more agile ways of working and decision making and support the delivery of ambitions and ongoing governance improvements there is a need to increase the capacity of the MO and DMO roles. The chief executive is regularly being drawn in to fill this space distracting her from her strategic, place and organisational leadership role. The recent member skills audit identified a need for an enhanced training and development programme to support members in new roles and provide refresher training to those who hit the ground running two years ago. Peers were united in their views that the current budget allocation for member training was inadequate to support the programme, this



should be reviewed.

To support the councils improved governance approach and work towards being an example of best practice, Peers recommend the council:

- Review the council's constitution – opportunity to shape this through the newly established Constitution Review Working Group.
- Provide additional capacity for MO and DMO roles – to support the delivery of ambitions and ongoing governance improvements and relieve pressure on the democratic services and elections manager and chief executive.
- Ensure sufficient investment and resource for member development – increase the budget to support an enhanced programme.

Whilst there are positive relationships between members and officers, it was felt some historic ways of working were preventing members from having the ability to shape, direct and make decisions where appropriate. Peers heard members say, “*we feel like a thorn in the side of officers.*” The members want to add value, help shape and reduce the size of agendas, contribute towards forward plans and not feel like officers are leading them. Some dedicated time should be allocated to clearly define, understand and implement the respective roles and responsibilities of members and officers, so that everyone is better informed and constructive ways of working are established.

The council operates a pre-scrutiny process which is favoured by members, although they feel the time between Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet is not long enough to support constructive challenge and influence and the process was referred to as a “*conveyor belt*” akin to a clearing house for reports. Peers heard conflicting accounts of agendas being too long, to agendas not containing enough information. A happy medium must be found, and Peers recommend the Scrutiny Committees are supported by a member of SLT to develop a member led work programme which prioritises areas where they can add value, contribute to policy development and help mitigate risk. Some training and development is programmed in this area, which Peers suggest has the following outcomes for members:

- A greater understanding of the underlying principles of scrutiny, the roles it can play and how it can be conducted effectively.

- Understanding the crucial role that work programming and prioritisation plays in successful scrutiny.
- Explored effective processes for undertaking in-depth investigations including member-led scoping of projects.
- An enhanced awareness of the importance of powerful questions and will have practiced developing key lines of enquiry.
- Explored the many ways in which scrutiny can effect positive change and 'make a difference.'

External Audit are positive about the council and there is the basis for developing a strong relationship. They issued an unqualified opinion on the arrangements the council had in place to ensure value for money based on evidence they gathered as part of the 2021/22 audit and included no separate improvement recommendations. However, the annual internal audit report for 2022/23 identified a number of areas of limited assurance, in particular risk management arrangements.

The council adopted a new Risk Management Strategy on 14th November 2023. A new risk officer was appointed in February 2024 and has supported managers in identifying risks as part of the service planning process along with delivering a council wide training programme. Following recommendations from the Governance Peer Challenge in February, Peers were pleased to see the risk officer is now working alongside the Internal Audit function drawing on skills and experience from other parts of the council.

Service based risks have been aligned in the risk register which is now a large live document. The highest risks are reported to senior leadership team and on to the CGC. It was encouraging to hear that the council is building capacity with the risk management, procurement and contract management to ensure compliance with new legislation.

A senior risk officer is due to be appointed to support the embedding of a risk-based culture amongst all staff, some of whom currently don't recognise it as an integral part of their roles.

Some members referred to the risk register as a list of items on a spreadsheet and didn't necessarily agree with the top risks identified by officers. It was suggested to Peers that the risk register would benefit from being presented to members in a



similar way to that of the performance measures. They would like more details about the risks they are being asked to review and an opportunity to discuss and put forward the risks they feel are important.

#### **5.4 Financial planning and management**

The council is not currently forecasting any funding gaps in its MTFS for the next two years and has an awareness of current and future challenges, for example the national non-domestic rates (NNDR) rebase which is expected and planned for. In recent years, budgets have been balanced without planned use of reserves and underspends have allowed reserve levels to be built up. The level of reserves on 31st March 2023 was below median for district councils but growth over the past three years was around upper quartile.

Budget monitoring shows that this position was maintained in 2023/24 and a further underspend was forecast which added to reserves on 31st March 2024. The budget allows a contribution to reserves in 2024/25 and the medium-term financial strategy (MTFS) envisages there will be a further contribution to reserves in 2025/26. The 2022/23 accounts show that the General Fund (GF) reserve balance remained at £2.175m with additional Budget Surplus Reserve, the Commercial Investment Fund and Other Reserves, all of which whilst earmarked could be used for general purposes, have increased. These other reserves provide considerable resilience to the council on top of its GF balance.

There was a GF underspend of £0.5m against a net revenue budget of £21.4m in 2022/23. The main contributory factors were as a result of the impact of higher interest rates, additional waste income streams, and additional income from the planning pre-application service. The main overspends were temporary accommodation costs; the impact of increased electricity and employment costs and lower membership income on leisure services; and re-allocation of digital team costs between partners.

A factor in ensuring the council's financial sustainability was the Commercial Investment Strategy (CIS) agreed in 2015 which led to investment in commercial property in the late 2010s. This has yielded an annual contribution of around £4m which supports the council's budget. Most of the investment activity was funded by internal borrowing and the council's level of external indebtedness is at a reasonable

level. External debt has a long maturity profile, so the council is protected from the impact of current high interest rates and has indeed benefited favourably from the impact of the present interest rate environment on returns on its cash balances.

HDC is pro-active in identifying ways to be financially sustainable. The CIS is one example. More recent examples are the decision to introduce garden waste charges and measures the council is taking to put leisure centres on a more commercial footing. Whilst the garden waste decision was a difficult political decision it has been a real success with the three-year income target being met within three months. The council is also involved in a number of shared service arrangements with Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council which provide resilience, 15 per cent year on year revenue savings and cost efficiencies on procurement.

The budget report refers to a review of the CIS and projects the underlying returns from the CIS will be lower in future years than recent years. This is partly due to a recently vacated office building in Fareham being redeveloped into smaller units to optimise rent income. There are also vacant units in St Neots currently being marketed. Prudently the council is budgeting for lower income returns on these until new tenants are secured.

The council has benefitted from the impact of business growth on business rate retention. The 2024/25 budget included an increase in retained business rates from £11.3m in the original 2023/24 budget to a forecast £13.8m in 2024/25. Whilst the council has benefitted from business rate growth, this also represents a threat should business rates be rebased and the MTFS has prudently included a significant reduction in retained business rate income from 2026/27. This leads to projected use of reserves to balance the budget from 2026/27 onwards although reserves are forecast to remain at a healthy level through to 2028/29, which is the last year of the current MTFS.

The council has struggled to deliver its capital plans, which were inherited by the current administration two years ago. There has been significant slippage in the capital programme since the covid years, with £12.8m spent in 2022/23 against a revised programme of £41.9m. Key areas that have been affected by rephasing are the Market Towns Programme and other large schemes such as work at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park. In addition, a further contributor to the underspend in

2022/23 was a review of the Huntingdon redevelopment project. This has resulted in investment in some new projects in Huntingdon including joint work with the Town Council to deliver a significant upgrade to the Cromwell Museum and working with private sector partners to redevelop the vacant Waitrose and cinema sites.

There are clear methods in place for setting the budget, linked to the service planning process. There is also detailed budget information by both service and portfolio. However, further work is needed with service managers to improve horizon scanning and feed this into the budget setting process.

The Ideas Board is being used to fund in-year expenditure on areas of work that Peers believe should have been planned for. For example, a redesign of the council tax support scheme, improvements to the Intranet and to fund temporary staff. The Ideas Board should be taking a more strategic approach to reviewing requests for funding, making sure any bids are aligned to the councils' priorities and clearly drive innovation. There also needs to be consideration given to how any projects funded on a trial basis could be sustained in the longer term if deemed successful, for example the HVO pilot of the waste fleet. There needs to be clarity regarding who makes any final decision on increasing spending, particularly on additional staff.

The 2024/25 budget report refers to funding put aside to implement a review of the Workforce Strategy which will deliver revenue benefits in the future. The new strategy had not been published at the time of the Peer Challenge but was imminent. Peers felt there was a lot riding on the implementation of this strategy and at the time it was unclear how the funds will be spent or how it is intended this will lead to future revenue benefits given the issues it seeks to address.

Having a positive financial position, has delayed the need to make significant savings, unlike many other councils. For example, the council has a high procurement spend in comparison to similar sized councils, it is well resourced, undertakes many non-statutory functions and often steps in to provide services when other public sector partners withdraw. Peers urge the council to continue driving efficiencies and value for money across the organisation through service improvement and contract management to enable focused delivery on political priorities. There will come a time in the not-so-distant future that the financial situation may change, and Peers fear the likely financial impact of the pay and

renumeration review and wider Workforce Strategy could put the budget under significant pressure. It would be advisable to consider some financial scenario-based planning which model different financial outcomes, specifically for this issue.

Peers recommend further work is undertaken to align the MTFs with the Corporate Plan to ensure the council focuses on what it has identified as its priorities and delivers them. This needs to be a collective effort which is closely managed. At present, when asked about priorities, Peers were given differing responses. If the council wants to demonstrate good outcomes by the end of the current administration, then there needs to be unified agreement on what these are, how they will be delivered and what else may have to stop to achieve this.

The external auditors advised regular review and monitoring of the earmarked reserves. Peers were informed that the council undertakes a review of the earmarked reserves as part of the annual budgeting process which the chief finance officer then monitors for the year end finance statements. Emails are sent to managers in October, reminders sent in November, with the earmarked reserves reviewed and reconciled again for the annual statement of accounts which go to CGC at the end of the April, ready for publication by 31st May. Peers were satisfied this process met the requirements for reviewing reserves.

## **5.5 Capacity for improvement**

HDC is fortunate to have loyal and committed staff to both the council and place. Many live locally and have a vested interest in the success of the organisation. The new chief executive is visible, operates an open-door policy and is committed to staff engagement.

Peers found the council to be well resourced but were concerned that the organisational structure and resources did not appear to be aligned with the Corporate Plan priorities. Some partners were confused about who was responsible for certain areas of work and CVS partners often struggled to identify routes into the council to discuss joint working opportunities. Peers recommend a clearer structure is developed with defined remits and lines of accountability. The council needs to have the right resources, both financially and workforce in place to deliver on the Corporate Plan priorities.

There was evidence of good practice in people management and leadership, with career pathways, one to one's and appraisals in the housing and operations services. Leisure services had bought in expertise from the private sector which was bringing about improvements for staff, including training and development opportunities. Many staff also mentioned they had accessed ILM level three, five and seven apprenticeships for which the council had utilised the apprenticeship levy. This good practice wasn't universal, with many other staff telling Peers they did not have one to one discussions, appraisals, or performance conversations. Some managers also said they were too busy to undertake them. The council removed the requirement to undertake appraisals during covid but did ask managers to complete individual conversations with staff. This inconsistency in practice and adherence to policy appeared across a number of areas creating silo working alongside pockets of good practice.

Building on the council's icare values (Inspiring, Collaborative, Accountable, Respectful and Enterprising) which are imprinted on all staff lanyards, Peers urge HDC to prioritise people management, learning from the areas of good practice to develop consistent organisational expectations and oversight of staff performance. The ILM management training should be built on to create a bespoke HDC programme which brings consistency and support to managers, bringing the more theory-based learning into practical application.

There is a desire for HDC to be a great place to work – “an employer of choice.” Over the past 12 months the council has dedicated resources to engage on a new Workforce Strategy. All staff have had the opportunity to contribute either in person, virtually, through surveys, focus groups, team shadowing or as part of the champion group. The strategy has three pillars:

- Attraction and retention
- Engagement
- Wellbeing

It was clear from conversations with staff that consultation on the strategy had generated high hopes about what the strategy would deliver. Pay and reward were the top issues fed back to Peers with staff complaining of inconsistency in applying market supplements, pay increments and starting salaries. Pay was also identified as

a key factor in recruitment and retention with neighbouring councils offering higher salaries and lifestyle incentives. Peers recommend the new Workforce Strategy is delivered at pace and that it looks to address the concerns raised by staff as soon as possible, particularly around pay and reward and performance. It is essential the council makes the necessary revenue budget provision for the recurring costs that the Workforce Strategy will bring, once implemented. A consistent approach to policy and practice must be developed if the council is determined to create a One Team culture and break down silo working.

HDC is not part of the National Joint Council (NJC) pay scheme and sets its own locally agreed pay bands and awards. This is locally negotiated with the Employee Reference Group (ERG) who work really hard for their colleagues but are not trained/qualified union representatives. The ERG performs a valuable staff led sounding board function for the council but there are some overlaps with human resources functions. Over the past 18 months Unison has established members in the council and are supporting the ERG to be heard. The council values the role of the ERG and Unison but need to find a way for them to work together and add value alongside the delivery of the new Workforce Strategy and human resources team.

Consideration should also be given to undertaking a full staff survey. There hasn't been one for four years and conducting on a more regular basis would really help to evaluate the impact of the Workforce Strategy on staff attitudes to the council, management, leadership and more.

There are a number of differing views on what transformation means for HDC. Peers heard, *"transformation is a dirty word"* and *"the T word, the word that shall not be said"* whether it is transformation, change or continuous improvement, Peers recommend the council defines what it means by this and communicates the approach across the organisation. There is a collective appetite for change and an opportunity to put in place the cross-cutting foundations (technology, workforce, structures, culture, communications) to enable the organisation to be ready for service transformation holistically rather than reinforcing silos. Peers were concerned that if the council only adopts a deep dive approach into individual services, there are risks some of the enablers for change such as technology, staff and structures could be developed for each service, which will cost more money and prevent the council adopting a corporate approach to each of these.



The performance and insight approach being embedded at HDC is a valuable tool which supports a culture of improvement and transformation.


The council has more than one brand with One Leisure, Active Lifestyles, Invest in Huntingdonshire and a number of parks, open spaces and nature reserves which not everyone recognises as being delivered by HDC. Some leisure staff didn't realise they worked for the council. Peers are concerned the council is underselling itself, its achievements, and the wide range of services it delivers. They recommend the good practice demonstrated across multiple services is harnessed and resources are redirected to develop a Communications and Engagement Strategy which defines a single strong brand and strategic narrative. Bringing it all together will create more impact.

In order to do this, communications and engagement needs to be adequately resourced and coordinated to drive corporate internal and external messages and manage brand promotion. The council keeps staff well informed through the intranet, chief executive weekly messages, all staff emails and quarterly all staff briefings but staff feel this is more broadcast communications rather than engagement providing them with opportunities to feed messages back up through the organisation. This is also heavily reliant on the chief executive and needs to be sustained through resourced corporate communications which reaches all staff, including those without e-mail access.

Some positive work has been led on external communications, reducing the number of social media channels and increasing capacity to deliver messages via the councils' main channels. It is also positive that the communications manager has a place on SLT and has support to work with the LGA on a health check and narrative workshop. However more capacity is needed to ensure the council can fulfil its ambitions to fully engage and communicate internally with staff and externally with residents, partners and stakeholders.

## 6. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. The LGA will continue to provide on-going support to the council. As part of the CPC, the council are also required to have a



progress review and publish the findings from this within twelve months of the CPC. The LGA will also publish the progress review report on their website.

The progress review will provide space for a council's senior leadership to report to Peers on the progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations, discuss early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC action plan. The progress review will usually be delivered on-site over one day.

The date for the progress review at Huntingdonshire District Council will be around January/February 2025.

In the meantime, Rachel Litherland, Principal Adviser for the East of England, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Rachel is available to discuss any further support the council requires. [Rachel.Litherland@local.gov.uk](mailto:Rachel.Litherland@local.gov.uk) 07795 076834.