

## Cabinet – 2 April 2025

### Corporate peer challenge report and action plan

Purpose	For Decision
Classification	Public
Executive Summary	<p>The report presents the Local Government Associations (LGA) feedback report from the December 2024 Corporate Peer Challenge and associated action plan.</p> <p>In consideration of capacity to deliver on the council's ambitions and respond effectively to the Devolution White Paper, as recommended by the peer team, the report also presents a revised list of key deliverables in support of corporate priorities.</p> <p>The report also presents a motion referred to the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel, regarding the Council's process for selecting Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of Committees and Panels, given that the Corporate Peer Challenge report makes specific commentary on the appointment of Overview and Scrutiny Panel chairs.</p>
Recommendation(s)	<p><b>Cabinet is asked to:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>1. Note the LGA's feedback report;</b></li><li><b>2. Approve the action plan at Appendix 2 in response to the recommendations and observations contained within the feedback report;</b></li><li><b>3. Approve the revised key deliverables at Appendix 3; and</b></li><li><b>4. Consider the views of the Resources and Transformation O&amp;S Panel, with regard to the motion set out at paragraph 18 on the process for</b></li></ol>

	<b>selecting Chairmen and Vice-Chairman of Committees and Panels, and make recommendations to Council.</b>
Reasons for recommendation(s)	<p>Recommendations support the continuous improvement focus of the corporate peer challenge, including the council's key strategic priorities within the Corporate Plan.</p> <p>The Corporate Peer Challenge process requires the council to publish the findings on the review and an associated action plan.</p>
Ward(s)	All
Portfolio Holder(s)	Councillor Jill Cleary – Leader of the Council
Strategic Director(s)	Kate Ryan – Chief Executive
Officer Contact	<p>Rebecca Drummond  Assistant Director – Transformation  023 8028 5080  rebecca.drummond@nfdc.gov.uk</p>

## **Introduction and background**

1. In December 2024 NFDC invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to carry out a corporate peer challenge (CPC). This process aims to provide robust, strategic and credible challenge to our activity designed to support our decisions, ambitions and appraise our current performance and improvement capabilities.
2. Over three days a team of five peers and two representatives from the LGA visited the council and gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 40 meetings and spoke to more than 130 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.
3. The team was made up of both political and managerial peers from different authorities across the country.
4. Initial feedback was presented in person at the end of the onsite visit and is now further supported by the LGA feedback report (Appendix 1), detailing recommendations and observations based on their findings during the challenge.

5. The outcome of the peer challenge is extremely positive and worth celebrating in its own right. The peer team made some observations and recommendations to support our continued improvement, dealt with later in this report, but commended the council on its clear vision, how much it has already achieved, the visibility of the Leader and the Chief Executive, the passion and commitment of Members and its staff being the greatest asset. They thanked all staff for their openness and honesty throughout the process.
6. The peer team reflected that it was great to see the organisation on an improvement journey with some of the comments they received during the review including that the council has a heart and cares, has been proactive and shown great leadership, that it delivers for residents and staff saying that they are proud to say they work for New Forest District Council.
7. It is a requirement of the process that the Feedback report is published three months after the visit (by 12 March 2025), followed by an action plan five months after the visit (by 12 May 2025).

### **Recommendations and action plan**

8. The peer team's key recommendations to the council are:
  - Clarify priorities and timelines for delivery
  - Create an overarching corporate narrative and communicate proactively with staff, members and local people
  - Design and deliver a robust member and senior officer development programme
  - Consider ways to strengthen the Overview and Scrutiny function
  - Ensure there is effective ownership of the transformation programme by the Executive Management Team
  - Apply internal policies and practices consistently across the Council
  - Develop an assets strategy and action plan
  - Demonstrate further commitment to carbon reduction with a clear action plan
  - Continue the good practice in housing and consider applying successful approaches to the wider organisation
  - Remember to celebrate your achievements no matter how small or big they are
9. The next stage of the peer challenge process commits us to publishing an action plan, outlining our intentions, activity and timelines towards addressing the recommendations within the LGA feedback report.

10. The report also makes a number of observations and suggestions and these have also been considered as opportunities for improvement in the action plan at Appendix 2.
11. The feedback report refers to the fact the Devolution White Paper was published after the CPC visit and its initial findings. It is appropriate that the action plan and consideration of priorities is now framed in this new context.
12. Progress against the action plan will be monitored and formally reported on six months from publication (October 2025).

### **Key deliverables**

13. One of the key recommendations of the peer team is for the council to consider the capacity it needs to deliver on the corporate plan priorities over the short, medium and longer terms, accepting that not all of them can be delivered at the same time.
14. The corporate plan continues to set the strategic direction of the organisation but it's appropriate to consider the legacy priorities and start to refine what we must deliver against these priorities and where capacity would be better redirected considering the new and emerging context.
15. Consideration has been given to key deliverables, as linked to the corporate plan priorities, in response to the recommendation and to reflect the new local government reorganisation context and its demands. Appendix 3 sets out an initial view of the key deliverables although it is acknowledged that these will need to be flexible and kept under review as future demands arise.
16. It is proposed that the delivery plan is subject to regular review by EMT and formally reviewed annually as part of the annual performance report.

### **Follow up review**

17. As part of the CPC, the council is required to have a progress review and publish findings of this within twelve months of the original CPC visit (by 12 December 2025). The follow up visit is anticipated to take place during October 2025 and will coincide with the update on the action plan progress.

### **Motion referred by Council**

18. At the Full Council meeting of 24 February 2025, Cllr Rackham moved the following motion, which was seconded by Cllr J Davies:-

*"This Council resolves that:-*

- 1. Only those Members who do not belong to the ruling political group shall be eligible for nomination to the positions of Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the ordinary committees and panels of the Council; and*
  - 2. The consequential amendment to the Council's Standing Orders for Meetings be made by the Monitoring Officer."*
19. In accordance with the Council's Standing Orders for Meetings, the Full Council resolved to refer the motion to the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel, and specifically through the consideration of this report, given the Corporate Peer Challenge report commentary relating to the appointment of opposition Members as Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny Panels.
  20. As this is ultimately a matter for the Council to determine, the Panel was asked to consider the motion as set out above, and make onward recommendations to Cabinet, and Council.
  21. At the Panel meeting, Members passed a resolution that the Council should not depart from its current procedures, whereby the selection of committee and panel chairs is undertaken at the Annual Council meeting by the voting Members of each committee or panel in question. It should be noted that where positions are contested, the Council's Constitution provides for a secret ballot to be undertaken. Cabinet is asked to consider the Panel's views, including the further commentary expressed at paragraph 24 below, and make a final recommendation to Council.

### **Corporate plan priorities**

22. A core component of the CPC review is to assess the clarity of the council's priorities, how well informed they are by the local context and whether the council is delivering effectively on these priorities contained within the Corporate Plan.

### **Options appraisal**

23. The council is required by the LGA to publish the findings of the CPC and an associated action plan. The council welcomed the review and is keen to act upon the observations made to ensure continuous improvement.

## **Consultation undertaken**

24. The Panel considered and noted the Corporate Peer Challenge report and supported the action plan. The Panel resolved to recommend to the Cabinet that the motion regarding the process for selecting Chairmen and Vice Chairmen of committees and panels should remain unchanged. In respect of Appendix 3 and the list of delivery activities, a member highlighted the need to continue to make representations regarding the upgrading of the A326. Members highlighted the difficulties faced by town and parish councils in keeping abreast of developments regarding LGR and it was noted that a meeting involving NFALC was scheduled for 28 April, to which all parish and town councils were invited.
25. Internal consultation has been undertaken with the Executive Management Team and relevant members of the Senior Leadership Team to inform the action plan.
26. Key deliverables have been informed by the Senior Leadership Team, Executive Management Team and Cabinet members.
27. The feedback report has been shared with our stakeholders and partners that contributed to the peer challenge with their valuable insight.

## **Financial and resource implications**

28. Actions identified are within existing resources. Key deliverables have been flagged as to whether resources are already identified and where not they will be resourced from diverting resources from activities that have been de-prioritised.

## **Legal implications**

29. There are none arising directly from this report and the reprioritising of planned activities has had due regard to statutory requirements.

## **Risk assessment**

30. A formal risk assessment is deemed not to be required. The CPC visit and subsequent recommendations was immediately prior to the publication of the Devolution White Paper and the emerging impact of local government reorganisation will be taken into account within the actions identified.

## **Environmental / Climate and nature implications**

31. The action plan directly responds to the CPC recommendation for the council to demonstrate further commitment to carbon reduction with a clear action plan.

### **Equalities implications**

32. The CPC feedback report makes a few observations on how equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) can be improved, acknowledging that the council has already driven forward efforts in this regard. These observations have been included in the action plan to further enhance our commitments in this area.

### **Crime and disorder implications**

33. There are none arising directly from this report.

### **Data protection / Information governance / ICT implications**

34. The CPC feedback report makes an observation on how the consistent use of technology can be improved. This observation has been included in the action plan.

### **Appendices:**

Appendix 1 – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge New Forest District Council (10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> December 2024) Feedback Report  
Appendix 2 – CPC Action Plan  
Appendix 3 – Corporate Priorities – key deliverables review

### **Background Papers:**