

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>Cabinet is asked to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Note the LGA's feedback report; 2. Approve the action plan at Appendix 2 in response to the recommendations and observations contained within the feedback report; 3. Approve the revised key deliverables at Appendix 3; and 4. Consider the views of the Resources and Transformation O&S Panel, with regard to the motion set out at paragraph 18 on the process for

	selecting Chairmen and Vice-Chairman of Committees and Panels, and make recommendations to Council.
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
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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 (10th-12th December 2024)
Feedback Report
Appendix 2 – CPC Action Plan
Appendix 3 – Corporate Priorities –
key deliverables review

Background Papers:

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

New Forest District Council

10th to 12th December 2024

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge

Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Executive summary	4
3. Recommendations	6
4. Summary of peer challenge approach	8
5. Feedback	10
6. Next steps	24

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 New Forest 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

New Forest District Council (the Council) is a well-performing council that clearly understands its unique local context which consists of the New Forest National Park, urban areas and 40 miles of coastline. The peer team enjoyed spending time in the New Forest.

There is widespread acceptance that changes in leadership of the Council since the last CPC in 2017, with both a new Leader and new chief executive, has been instrumental in creating a culture of change and improvement. Both the Leader and the chief executive were consistently described by officers, members and external stakeholders as highly visible, collaborative and engaging. Under their leadership the Council has embraced partnership working, become more outward facing, and maximised its role as an effective convener. As a result, the Council now plays a

more credible role on the local and regional stage, both at the political and officer levels.

The Council is now more prominent in maximising exciting regeneration opportunities, such as the delivery of Solent Freeport and town centre regeneration. It works effectively in partnership with businesses, community groups, culture and health partners on a range of areas, as well as continuing to work closely with the New Forest National Park Authority.

Members and officer working relationships are effective, supportive and characterised by mutual respect. Whilst senior members are clearly passionate and committed, there are opportunities for them to have a greater role in setting the direction of the Council. The peer team also heard about the appetite to strengthen the Overview and Scrutiny function and providing more training and support to members on this topic.

The corporate plan clearly sets out an ambitious vision for New Forest, but the peer team consistently heard from staff, members and external partners that there were too many priorities, with a lack of clarity over what would be delivered and by when. Clearer delivery plans for the priorities would improve this. There are also opportunities to make the delivery of the priorities more visible, with the potential to make better use of external and internal communication channels.

The transformation programme, Future New Forest, is in place and has strong commitment from all political groups and staff at all levels. Leadership of the programme is effective, with robust commitment from the Executive Management Team and Senior Leadership Group to deliver it. To further enhance the likelihood of its success, the peer team encourages all members of the Executive Management Team to collectively own the programme, and for its scope to remain focused.

Meeting housing needs is one of the Council's key priorities and the peer team was asked to consider it as an additional area of focus. The Council's development and acquisition programme is centred on local needs; it has strong political support and with effective working relationships between the portfolio holder and the Housing department, the Council is well placed to achieve its ambitions. Nevertheless, challenges remain, and the Council will need to maximise partnership working, particularly emerging relationships with tenants, developers and private sector landlords, as well as with charities to tackle homelessness.

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Local Government Association company number 11177145 Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government company number 03675577

Chair: Councillor Louise Gittins

Chief Executive: Joanna Killian

President: Baroness Grey-Thompson

Overall, the organisation has strong foundations to deliver on its corporate plan ambitions. Delivery will ultimately rest on the capacity and capability of staff, who are New Forest District Council's strongest asset. The workforce is passionate, enthusiastic and proud to work at New Forest District Council. Crucially, staff are committed to delivering the transformation programme. However, the peer team heard that working practices, policies and the new values were being inconsistently applied across the organisation and that this could undermine staff morale. To sustain this, recognising the issue of capacity and maintaining staff motivation will be important.

The Council is in a solid financial position, because of a prudent approach over many years. Sound governance and audit processes supplement its culture of effective financial management and planning. Reserves have been maintained and officers and members have identified future financial pressures facing the Council. The Council has started to undertake work to be more commercially minded, for example developing proposals to release some of Appletree Court to generate income and pulling together an assets register. As the Council faces increasing financial pressures, further work in this area may strengthen its ability to be financially sustainable.

The Council should be rightly proud of what it has achieved to date, with many improvements taking place behind the scenes. Whilst the Council acknowledges that it remains on a journey with some way to go to further improve, the peer team encourages the Council to celebrate its achievements much more, no matter how big or small they are.

Following the corporate peer challenge, the [Devolution White Paper](#) announced the Government's desire for all of England to benefit from devolution. The White Paper also announced that the Government will facilitate a programme of local government reorganisation for all two tier areas. In light of this, the Council will now need to take stock of its priorities and refocus its plans.

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 Clarify priorities and timelines for delivery

The corporate plan sets out lots of ambitious priorities and not all of them can be delivered at the same time. The Council will need to consider capacity in order to understand what can be delivered over the short, medium and longer terms, particularly in response to the publication of the Devolution White Paper.

3.2 Create an overarching corporate narrative and communicate proactively with staff, members and local people

Only 66 per cent of respondents to the resident's survey said that they feel the Council keeps residents well-informed about the services it provides. A compelling narrative will help staff, members, partners, and residents look towards the future and help them see how they can support the delivery of the corporate plan.

3.3 Design and deliver a robust member and senior officer development programme

Leadership of the Council, both at political and officer levels, is effective. Development days could further strengthen working relationships, particularly in supporting senior members to be more assertive in setting and steering the priorities of the Council.

3.4 Consider ways to strengthen your Overview and Scrutiny function

Members are keen to provide more effective scrutiny and the Council may wish to consider ways to strengthen and develop its Overview and Scrutiny function; one option could be to appoint opposition members as chairs of the Panels.

3.5 Ensure there is collective ownership of the transformation programme by the Executive Management Team

Collective ownership will ensure that all members of the Executive Management Team are all equally responsible for the delivery of the transformation programme, thereby contributing to the likelihood of its success.

3.6 Apply internal policies and practices consistently across the Council

To maintain staff morale and commitment to the transformation programme, internal policies and practices must be applied consistently across the Council.

3.7 Develop an Assets Strategy and Action Plan

The Council has already begun to understand its physical assets, their liabilities, and future commercial opportunities. The peer team encourages the Council to complete this work and develop a strategy to deal with the assets as part of a coherent corporate asset management appraisal system.

3.8 Demonstrate further commitment to carbon reduction with a clear action plan

The Council has bold ambitions to reduce carbon emissions of council owned homes to net zero by 2050 and to reduce carbon emissions of the housing operational services; the peer team encourages the Council to develop an action plan that will demonstrate how it will deliver these ambitions.

3.9 Continue the good practice in housing and consider applying successful approaches to the wider organisation

There are already examples of transformation and improvement achieved in the Council's Housing department. This presents a valuable opportunity to take the learning, for example the preparation for regulatory inspection, and apply it to other parts of the organisation.

3.10 Remember to celebrate your achievements no matter how small or big they are

The Council has achieved significant change and improvement over the last few years, and there is much to be proud of. Whilst there is more work to be done, do not forget to celebrate your achievements.

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:

- Jonathan Stephenson, Chief Executive, Brentwood Borough Council and Rochford District Council

- Cllr William Nunn, Breckland Council and Norfolk County Council
- Cllr Sarah Osborne, East Sussex County Council
- Claire Astbury, Head of Housing Strategy and Development, Luton Borough Council
- Jane Wilson, Chief Operating Officer, Cambridge City Council
- Eva Barnsley, LGA Policy Adviser
- Nick Searle, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

4.2 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 provide feedback on housing and its transformation programme.

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 New Forest 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 a 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 New Forest District Council, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 40 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 130 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

In 2024, the Council launched its new [Corporate Plan 2024 to 2028](#), setting out clear ambitions for the district, with strategic priorities focusing on People, Place and Prosperity. The peer team consistently heard that the development of the corporate

plan involved comprehensive and meaningful engagement from staff, members and external partners.

The Council has made good progress on a number of its key priorities, including delivery of new affordable homes and implementation of its Waste Strategy 2022 – 2027. Whilst recognising that the Council has an ambitious de-carbonisation approach, aiming to reduce carbon emissions of council owned homes to net zero by 2050 and to reduce carbon emissions of the housing operational services, the peer team encourages the Council to develop an action plan with milestone targets demonstrating how it will deliver these ambitions.

Communication of the Council's priorities to staff, members and stakeholders is key to ensure that they understand their role in supporting its objectives. It is also important to be clear to residents about what the Council can and cannot deliver, and by when. Furthermore, the Council may wish to explore ways to make the delivery of its priorities more visible, such as through internal and external communication channels. A clearer narrative on priorities will better help staff, local people and partners understand what the priorities, why they are needed and when they will be delivered.

Although the corporate plan sets out ambitions, it was clear to the peer team that not all staff understood their role in delivering it, as well as feedback that there was a large number of priorities. The Council may therefore wish to explore ways to provide clarity on the priorities, outlining when priorities will be achieved over the short, medium and longer term, as well as ensuring there is a 'Golden Thread' from the corporate plan down to staff.

The corporate plan provided an opportunity for the Council to review its existing approach to performance management. It subsequently put in place arrangements to monitor performance against the strategic priorities outlined in the corporate plan. The Council's new performance management framework takes the commitments outlined in the corporate plan, works with the transformation programme, and builds continuous improvement opportunities and learning throughout. The corporate plan includes a list of 48 key performance indicators (KPIs). The development of corporate KPIs has been rigorous with detailed descriptions and data collection methodology assigned to each measure within a comprehensive definitions handbook.

Performance against these KPIs is monitored and will be published via a corporate

performance dashboard.

The peer team saw visible evidence of the Council engaging with its residents, demonstrating that it continues to incorporate community engagement into service development and service provision. For example, the Tenant Involvement Group meets regularly and is used as a forum to engage and discuss ideas for future service delivery initiatives, with tenants reporting that they felt more listened to and respected. Community forums have been established covering cost of living, emergency planning and resilience. These forums invite town and parish councils, councillors, partners, emergency planning responders, local organisations, and representatives of the council to hear presentations from key speakers. These approaches demonstrate how the Council can continue to achieve community-driven solutions.

The peer team observed that community groups feel valued, with the annual community grants process seeing 17 awards totalling £135,000 in revenue support and £96,040 in 12 capital awards for 2024/25. The peer team welcomed that the grants in 2025/2026 will be closely aligned to the corporate plan objectives.

The Council has driven forward efforts to improve the equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI). This includes establishing the EDI staff group in July 2023, the launch of the launch of the LGBT+ employee-led network in June 2024, and the chief executive's discussions with different faith groups within the Council's workforce. The peer team commends the efforts to date and encourages the Council to build on this progress. The Council may wish to ask itself whether EDI features adequately in terms of service planning and delivery; whether there is appetite from other protected groups to establish staff networks; and whether EDI is being considered early enough in the policy development cycle so changes can be made.

5.1.1 Performance

The Council's approach to business planning and performance management is relatively new, with a recently approved performance framework. The corporate plan includes a list of 48 key performance indicators (KPIs). Performance against these KPIs is monitored and is published via a corporate performance dashboard. As of August 2024, the 48 KPIs on or above target has been raised to 84%.

The Council uses a resident's survey to capture a range of data. The most recent

[resident's survey](#) (September – November 2022) engaged 760 residents across the district. The results are used to inform decision-making and the development of priorities. The survey showed positive results, for example 93% of respondents feel satisfied with the area as a place to live, and 78% of respondents feel satisfied with the way the Council runs things.

The Council's [LG Inform Headline Report](#) compares council performance to its Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) nearest neighbours. These show how the Council performs strongly in some areas, for example housing. When compared to other councils in the CIPFA nearest neighbours group the Council has the shortest amount of time taken to process housing benefit new claims at four days (average is 10 days), and below average number of total households on the housing waiting list at 1,876 (against an average of 2,687). It does, however, have the most number of households living in temporary accommodation per 1,000 households at 4.08 (average is 1.25) The peer team found that in housing, the Council showed a willingness to review their processes and improve performance monitoring.

The number of affordable homes delivered (130) in 2023/24 is below the benchmarking group average of 228. Despite spending the least amount in the benchmarking group of total revenue on planning and development services per head of population at £27.13 (against an average of £54.60), the Council performs well with 100 per cent of major planning applications decided on time and 95 per cent of other planning applications decided on time. Minor applications are at 86 per cent, which is just below the average of 92 per cent. In relation to this, the peer team found that local developers did report that they would like to see improvements in the consistent application of planning policy, and standardisation of Section 106 planning agreements to facilitate faster conclusion of planning permissions.

On waste, LG Inform performance data suggests that there is room for improvement. When compared to the benchmarking group, the Council has the lowest percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting at 34 per cent (well below the average of 46.38 per cent); and its amount of residual household waste per household at 457.40kg is higher than the average of 396.2kg. The Council is confident that fundamental service changes in this area supported by a new depot will improve this performance over the coming years.

5.2 Organisational and place leadership

The peer team heard consistent and positive feedback on how the Leader and chief executive are highly respected, engaging and collaborative, both inside the Council and by external partners across the Hampshire region.

After a long period of continuity at the helm of the organisation, there were changes of leadership with the new chief executive joining in December 2021, and the Leader of the Council taking up their role in November 2022. Both were described as instrumental in improving the visibility and credibility of the Council on the regional stage, both at the political and officer level. The peer team heard how the Leader is described as 'open and a key figure in the culture of change', and the chief executive as a 'breath of fresh air'.

Following the appointment of the chief executive, a new model of leadership was implemented, moving from a four executive head model to three new strategic director roles. Its senior officer leadership team, known as the Executive Management Team (EMT), consists of the chief executive and three strategic directors. EMT meets twice a month with the monitoring officer and democratic services manager also attending. The EMT works well together and brings together valuable experience from working in the Council as well as from other local authorities but could be more joined up on their approach to transformation. EMT may wish to build on the leadership development work it has already undertaken and consider development days to further strengthen working relationships.

Below the EMT, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) brings together senior managers and meets monthly. The peer team found that the SLT is highly engaged and proactively supportive of change. The Council may wish to consider clarifying the membership of the SLT and their corporate role; ensuring that SLT membership consistently cascade information to the wider staff community will be important.

Internally, both the Leader and the chief executive are accessible to staff. The employee forum meets approximately four times a year and is attended by both the chief executive and the Leader, with representatives from each service area who can raise issues and cascade information back to their teams. The chief executive holds regular staff briefings three or four times a year, both in person and virtually. At these briefings corporate updates are provided and staff are given a chance to ask questions. The staff networks also appreciate their good access to the chief

executive. This accessibility reinforces the clear value-led commitment that staff at all levels have to the Council and residents.

Externally, the Council listens to local people, residents and businesses and engages in a meaningful way, for example through the Resident's Insight Survey as previously mentioned, the Tenants Involvement Group (see Housing section 5.6) and Town and Parish Councils. Whilst acknowledging the existing partnership with the Town Parish Councils is productive, the peer team heard of the Town and Parish Councils' enthusiasm to further collaborate as partners and to develop a more meaningful relationship regarding budget for them to deliver services. The Council may therefore wish to consider this in more detail. The Council works effectively in partnership with community groups who are seen as respected and their relationship with the Council is strong.

The peer team heard that the Council used to be very inward looking, but now embodies strong partnership working and has an effective convening role with a range of partners. There was wholeheartedly positive feedback from neighbouring authorities, business partners, public sector partners and other stakeholders. The peer team heard how the Council is now seen as open and willing to collaborate.

The partnership with the New Forest National Park Authority (NFNPA) is particularly well-established and mature. The NFNPA is the planning authority for the specific area and there are several service level agreements in place, covering things such as HR, finance, IT and technical professional services. The Council is encouraged to maintain its positive relationship with the NFNPA and harness any further opportunities, such as future accommodation and joint working on climate action and tourism.

Partnerships with other public sectors partners are also strong. On facilitating greater local involvement in the development of cultural activities, the Council has worked effectively with Arts Council England. A strategy is currently being developed, and the Council has established a strategic working group, which includes the NFNPA, Arts Council England, the NHS, the Hampshire Cultural Trust as well as other partners.

The Council has proactively built effective relationships with business partners and is an active player in these networks. The Leader sits on the Hampshire Prosperity Partnership Leaders Board, and from this District representatives attend the

Hampshire Prosperity Board, which replaced the previous Local Enterprise Partnerships covering Hampshire.

The Council is an active player in the development and delivery of the Solent Freeport, with the Leader on the Solent Freeport Board. The Council established the Waterside Steering Group and plays a crucial role in facilitating joint working across partners and delivering work on the Freeport priorities. The peer team encourages the Council to maintain its efforts to date and maximise the opportunities within the Freeport, such as wider NFDC representation in sub-regional groups.

The Council also partners with the voluntary sector, particularly on supporting vulnerable households across New Forest, and chairs a New Forest Partnership Meeting which brings together multiple organisations to share information and work on specific projects, as well as signposting support. The Council works collaboratively with FareShare, local foodbanks, and partners to support the weekly food larders and community hubs as part of a cost-of-living steering group. The peer team encourages the Council to further harness the voluntary sector in New Forest to enhance and improve service delivery.

5.3 Governance and culture

The Council's governance and decision-making processes are strengthened by positive and respectful relationships between officers at all levels and the Cabinet, with the Leader's consensual style recognised and all political groups reporting good access to the chief executive.

The peer team consistently found that member and officer roles and responsibilities are well understood, with relationships described as trusting, constructive and collaborative. Collaborative working, particularly between senior officers and the Cabinet, has created a supportive culture.

The Council has improved its support to members, particularly via the revamped member induction programme in 2023, which included improved IT support, a new members' handbook, and a dedicated SharePoint site with resources uploaded. The peer team heard the induction programme has been well received and the regular all member briefings are welcomed.

Whilst the member induction programme is effective, the Council should ensure that the ongoing member development provision is robust. The peer team encourages

senior members to be more assertive in setting and steering the priorities of the Council, for example in developing their own agendas and encouraging recommendations for Cabinet committee meetings.

To ensure that New Forest District Council is a diverse and representative local council, it is vital that councillors from all backgrounds and experiences reflect the New Forest communities they serve. The peer team encourages the Council to continue its efforts to recruit more diverse people to consider standing to be local councillors. The LGA can provide support and information on this.

The Council revised its Overview and Scrutiny arrangements in May 2023, to coincide with the implementation of an electoral review and the reduction in the number of district councillors from 60 to 48. There are now three Overview and Scrutiny panels: Housing and Communities; Place and Sustainability; and Resources and Transformation. There is a clear appetite from members and officers to learn from best practice to provide more effective scrutiny. The Council is therefore encouraged to consider ways to strengthen and develop its Overview and Scrutiny function. This could include opposition-led scrutiny, as well as utilising LGA resources to learn from best practice and apply it in the New Forest.

There is evidence of cross-party working, with support across all political groups on the Council's transformation ambitions. Furthermore, the Council set up several task and finish groups with wide political representation to undertake reviews on areas such as health and leisure and sustainable waste, amongst others. The Council may wish to explore further opportunities for cross-party working to deepen political commitment to achieving the Council's goals.

One of the key priorities for the Council is to be an employer of choice, with a well-supported and dedicated workforce. Staff are New Forest District Council's greatest asset. They are passionate, enthusiastic and committed to the direction the Council is heading in. It was very clear to the peer team that the culture of the Council has improved, with a notable shift away from being siloed and inwardly facing to more collaborative and supportive. The Monthly Meet, launched in 2023, has played a key role in this shift. It provides an opportunity for staff to better understand other services and learn more about the work the Council does. The peer team also observed the Council's improved relations with its Trade Unions.

The annual staff survey gives employees a voice to express their opinions and is a

useful way to gather feedback to identify areas for improvement. Although only 57 per cent of staff responded to the 2024 staff survey, this was an increase of 16 per cent on the previous survey. Overall, 76 per cent of respondents would recommend the Council as a place to work. The Council's supportive culture was recognised, with 84 per cent of respondents agreeing that team members help and support each other. The peer team did hear about some scepticism on the anonymity of the staff survey so the Council may wish to reassure staff about this.

To shape the culture of the Council four values, known as LEAF, were established: Learning, Empathy, Ambition and Fairness. Whilst staff clearly accept the four LEAF values, many staff felt 'Learning' and 'Fairness' were not consistently applied across the organisation. In particular, there appears to be inconsistency on communications, with staff at the depot not always receiving key messages at the same time when it is cascaded to all staff.

The Council has historically been a risk averse organisation, but with robust risk management arrangements in place it can become bolder and braver with its decisions. It was clear to the peer team that members and the Senior Leadership Group are committed to effective risk management as they have led from the front in driving forward improvements to the council's risk management processes. The Audit Committee considers risk management and operates effectively, and the Annual Governance Statement tracks actions to completion.

Strategic risk management is embedded into service plans, with the service plans informing the Strategic Risk Register. In a tangible sign of good practice, the Council's Strategic Risk Register is published on the website, updated regularly, and kept under review. The Council could use the audit planning cycle for 2025/26 to ensure there is a 'Golden Thread' from the Strategic Risk Register through to individual Service Risk Registers.

In their last formal report covering 2021/22, no issues in relation to value for money were raised by the Council's external auditors. Although issues were raised over the valuation of both investment and leisure properties, this was due to differences of view on the methodology.

Like many other local authorities, the Council received a disclaimed opinion on its 2022/23 accounts. Draft accounts for 2023/24 have been published with no significant risks identified. The Council is hopeful that its auditors will complete the

audit of the 2023/24 accounts before the February 2025 deadline.

5.4 Financial planning and management

The Council is in a solid financial position because of a prudent approach to financial stability and proactive financial management over many years. Indeed, being financially responsible is one of the key strategic priorities of the Council's corporate plan.

The Council's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) covers the period up to 2028/29. The overall forecast deficit taking into the account the various funding assumptions and budget movements totals £466,000 for 2025/26, increasing to a cumulative £2.693m by 2028/29. With the General Fund budget set for 2024/25 at £24.536m, the deficit represents a gap equivalent to 10% by the end of the MTFP period.

The budget gap for 2025/2026 is primarily related to the additional costs of transitioning to the new waste service during 2025/2026, with an expectation of new burdens funding from April 2026. The larger gap from 2027/2028 is an assumption of a business rate reset, tied in with the Fair Funding Review.

To address the forecast deficit to 2028/29, the Council is undertaking an organisation wide transformation programme. The MTFP identified a targeted saving of £1.75m from the transformation programme.

There is a risk that the scope of the transformation programmes widens too far, and the Council wants to do too much at the same time; the peer team recommends that the scope of the transformation programme remains focused to ensure that officer capacity is not stretched and that the timetable and sequencing of the transformation programme is clear to all staff.

The Council's unearmarked reserves balance has remained constant at £3m since 2017. Whilst the level of the Council's reserves relative to spend is not as high as some of its neighbours, they are sufficient for the authority to smooth changes to income in the medium-term. The Council has been able to add to reserves largely as a result of additional interest income.

The Council has well-established and good financial monitoring systems in place. The financial position is reported on quarterly as part of the performance management framework and Cabinet members are confident in the monitoring process. To enhance reporting, the Council could consider formal corporate

processes for monthly reporting.

The peer team recognises the work done to date to make the Council more commercially aware, with ownership of around £30m of commercial property that is all located in the district, and the plans to improve the utilisation of office accommodation at Appletree Court to generate income. However, the peer team felt that much more can be done to comprehensively understand the Council's physical assets, their liabilities, and future commercial opportunities. Assets across the New Forest could include things such as car parks, public toilets, Tide Mill, and the waste depot site. Once the mapping has been complete, a strategy could be developed to deal with the assets as part of a coherent corporate asset management appraisal system. This work would help the Council consider opportunities to maximise its income, thereby further supporting its ambitions to be financially responsible.

The Council's transformation savings targets and its position on assets will need to be revisited in light of the Government's announcements on local government reorganisation.

5.5 Capacity for improvement

The delivery of the Council's transformation programme, Future New Forest, is significant in helping the Council achieve financial sustainability, deliver services effectively, and to continually improve.

The peer team observed that the transformation programme is purpose led and has a solid evidence base. There is clear recognition of the Council's starting point and progress has already been achieved behind the scenes, but that the level of modernisation needed to deliver transformation is challenging.

Leadership of the transformation programme is strong, with commitment at all management levels to deliver it. The peer team observed that increased visibility of EMT's collective ownership of the transformation programme could strengthen the delivery of the programme.

Staff at all levels are passionate, committed, and believe in the need for change – they want to play their part in delivering the transformation programme. Despite this, adequate resourcing of the transformation programme is fundamental for its success. The peer team recommends that officer capacity is constantly reviewed to ensure that staff are not just delivering business as usual but can deliver transformation

priorities too. Giving staff permission to say no may enable this. The peer team also recognises that progress has been made on reducing silo-working, which could further increase staff capacity. The Council may look to build on this and go further by combining specialisms, such as communications, consultation and business intelligence.

Keeping up the morale of staff is equally important, especially during periods of significant change. The peer team observed that several internal policies and practices are not being consistently applied across the organisation, including staff, induction, flexible working, Job Evaluation, Sickness Policy, job titles and job descriptions. This has led to staff dissatisfaction and frustration, particularly in the areas of the Council who have felt that they are being treated unfairly. Addressing these inconsistencies may ensure that support for the transformation programme is not diminished.

One of the four themes of the transformation programme is customer and digital services. Standardising customer focuses processes and technology across all services will rely heavily on digital platforms. It will therefore be essential that staff have the required skills and that customers are able to use it.

The peer team heard that the Council's IT officers are well thought of, and they provide helpful support. However, there is inconsistent use of IT across teams within the Council, for example how documents are stored, IT training and the use of SharePoint. There are therefore opportunities to create more effective and efficient working practices. There could be an opportunity to establish expectations for IT use across the authority.

The Council is currently considering ways to improve the underutilised office accommodation at Appletree Court. This presents an opportunity to reexamine the layout of its office space and could result in potentially releasing some office space for third party tenants, providing a commercial opportunity for generating income. The peer team encourages the Council to engage staff sufficiently in these plans to ensure that their needs are met.

A consistent approach to IT use and the adoption of shared practices would benefit the organisation and improve efficiency. The Council's move to hybrid working thereby demonstrates the importance of developing capabilities in Microsoft Teams to enable effective working.

As previously mentioned, the Council may wish to explore how internal and external communication channels can increase the visible delivery of its priorities. The Council will be building on solid foundations with communications colleagues already working effectively with teams to develop messaging on service delivery and key projects. A corporate-wide communications strategy could help prioritise key campaigns and messaging to drive behaviour change, such as implementation of the waste strategy. Furthermore, given communications is at the heart of all Council activity and success, the peer team encourages the Council to better celebrate its achievements, no matter how big or small they are. On the transformation programme, quick wins could be regularly highlighted to build momentum and communications to residents could explain how the transformation programme will benefit them.

5.6 Housing

Given meeting housing needs is one of the Council's top priorities in its corporate plan, the peer team were asked to consider it as an additional area of focus. Overall, the peer team found that Council has an ambitious and creative development and acquisition programme focused on local needs.

There is strong political support for the Council's housing priorities. The Peer Team found that the Council's portfolio holder, who is also the Deputy Leader, is committed and has a strong working relationship with the Housing Team and the Tenants Group. The Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel operates collaboratively and provides effective oversight.

The Council's commitment to delivering 600 new affordable homes by 2026 is ambitious, but challenges remain. Given the Council's emphasis on housing delivery, housing developers were keen to see greater articulation of housing needs to overcome localised opposition to housebuilding. The Council may therefore wish to establish a narrative to better articulate local housing requirements to overcome public and political opposition.

The Council cannot achieve its housing ambitions on its own; it will need to work effectively with private and public sector partners. Peers were impressed by the approach taken to affordable housing delivery which has embraced multiple approaches to increasing availability, including partnerships with housing associations, acquisitions from the open market, S106 acquisitions and direct delivery.

The peer team also welcomed the Council's emerging relationships with developers and private sector landlords, and noted the Council's constructive relationship with Hampshire County Council on helping people live independently at home.

The Council owns around 5,000 homes and has undertaken sufficient preparation in advance of the new social housing regulatory requirements, including staff training and tenant engagement. The Tenant Involvement Group set out that attitudes to tenants had shifted recently to a more positive and equal relationship. The group meets regularly and is a forum to discuss ideas around priorities and service delivery. Further involvement of tenants in policy development, scrutiny and training could strengthen their voice within the organisation, putting the Council in a stronger position for regulatory inspection.

The Council is rightly proud that 81% of respondents are satisfied overall with their council managed property. However, only 29.1% of tenants are satisfied with the Council's approach to complaint management and the Council recognises this is an area to improve upon. The existing tenant engagement channels provides an opportunity to grow their involvement and influence, and work collaboratively to resolve issues.

In February 2024, Cabinet agreed to undertake a full review of the Local Plan. It is worth noting that any developments on local government reorganisation in Hampshire may impact Local Plan activity. The peer team observed that some aspects of the planning process are delaying development, although this is not a problem just for New Forest. The Council will therefore need to be mindful of future challenges and opportunities for its development programme.

On homelessness, the Council has an effective operational response to homelessness pressures and works collaboratively with local charities and groups to tackle rough sleeping, for example with The Crossings charity on housing register support in the Hythe area. Furthermore, there has been a reduction in rough sleeping over the past three years, which is a significant achievement.

The Council also partners with the New Forest Disability Information Service to provide support for vulnerable residents who have been discharged from hospital to help them live independent lives at home. It also works effectively with Hampshire County Council on adaptations and specialist accommodation needs.

6. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. It has already been acknowledged in this report that the peer review took place before the announcements on devolution by the Government. It is important to recognise that while addressing key priorities, the Council will need to divert officer capacity to support potential local government reorganisation planning.

The LGA will continue to provide on-going support to the council. Following publication of CPC report you need to produce and publish an Action Plan within five months of the time on site. 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 New Forest District Council is October 2025.

In the meantime, Will Brooks, Principal Adviser for the South East, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Will is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

Email: William.Brooks@local.gov.uk.

Tel: 07949054421



Action plan

Corporate peer challenge 2024

March 2025

Introduction

Recommendations from the CPC team

Following the completion of the corporate peer challenge in December 2024 a feedback report has been published by the LGA including a list of recommendations for consideration. The report also included key observations and comments from the peer team based upon their findings from the peer challenge.

We are required to publish an action plan within five months of the completion of the peer challenge. This document outlines associated actions, timelines, and tracks progress towards implementation of the recommendations. Included within this action plan are additional actions which arise from the peer teams observations and commentary.

It is acknowledged that the peer challenge took place prior to the announcements on devolution by the Government, which may impact the resources required to address key priorities, as officers' capacity will be diverted to support reorganisation planning.

A progress review by the LGA will be scheduled to allow feedback and report progress made against each of the recommendations and discuss impact and learning. A progress report will then be published by the LGA.

Recommendations

The following are the 10 recommendations from the corporate peer challenge feedback report.

No.	Recommendation	Associated actions		Timescales	Owner
1	Clarify priorities and timelines for delivery	1.1	Revisit priorities and categorise considering LGR (continue, review and pause)	Jan 2025 <i>Delivered</i>	Alan Bethune
		1.2	Seek formal approval for revised priority list, following informal consultation with the Leader and Cabinet members	March/April 2025 <i>Delivered</i>	Alan Bethune
		1.3	Reallocate resources based on revised priorities in the 2025/26 budget.	March 2025 <i>Delivered</i>	Alan Bethune
2	Create an overarching corporate narrative and communicate proactively with staff, members and local people	2.1	Develop concise view (graphic/one pager) of priorities to support internal & external comms	April 2025	Kate Ryan
		2.2	Develop narrative to support revised priorities (aligned to LGR report)	May 2025	Kate Ryan/Sara Hamilton
		2.3	Prioritise communications messaging and resource aligned to corporate plan, agreeing gold, silver and bronze focus	June 2025	Kate Ryan/Sara Hamilton
		2.4	Celebrate successes linked to revised priorities to ensure continuity and reinforcement of narrative (link to recommendation #10) Annual Report (July 2025) End of year look back (December 2025)	Ongoing	Leadership team/Sara Hamilton

		2.5	Support staff understanding of their role in delivering priorities through clear links from corporate plan to individual performance through regular development conversations. Review of performance reviews and one to ones being undertaken within People Strategy Roll out	October 2025	Alan Bethune/Rebecca Drummond/Leadership team
3	Design and deliver a robust member and senior officer development programme	3.1	Member training opportunities, including self-serve, Member briefings and LGA sessions will be themed to support Members' understanding of the different roles of an elected Member and how training can support their development. This will take account of Local Government Reorganisation implications. Training will be prioritised based on the feedback received from a recent Member Development survey, which includes strengthening Overview and Scrutiny (See 4 below).	May 2025	Tanya Coulter / Matt Wisdom
		3.2	Support members in their roles across key programme governance including waste, transformation and LGR	Ongoing	Tanya Coulter / Matt Wisdom
		3.3	Build on the informal EMT/Leader meetings to set up dedicated EMT/Cabinet development sessions	Ongoing	Kate Ryan
		3.4	Continue leadership and management development programmes with further	Ongoing	Alan Bethune/Rebecca Drummond

			opportunities linked to the behaviours framework and development of leadership skills to support LGR		
4	Consider ways to strengthen your Overview and Scrutiny function	4.1	Strategic Director linked to each O&S panel to provide direct support to panel members	January 2025 <i>Delivered</i>	Strategic Director Lead/Matt Wisdom
		4.2	Agenda planning and topic prioritisation meetings take place with the lead SD, Chairman and Vice-Chairman	January 2025 <i>Delivered</i>	Strategic Director Lead/Matt Wisdom
		4.3	Specific topic briefings to be held i.e. Housing Regulation, to develop member knowledge and support scrutiny role	Housing – March 2025 <i>Delivered</i>	Strategic Director Lead / Tanya Coulter/Matt Wisdom
		4.4	Develop an ‘essential’ training package for all councillors that serve on Overview and Scrutiny Panels, comprising delivered and self serve training, to include:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • O&S Chairman training • Questioning skills training • Scrutiny essentials • LGA resources 	May 2025	Tanya Coulter / Matt Wisdom
5	Ensure there is collective ownership of the transformation programme by the Executive Management Team	5.1	Governance structure supports reporting and discussion at directorate level with escalation to Transformation Board	March 2025 <i>Delivered</i>	Alan Bethune/Rebecca Drummond
		5.2	Further embed governance arrangements, including reporting of issues and decisions that conflict with agreed strategic direction	March 2025 <i>Delivered</i>	Alan Bethune/Rebecca Drummond

		5.3	Revise business case considering LGR and ensure new focus is well communicated and anchored in governance reporting	June 2025	Alan Bethune/Rebecca Drummond
		5.4	Consider and implement opportunities to improve EMT visible leadership of change initiatives	September 2025	Alan Bethune/Rebecca Drummond
6	Apply internal policies and practices consistently across the Council	6.1	Investment in additional OD and Employee Engagement resources agreed	Feb 2025 <i>Delivered</i>	Alan Bethune/Rebecca Drummond
		6.2	Induction framework being revisited to ensure consistency, including 'induction essentials' video for new starters and enhanced guidance for managers	May 2025	Alan Bethune/Rebecca Drummond
		6.3	Behaviours framework being developed to ensure consistency	July 2025	Alan Bethune/Rebecca Drummond
		6.4	Different ways to communicate key messages and cascade information to operational staff will be implemented including briefing notes and visual updates where appropriate	April 2025	Strategic Directors/Rebecca Drummond
		6.5	Review local arrangements to ensure policies and practices consistently applied and create baseline data to monitor improvements. Linked to People Strategy delivery	September 2025	Alan Bethune/Rebecca Drummond
7	Develop an Assets Strategy and Action Plan	7.1	Initial engagement with Overview and Scrutiny panel to test direction of travel of emerging strategy	March 2025 <i>Delivered</i>	Alan Bethune

		7.2	Adoption of Asset Strategy and Action Plan	July 2025	Alan Bethune
		7.3	Commence discussions with Town and Parish Council and other partners	July 2025	Alan Bethune
8	Demonstrate further commitment to carbon reduction with a clear action plan	8.1	Continue to decarbonise the council's housing stock and housing of all tenures in line with the Greener Housing Strategy	Council housing stock EPC 'C' or higher by 2030	Richard Knott/Sophie Tuffin
		8.2	Ensure low carbon development through alignment with the Planning for Climate Change SPD and wider Local Plan Review	Ongoing	James Carpenter/Tim Guymer
		8.3	Refresh of the Climate Change and Nature Emergency Action Plan to ensure ambitious carbon reduction, climate adaptation and nature recovery outcomes	March 2026	James Carpenter/Roxanne King
9	Continue the good practice in housing and consider applying successful approaches to the wider organisation	9.1	Establish a list of key good practice items and outcomes	October 2025	Richard Knott/Paul Thomas
		9.2	Knowledge transfer opportunities with wider SLT	October 2025	Richard Knott/Paul Thomas
		9.3	Use the topic based 'Monthly Meet' staff engagement forum as a learning opportunity to share examples of Housing best practice and improvement initiatives	September 2025	Richard Knott/Paul Thomas
10	Remember to celebrate your achievements no matter how small or big they are	10.1	Prioritise and develop an approach and multi-level offer for all staff and implement focussed activity for operational services across Place and Housing	August 2025	Kate Ryan/EMT

		10.2	Build a values based, equitable recognition element into the implementation of the Behavioural framework	October 2025	EMT/Leadership Team
		10.3	Leadership team development session on rewards and recognition, to shape and embed this across the organisation.	August 2025	EMT/Leadership Team
		10.4	Build in time to celebrate success into all staff, directorate and team sessions.	Ongoing	EMT/Leadership Team

Additional actions

The following are additional actions and considerations which arose from the peer team's commentary and observations.

No.	Observation	Actions	Timescales	Owner
1	Service planning and delivery to proactively consider opportunities for enhancing inclusivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include equality and inclusivity considerations into service planning template and associated guidance • Consider knowledge gaps and way to create greater understanding and awareness of equality and inclusion across all staff groups in support of improved diversity and inclusion in the services we provide • Link to People Strategy and the creation and development of staff forums 	August 2025	Alan Bethune / Rebecca Drummond
2	Policy development to include consideration of equality, diversity and inclusivity impacts at the outset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership team development session to explore the LG Equality Framework as it relates to service delivery • EMT to ensure that where relevant policy development includes an equality impact assessment 	October 2025 Ongoing	Kate Ryan Strategic Directors
3	Development Management – Standardisation of Section 106 planning agreements to facilitate faster conclusion of planning permission.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a Developer Forum to explore the issues raised with the service leads with an initial meeting by the summer. 	July 2025	James Carpenter
4	SLT – Clarify corporate role of wider leadership team members and ensure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions to be summarised for each agenda item, including for 	May 2025	Kate Ryan

	clear expectation set to consistently cascade information	cascade, engagement, learning etc.		
5	Town & Parish Councils – Explore opportunities to develop a more meaningful relationship regarding budget for them to deliver services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased regularity of meeting with Town and Parish Council clerks Collaboration on LGR with a joint event planned to increase understanding Developing a Community Asset transfer policy Resourcing allocated for capacity and delivery 	<p>Ongoing</p> <p><i>Delivered</i></p>	<p>Kate Ryan</p> <p>Richard Knott</p> <p>Alan Bethune</p>
6	Freeport – Maintain efforts to maximise the opportunities within the Freeport, such as wider NFDC representation in sub-regional groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Waterside Steering group continues to bring together key partners, and ensure a focus on NFDC benefits. Deputy Leader attending Solent Freeport Board and FRAC. Economic development and growth capacity re-established to help take forwards Totton masterplan and skills agenda Chief Executive taking a lead role in the Mayoral Strategic authority programme board 	Ongoing	James Carpenter
7	Voluntary sector – Further harness the voluntary sector in New Forest to enhance and improve service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to deliver, and enhance the outcomes of the Community Forum, Cost of Living Steering Group, Community and CIL Grants Schemes, SLAs with key Voluntary Sector Providers, Health & Wellbeing Initiatives and delivery 	Ongoing	Richard Knott

		of Disability awareness programmes.		
8	Continue efforts to recruit more diverse people to consider standing to be a local councillor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political group leaders to consider how their work recruiting, developing and selecting candidates to stand for future elections can improve wider representation of the local community. Review engagement opportunities ahead of future Town & parish and District elections 	<p>April 2026</p> <p>TBC</p>	Kate Ryan/ Matt Wisdom
9	Establish expectations for consistent IT use across the authority, including how documents are stored, IT training and the use of SharePoint and M365 tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create plan to deliver 'Digital Skills for all' to facilitate learning, technology adoption and best practice usage. Continued training and knowledge sharing with the ICT service desk to then deliver consistent best practice and meaningful messaging to our staff. Creation of 3 new ICT best practice guides: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Where to start a digital conversation" "Where to save my files" "Best practice guide to using my SharePoint Team Site" 	August 2025	Alan Bethune/ Rebecca Drummond
10	Housing – Further involve tenants in policy development, scrutiny and training to strengthen their voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliver actions in the Tenant Engagement Strategy. 	April 2026	Richard Knott

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a menu of engagement options and learning opportunities for staff • Increase participation across demographics and localities. • Complete the Tenant data survey and analyse results to create targeted approach 		
11	Establish a narrative to better articulate local housing requirements to overcome public and political resistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressing the Local Plan from current Reg 18 Issues and Options stage through to Reg 19 will allow wider views to be gathered • Undertaking a range of engagement activities both with the community/ Towns & Parishes and with elected members, through the Local Plan Member Working Group and more widely. • Undertake Green Belt review as part of the local plan evidence base to better understand capacity in the district, in line with the NPPF principles of "Grey Belt" • Partnership working across Hampshire, and with the National Park Authority on the special landscape constraints and designations that constrain growth in the district, to arrive at an appropriate housing number. • Specific work with officers planning committee members to 	April 2026	James Carpenter

		understand and act upon the current and future implications of a lack of 5-year housing land supply, and the impacts of not meeting the NPPF Housing Delivery Test (application of a 20% buffer) on planning decision taking.		
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Corporate plan priorities – key deliverables review

March 2025

Introduction

Local government reorganisation





The recent corporate peer challenge and the emerging local government reorganisation (LGR) discussions has prompted a review of the key deliverables in support of the Council's priorities to ensure our ambitions are balanced with our capacity and that our capacity is focussed on the right activities.

The Corporate Plan and Future New Forest remain the agreed policy frameworks and ongoing service delivery continues to be central to ensuring the needs of our residents are met.

This review enables a discussion to bring about more clarity on the delivery of priorities and associated timescales, to focus resources and consider the potential impacts of local government reorganisation.

Status





The delivery activities within each of the corporate plan themes have been initially assessed and categorised on the following basis:

-
- | | | |
|----------|---|---|
| Continue |  | Rationale supports continuation based on impact and/or nearing completion |
|----------|---|---|
-
- | | | |
|----------|---|---|
| Consider |  | Proportionate response with limited resources |
|----------|---|---|
-
- | | | |
|------|---|---|
| Stop |  | Timescales and capacity required suggest that activities should be paused |
|------|---|---|
-
- | | | |
|---------|---|---------------------------------|
| New/LGR |  | New activities arising from LGR |
|---------|---|---------------------------------|


People

Helping people in the greatest need and creating balanced, resilient and healthy communities who feel safe and supported with easy access to services.









Helping those in our communities with the greatest need

Delivery activity	
	Community forum
	Universal credit rollout
	Careline digitalisation
	Careline growth

Empowering our residents to live healthy, connected and fulfilling lives

Delivery activity	
	Cultural strategy
	CCTV expansion
	Community grants (annual)
	Cultural strategy (implementation)
	Development of new Health and wellbeing strategy
	Community strategy





Meeting housing needs




Delivery activity	
	Homelessness strategy
	Social Housing Decarbonisation fund bid wave 3
	Tenant satisfaction survey part 2
	Social Housing Regulation Act (Implementation)
	Private Sector Housing strategy review
	Affordable Housing Delivery action plan
	Development of new Empty homes strategy
	Housing strategy consultation/publish (aligned with local plan timescales)

Place

Delivering growth, opportunity and services that shape our place now and for future generations, within a unique environmental context, to ensure we remain a special place to live, work and visit.












Shaping our place now and for future generations

Delivery activity	
	Local Plan (issues and options)
	Dibden Bay planning response
	A326 upgrade
	Nationally significant infrastructure project - Fawley Pipeline

	Development Management Review
	NEW – Community infrastructure levy (CIL) Community
	NEW – CIL Strategic










*Planning performance agreement

Protecting our climate, coast and natural world

Delivery activity	
	Public space protection order (PSPO) Review
	Air quality strategy
	Emergency planning and business continuity review
	Christchurch Bay flood/coastal erosion risk management (FCERM) approval
	Hurst Spit to Lymington
	Climate and nature emergency strategy and action plan
	Air quality strategy (implementation)
	Fleet strategy
	Climate/Sustainability Impact Decision Tool Assessment
	Coastal destination strategy
	Coastal partnership model

Caring for our facilities, neighbourhoods and open spaces in a modern and responsive way


Delivery activity

	Waste Strategy mobilisation and rollout
	Bartec in cab technology rollout
	Hardley depot move
	Marsh Lane depot essential works
	Ringwood depot expansion
	Review of commercial waste
	Simpler recycling legislation
	Open Spaces review
	Parking strategy


Prosperity

Promoting a strong local economy that delivers its inclusive aspirations through effective partnerships, attracting investment, and increasing skills and employment opportunities.


Maximising the benefits of inclusive economic growth and investment

Delivery activity	
	Economic strategy / prospectus

Supporting our high-quality business base and economic centres to thrive and grow

Delivery activity	
	Totton Masterplan

Championing skills and access to job opportunities


Delivery activity	
	Employment and skills strategy

Future New Forest








Putting our customers at the heart




Delivery activity	
	Resident insight (2025 survey)

Being an employer of choice







Delivery activity	
	People strategy

Being financially responsible








Delivery activity	
	Financial regulations update
	Strategic Asset review (inc. Lymington Town Hall, community assets)
	Strategic Asset implementation
	Appletree court (ATC) essential works project
	NFEC Future arrangements
	Claymeadow depot Future agreed
	Eling Tide Mill (urgent works/repairs)

	Eling Tide Mill (long-term asset strategy)
	ATC South Wing business case works
	NEW - Transformation business case revisit

Designing modern and innovative services

Delivery activity	
	Digital strategy (delivery)
	Digital Transformation: Customer platform
	Digital Transformation: Data platform
	Digital Transformation: Housing Maintenance
	Digital Transformation: Asset Management software
	Digital Transformation: Regulatory Services software

Other corporate activity

Delivery activity	
	Elections
	Scheme of Delegations update
	Business Planning Framework
	Member development (proportionate to LGR context)
	Corporate Dashboards
	Communications strategy (delivery as per service plan)
	NEW - Devolution / Local Government Reorganisation

