



Corporate Peer Challenge:
Chippenham Town Council

10 – 11 September 2019

Summary Feedback Report

1. Key Messages

Chippenham Town Council (CTC) is an ambitious and progressive council. It warmly welcomes external challenge as a means of driving its own improvement and raising the standards and aspirations within the sector as a whole. It was therefore apt that it was the subject of the Town and Parish Council sectors' first ever Corporate Peer Challenge.

CTC's ambition and innovation abounds, a great example being its proactive approach to the devolution, asset transfer and delegation of responsibility plans with Wiltshire Council, focussed on establishing sustainable, locally led and well delivered services for Chippenham and its residents. The council took the initiative to purposefully engage with the principal authority, and in the short term this positive engagement with Wiltshire has helped augment service delivery and standards around the town's street cleansing, green space management and cleanliness, and into the medium term is securing the future of significant assets such as Monkton Park and the Neeld Community & Arts Centre.

The council knows what it wants to achieve and has clear priorities which chart that course. Within this context, it aims high and gauges progress well. Its current Corporate Strategic Plan (2018-22) has, on the back of significant public consultation, five core priorities with an emphasis on strong provision of services, promoting well-being, working in partnership, creating a safe environment, promoting Chippenham and the effective use of resources. The ambitions behind these are well developed and the council's progress in achieving them is well documented and on track. Our challenge therefore, is given the significant progress made to date, is whether CTC could review the individual actions underpinning its priorities and where appropriate refresh or refine these, building upon the existing strong platform to ensure its various core strategic plans are aligned.

Core to this platform and the council's strong current position, is the strength of its leadership, both, politically and managerially. This is embodied in the relationship between the council's Leader and its Chief Executive. They jointly set the tone for the organisation, working collaboratively, forging a strong but importantly constructively challenging relationship. There is no complacency here, but rather a collective drive which pushes the council on. Such core strengths also represent improvement challenges for the council, as going forward it will need to instil and embed collective leadership through its wider body of councillors and officers. The recent appointment of two Corporate Director posts, one for Resources and the other for Communities is creating strategic capacity and this, alongside the appointment to a new Head of Service level team, affords the council an ideal opportunity to spread that leadership further, so that it lives and breathes throughout the council as a whole and is fully owned and managed.

The messages above aligns well with the 'One Council' drive at CTC that has been evident since 2017 and the associated development of the councils Behaviours Framework. Building upon this and having implemented this new senior structure, the council now can fully focus on embedding and inducting all staff into an organisation that will behave differently as it grows and becomes accountable for more key services in the town. An additional financial investment may be required to ensure both staff and councillors can grow into their new roles and work together more effectively too.

The council has a solid and well established governance structure, as one stakeholder told us 'it does what it says on the tin', and in the peer team views it is proportionate and effective.

The key challenge here again, is how CTC exploits such strength further, for example by building earlier member engagement and challenge into emerging policy positions.

The council is outward facing to its communities and works effectively in partnerships with others to ensure it maintains this. The strength of the relationship with Wiltshire Council, as already highlighted should not be underestimated. The achievement of a 'Purple Flag' award to reflect the strong partnership approach to the Town's night time economy is a further example. The council is constantly driving initiatives to help improve outcomes for communities, such as its engagement and influence in supporting a Neighbourhood Plan for Chippenham. The potential to progress these and other partnerships is a great opportunity and again a challenge for the council too. For example, how can it build upon the willingness to positively engage from the local secondary school head teachers to identify a number of strategic objectives to help focus future partnership working. The council are currently developing a Youth Council, with a planned introduction during 2020.

The council is in a relatively good financial position but knows it needs to 'future proof' its financial plans going forward to match its ambitions. The council has managed a significant increase in its precept charge this year to fund the cost of the transfer of assets and services from Wiltshire Council and also strengthen the senior management team. The council has a revenue budget of circa £3.7m and has a good sense of how it utilises this for the benefit of its communities. However, as its expansion plans develop and its ambitions for place need greater resourcing and capacity, it is important that CTC, scales up its financial capacity and wherewithal. The appointment of a suitably financially qualified, Director of Resources is a very positive step forward in addressing this. The key next step is to lever such financial expertise and build greater rigor in respect of the council's overall financial planning including budget setting (which should be a more inclusive exercise with the newly formed Management Team), monitoring, target setting and longer term financial plans as this is an area which must keep a pace with change, be a driver to enable the delivery of priorities and be a mechanism for effective accountability and oversight.

The last two years has seen significant change, but importantly real improvement, as the council modernises. It has established and appointed to a new senior structure, which will help create the necessary capacity and skills to keep it on its positive trajectory. Furthermore, it has updated its HR policies and practices to ensure it is a good and progressive employer. Such foundations will need to be nurtured so they enable the council to further develop and central to this will be the investment in the recently appointed 'Heads of Service', cohort of managers. They will need time, support and training to enable them to grow into their roles and influence with purpose. Furthermore, as CTC pushes cultural change and working practices, the core challenges of creating an effective workforce strategy and plans in respect of flexible and sustainable working arrangements, office accommodation and a fit for purpose IT platform will all need to be attended to.

Underpinning the effective delivery of any change programme is the need for a strong and inclusive communication plan. The council does have strengths in this area, notably some of its downwards briefing arrangements. However, this will benefit from a greater emphasis on encouraging upward communication, feedback and by seeking greater engagement with councillors, the workforce, and external stakeholders as a whole. Through this clear, consistent and timely communication will become a signature feature of CTC's approach. Such improvements will also help enable the grounding of a sustainable 'golden thread'.

That is, a clear alignment between the councils Corporate Strategic Plan, its Medium Term Financial Plan and the establishment of clear targets and performance goals for the council and its staff. We know that CTC is intent on putting these things in place one such example is a review of the council's Appraisal process, which will lead to an improved process being in place for 2020.

The Corporate Peer Challenge at CTC has been an important milestone. The council should use it to both celebrate its many successes, but also consolidate the real progress that has been achieved. This does not mean it stops improving, since improvement is within its 'DNA' Rather it should focus on the many things it does well, which are documented in this report, but equally attend to the recommendations we have laid out below. Importantly and typically CTC is already addressing these recommendations as it is intent on delivering its exciting ambitions for Chippenham and its residents.

2. Recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council

- Encourage all parts of the council to reflect and celebrate the significant improvements you have made in the last 2 years
- Utilise the strategic financial capacity you have created to establish a strong financial planning framework, instilling sufficient rigour and accountability within your arrangements
- Ground your future ambitions by creating an effective workforce and align this with your change programme to ensure it is sufficiently well designed, led, supported and resourced, so your goals in terms of training, development, accommodation and IT arrangements are realised
- Ensure there is effective, timely and inclusive engagement with your key stakeholders including partners, staff, councillors and residents, and that effective two way communication lies at the heart of everything you do

3. Purpose and Scope of the 'Pilot' peer challenge

The Corporate Peer Challenge at Chippenham Town Council was the first 'pilot' for The National Association of Local Councils (NALC). This joint initiative between NALC and the Local Government Association (LGA), is part of their joint work on sector-led improvement, helping to showcase the strong ambition within the sector to rise to the challenge of devolution and to raise the standard, starting with some of the largest local (parish and town) councils.

NALC's Corporate Peer Challenge is a performance improvement programme which involves a small team of local government officers and councillors spending time with a local council and engaging with a wide range of stakeholders connected to the council to help with the improvement and learning of the council, with immediate feedback and a report to follow. The learning from this pilot, and one further one, will help inform and shape and subsequent programme for the Local Council sector.

The peer team considered three key questions, drawn from the LGA's methodology which is applied in the sector for all Corporate Peer Challenges. Importantly though, through engagements with CTC, these were shaped to meet their own specific requirements. These are outlined below, they form the basis for this reports: Headline Messages, Detailed Findings and Recommendations. We believe they are critical to any councils' performance and improvement.

- **Place Leadership:** Are partners clear of the town council's role and ambitions and are they working well, together? Is there a shared view of their role as community leaders and enablers?
- **Resources and financial capability:** Are there adequate resource plans in place to deliver the vision?
- **Governance and capacity:** How is the council managing cultural change and devolution of services? Is it developing a strong corporate ethos and brand? Does it have robust and effective governance processes in place?

3.1 Peer review and challenge

Peer challenges are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. 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 process is not designed to provide a technical assessment or due diligence on specific proposals. Neither is it intended to provide prescriptive recommendations. The peer challenge process provides feedback, observations and insights from experienced practitioners that will help validate, reality check and further develop the council's current plans, proposals and evolving thinking about the future.

3.2 Peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the council's requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with the council. The peers who undertook the visit to Chippenham Town Council were:

- David Ashlee - Town Clerk and Chief Executive at Dunstable Town Council (Lead Peer)
- Harvey Siggs - former Leader at Mendip District Council
- Charlotte Eisenhart – Head of Member Services at NALC
- Paul Clarke - Peer Challenge Manager at the LGA

Peers prepared for their visit by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council, the challenges it is facing and the recent progress and developments made. The team then spent two days onsite at Chippenham in September 2019 during which they spoke to more than 45 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders. Therefore

they spent more than 80 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 2 weeks in Chippenham.

4. Specific findings and observations

This section provides further detail to the Headline Messages section by highlighting findings and observations in respect of the three core areas the peer team were asked to comment upon.

4.1 Place leadership

The council has real ambitions for Chippenham, its residents and its own role in influencing positive change. These ambitions are reflected within its Corporate Strategic Plan 2018-22 (CSP), were realised following positive public consultation, and the priorities highlighted within epitomise a progressive council striving to deliver good local services and to lead and influence on behalf of the town. Importantly, these result in tangible actions and outcomes, of which there are many examples: the devolution of services, asset transfer agreements and delegation of responsibilities CTC has reached with Wiltshire Council, the development of a Neighbourhood Plan for Chippenham and the achievement of a 'Purple Flag', of which only approximately 70 towns in England have. What is clear from the progress the council has made, is that there is the potential to both reflect and celebrate the achievements secured, but equally to consider a mid-term refresh of the actions that will deliver the five corporate priorities to enable it to both project further forward and to align its aspirations for the future to its financial and resource capacity.

At the heart of CTC's approach in shaping and leading Chippenham is that strong partnership focus, reflected in the examples above. This drives change and improvement and helps build collective capacity. In the week before our visit the council convened the first meeting of a Town Community Safety Forum, with in excess of 60 representatives from partner organisations in attendance. Our challenge now to the council is to be even bolder. Having built a reputation for partnership working it should take the steps to see, as one stakeholder told us, 'how far and deep CTC can help lead things'. This is about maximising the benefits and capacity that such partnerships can create but also to reflect the views of some partners, this would be enhanced by CTC working even closer with them to clarifying and better communicating the strategic aims of joint working, for example in relation to community safety or the future of the Town Centre or indeed the progress in respect of the Neighbourhood Plan.

From our visit to Chippenham, it is plain to see that CTC is a well branded council, with a clear brand and sub-brands which makes the council visible within and across communities. Much of that visibility is evidenced as a provider of service and is a strength to build upon. Increasingly, CTC is a 'place shaper' and real influencer of change, through partnerships. That same focus and attention to service branding needs to permeate across all of the councils activities. The council managed its precept increase very well this year, making it plain and clear what the residents of Chippenham were gaining from that increase. This is very much to the credit of the council and it will be important to keep that same forensic focus to ensure there is strong and purposeful communication and engagement with residents going forward, which is underpinned by core data and information.

4.2 Resources and financial capability

The council has made significant strides within the last two years in terms of improvement. It has established a clear 'One Council' focus, a set of key behaviours to reinforce this, and a 'fit for purpose' staff structure, which now, as one stakeholder described to us has 'the right people, in the right place, doing the right things'. The appointment of the two new, vastly experienced and suitably qualified Executive Directors is a testament to this and the ambitions CTC has to drive change.

The two new Directors are already influencing positive change. That is important as we met with CTCs committed managers and staff and they are clearly proud to work for the council and want to help further in shaping and delivering services that the local residents value. To do this well, they feel, as we do, that they will increasingly need to be engaged, trained, developed and then own the accountability that comes with this. This is particularly true of the recently appointed Heads of Services, who are pivotal in making this happen. It is equally true for councillors as well and there is a great opportunity now to build collective leadership of both councillors and officers going forward.

In terms of creating an effective resource base the council has much to be proud of. Its devolution plans and arrangements are sound. It recognises and has responded to the practical considerations of taking on services previously and currently delivered by Wiltshire Council, for example; street cleaning and grounds maintenance and is getting ready to take them on fully into the future. As devolution and asset transfer progresses progress it will be important that CTC grounds these into future proofed costed plans

In terms of financial planning the council is in a relatively strong position. It has healthy reserves and balances and therefore financial capacity to lever. Now it has senior financial expertise in place there are a range of areas to which it should attend to ensure its financial capability is utilised to the full. We found that some core disciplines need to be honed and applied in clear and consistent ways. For example, there is a need to engage managers in the organisation more effectively in setting budgets and income targets, as in some cases previous targets lacked sufficient substance. Equally, it will also be important to engage members more effectively in the process of budget setting and equip them with the necessary information, insights and principles to underpin both short and medium term planning as well as 'in year' monitoring, forecasting and challenge. This should create a culture of ownership and accountability for both members and managers, which is important if a more inclusive leadership style is to take hold. As part of this it will be worth reviewing the councils existing financial regulations and practices e.g. delegations, to see if they are fit for purpose. It will also be important to establish now a Medium term Financial Plan and ensure this is aligned to help drive the more effective delivery of the council's current and future priorities.

4.3 Governance and capacity

The relationship between the council's Chief Executive and Leader creates a strong platform for effective member/officer relationships and good governance. They are individually and jointly respected and have the confidence of the council's external stakeholders. The next steps will be to ensure those same attributes are embedded throughout the council. With a relatively high number of new councillors and a new senior structure in place the opportunity exists to seek to encourage and develop members and officers, to establish a strong culture of empowerment, accountability and delivery so the council builds from its existing position of strength.

The council continues to modernise itself and make it fit for purpose. There is a suite of sound HR policies, delivered with external support and challenge and owned by the council; this is refreshing. The council is investing in its core infrastructure, witness the significant investment in IT and its developing plans for office accommodation and flexible working; again the hallmarks of an enabling and effective council. Furthermore, with this peer challenge and with the many and various ways the council opens itself to external scrutiny, it is also evidencing a very open and transparent culture and way of working; this is to be applauded. Again, our challenge will be to constantly mainstream such challenge, scrutiny and accountability so it is characteristic of CTC, not just through a period of change, but also through periods of consolidation.

This same challenge is true in respect of the council's political governance arrangements. It is important to record that they are sound and secure, but could possibly be enhanced and reinforced by building on some of the key messages within this report around the growing culture of openness and challenge CTC is seeking to develop.

It was a pleasure to meet with some of the council's workforce and indeed some of its volunteers, notably those supporting the thriving local museum. They are clearly dedicated and committed to Chippenham and the council. It is important to engage them effectively going forward and one way this could be done is by establishing plans which sit beneath the council's CSP that they help develop and then use to inform and monitor effective delivery. Such plans can also be used as a means of tackling council wide issues of IT, accommodation, communications etc. With detailed delivery plans underpinning the CSP and a fit for purpose MTFP, the council will have established a strong 'golden thread' right from its strategic aspirations through to the effective management and delivery of services by individual members of its workforce.

It is important to end this report as it began by putting on record that Chippenham Town Council is a highly effective and well led council and it sets a great example for the sector as a whole. There are many examples and references within this report which reflect that. The challenges in this report are laid out with one intent only, they are the peer teams 'critical friend', reflections and observations to help make a good council even better.

5. Next steps

We appreciate the council will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions with the senior managerial and political leadership in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

At the same time both NALC and the LGA will work closely with the council to help evaluate the specific learning from this first pilot peer challenge and to help determine what support it may require from both organisations. NALC well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and they would be happy to discuss this. Charlotte Eisenhart is the main contact between your authority and NALC contact details are: Tel. 020 7290 0318 and Email. charlotte.eisenhart@nalc.gov.uk

In the meantime we thank Chippenham Town Council for all their efforts in helping deliver the sectors first ever Corporate Peer Challenge.