

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Chippenham Town Council

28 – 30 January 2025

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge

Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Executive summary.....	3
3. Recommendations	6
4. Summary of peer challenge approach	8
5. Feedback	10
6. Next steps	19

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 2.5 days at Chippenham Town Council to provide robust, strategic, and credible challenge and support.

The Local Government Association (LGA) and National Association of Local Councils (NALC) corporate peer challenge offer for local councils, utilises the strengths and experience of the LGA's expertise, working with peers from the town and parish council sector, and with NALCs engagement 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 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.

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

Chippenham Town Council (CTC) should be commended for its demonstratable drive for improvement, evidenced by inviting a second corporate peer challenge. The council extended a warm welcome to the peer team and were open and honest in the conversations held with them.

CTC should be confident in its role and in what it achieves for Chippenham. In the view of the peer team, it is doing a great job for the town and external stakeholders

that the peer team met with spoke positively about the council. CTC is described by some partners as impressive, approachable, effective and honest with a great sense of community spirit. CTC has recruited well to the officers it employs. Many of these staff that the peer team spoke to were passionate about what they do and clearly care about the town of Chippenham.

There is a shared sense of pride amongst councillors and officers in the quality of services and facilities that the town council provides for the town, demonstrated in awards such as the Purple Flag award and being a finalist in the 2025 NALC Star Council awards for Climate Response of the Year, and in successfully delivering a 'Neighbourhood Development Plan', which was adopted by Wiltshire Council in May 2024.

The council has an adopted Corporate Strategic Plan 2022-2026, and this guides the activity of the council to achieve the Plan priorities. A new plan will be developed following the May 2025 elections for 2026–2030. This will aid the council in decision making as resources can be allocated against priorities.

Achievement of actions against the 2022-2026 plan are reported to council. As well as monitoring performance against actions to deliver priorities, the council has introduced key performance indicators which help to evidence service delivery performance, and which demonstrates the council's commitment to continuous improvement. Monitoring and developing these KPIs will allow intervention and mitigation if performance goes off target.

Strategic partners speak highly of the town council and how it works effectively as a partner for the benefit of the community it serves. One partner described the council as an exemplar in this regard and similar sentiments were echoed by other partners in the focus group.

Community partners also recognise the work that the council does and would welcome CTC taking a facilitation role to coordinate a cross organisational approach. This would help build capacity at a community level, share knowledge and prevent duplication. For example, the One Chippenham website includes a link to Chippenham Museum, but the information advertised is out of date and relates to

2022. An example of how this cross organisational role could work would be development of a communication and engagement strategy.

The council benefits from a large number of volunteers who provide a valuable resource in delivering services to the town, such as at the Chippenham Museum and the CCTV service. The peer team were fortunate to meet with enthusiastic volunteers from these areas who clearly have a passion for the work they do which supports service delivery and provides increased capacity for the council.

The council has taken steps to begin to address equalities issues for example, monitoring the use of sports facilities by gender, but there is more work to do, and it should consider the routine use of equalities, diversity and inclusion data about both its communities and its staff. Equality impact assessments should form part of the decision-making process in the same way as climate implications are considered in council reports and decisions. Better understanding of the diversity of communities within Chippenham would ensure that harder to reach groups are not left feeling marginalised.

The council is committed to a climate change agenda with ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030. The council's achievements have been recognised nationally as mentioned above. However, the peer team heard that the strong focus on the green agenda may not be a priority for all residents and can cause tensions in wider project and service delivery. Balancing achievement of being carbon neutral by 2030 with other priorities and calls on limited resources is a challenge for the council.

The council has sound financial management in place and the external auditors have raised no issues. Continuing to robustly forecast income and expenditure will be important, as will regular review of the risk register. The council has sound governance processes in place and a review of the council's Standing Orders is in progress. Presenting the forthcoming review of Standing Orders to council will give the opportunity for all councillors to have input and collective ownership of this key document.

The council has recently undergone a top team restructure, and this has created capacity and diversity at a strategic level. There should now be an opportunity to

reassess the culture and values of the organisation with the input of officers and then review the HR policy framework so that for example, appraisals and training opportunities can be consistently applied. Communicating the benefits of the new structure and how members of CMT can support the council in service delivery will help with overall understanding of the structure of the organisation.

The council has a number of communication channels both internally and externally and the peer team heard that some are more effective than others. With the growth of the organisation, it is likely that a mix of communication tools will be needed that may need to be adjusted to fit the changing organisation. There is some work that the council could do to make improvements, such as two-way internal communication and feedback, and a communication and engagement strategy for working with community partners that will reduce duplication and support cross organisational working.

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 Communication and engagement strategy

Develop a communication and engagement strategy which includes how best to work with community partners, who could potentially provide additional capacity to support the council's delivery of priorities. The council undertaking a co-ordination role would help to facilitate this cross organisational approach. Different approaches to encourage more two-way communication with staff teams and the senior management teams could also be explored to improve dialogue.

3.2 Performance Management Framework

Develop the council's performance management framework that includes how best to present KPI information in a visual format that is easily understood, that considers whether to adapt or change the specific indicators and the frequency of reporting.

3.3 Equality, diversity and inclusion data

Use EDI data available to the council on communities, collect and use staff data and develop and use equality impact assessments in decision making, to ensure the council is meeting the requirements of the Equality Act and applying best practice in this area.

3.4 Reassess the culture of the organisation

Take the opportunity of an election, developing a new corporate strategic plan, and a new corporate management team to reshape and relaunch the internal culture of the organisation.

3.5 Include officers in a refresh of values

Take the opportunity to utilise the values and language that resonates with officers, such as caring and pride, and include officers in a refresh of values.

3.6 Review the HR policy framework

Once the culture of the organisation is reassessed and values updated, review the HR policies so that the culture of the organisation permeates down and appraisals and training and development opportunities are more consistently applied.

3.7 Review internal communications

There are a number of communication channels in place, but with current flexible working practices there is an opportunity to assess the most effective methods to reach different service areas, particularly due to the growth of the organisation and with the increase in hybrid working. Two-way communication and feedback can also be improved.

3.8 Continue with robust forecasting of income and expenditure

Forecasting of income and expenditure is more complex as the economic climate is less predictable. The RFO should continue to robustly forecast income and expenditure to ensure decisions are taken with the most up to date information.

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:

- Cllr Mike Drew – Yate Town Council
- Ian Morris – Chief Officer, Spennymoor Town Council
- Cleo Newcombe-Jones – Regeneration Service Manager, Bath and North East Somerset Council
- Kathryn Trant – 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.

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 Chippenham Town 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).

The peer team then spent 2.5 days onsite at Chippenham Town Council, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 15 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to almost 50 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

Chippenham Town Council has an approved Corporate Strategic Plan (CSP) 2022-2026 and this plan guides council activity to achieving the town's vision of 'Improving the quality of town life for present and future generations, whilst putting the priorities of our residents and climate considerations at the heart of everything we do'.

The CSP priorities are:

- Provide and develop facilities and services that are accessible, inclusive and promote health and wellbeing
- Play an active role in the future development of the town through collaboration with partners, stakeholders and our community
- Help to create a future that is carbon neutral, environmentally sustainable and resilient to the impact of climate change
- Maintain and create opportunities to enhance our green spaces and provide a clean and safe environment
- Provide and develop facilities and services that promote Chippenham as an attractive and vibrant market town and celebrate its rich history, heritage and culture
- Maintain effective and efficient governance and management of resources.

Each priority has a number of actions that sit below it, delivery of which will help to achieve the priority. Evidence of activity to support each of the priorities was demonstrated to the peer team, both in the documentation provided by the council and the site visit undertaken as part of the corporate peer challenge.

The CSP priorities and actions are reflected in the Service Plans produced for each service, evidencing the 'golden thread' that runs from the council priorities through the organisation to service plans, to deliver on the actions in the CSP and ensuring capacity and resource are directed to priority areas.

The next elections to CTC will take place in May 2025. Following the elections, the



council will develop a new Corporate Strategic Plan 2026 – 2030. The new plan will set out what the town council aims to achieve for the benefit of Chippenham. The council is already putting plans in place for wide external consultation, including resident consultation, so that residents' views can be considered by councillors as the new CSP, and council priorities are developed.

As with the development of previous Corporate strategic plans, many of the officers that the peer team spoke to would appreciate early internal consultation too, so that their views can be considered, as their input will be helpful in terms of their specialist knowledge and identifying resource.

Chippenham has a Neighbourhood Development Plan which has been used to actively shape development in the town. The council's proactive engagement with the community in developing the Plan resulted in a high level of response in the referendum, thereby setting expectations for the local planning authority to take planning decisions in line with the made Neighbourhood Development Plan. This clearly links to the second council priority regarding an active role in the future development of the town and demonstrates partnership working in collaboration with partners, stakeholders and the community. The council now has a Neighbourhood Plan Sub-Committee which will monitor the adherence to the new policies contained within the Plan by the Local Planning Authority, Wiltshire Council.

Another priority of the council is being addressed with the ambition for the council to be carbon neutral by 2030 and the council is undertaking a number of actions to evidence that it is on the way to achieving this. One of the positive actions is that the town council have established a Community Environmental Forum with the aim of bringing together local community groups, businesses, councillors and council staff so that they can share good practice and disseminate knowledge.

Climate action is reflected in service plans and climate implications are included in reports to council, so that actions to address the impacts of climate change are embedded throughout the organisation. As evidence of the commitment to climate change action, CTC has been recognised nationally for its achievements as the council has been nominated as a finalist for the NALC Star Council 2025 Awards in the Climate Response of the Year category.

There is recognition within the council of the challenges it faces, for example retrofitting heritage buildings and projects at other assets such as the sports facilities at Stanley Park, and the 'green' agenda may not reflect the priorities of all residents of Chippenham. The council may wish to consider the opportunity cost impact of focussing resources on carbon neutrality versus achieving other priorities as set out in the CSP.

Examples to evidence actions to achieve priorities – 'to maintain and create opportunities to enhance our green spaces and provide a clean and safe environment' and the priority to 'provide and develop facilities and services that are accessible, inclusive and promote health and wellbeing', include keeping the High Street attractive, well-kept and safe, as evidenced by the attainment of the Purple Flag status and the provision of high quality sports facilities and public open spaces for example Stanley Park Sports Ground Football facilities, John Coles Park, Donkey Field and Monkton Park.

The council also runs cultural activities such as town events and Chippenham Museum, which has a vibrant range of activities, active volunteers and celebrates the towns history and it delivers against the Council's objectives to provide services and facilities that promote Chippenham as an attractive and vibrant market town celebrating heritage and culture. Its recent refurbishment and the introduction of a new gallery wing has further improved the facilities and layout of the museum.

5.1.1 Performance

CTC had a CPC in 2019 and was the first local council to do so. The report referenced a number of recommendations, which were in summary:

- Celebrate the significant improvements made
- Utilise your strategic financial capacity to establish a strong financial planning framework
- Ground future ambitions by creating an effective workforce and align with your change programme
- Ensure effective, timely and inclusive engagement with key stakeholders and that effective two way communication lies at the heart of everything you do.

The council was the first council to pilot the LGA/NALC CPC in 2019. Since 2019 the CPC framework has been strengthened, the overall rigour and robustness of the process has increased. The council has continued its commitment to its improvement journey as evidenced by inviting a second CPC.

A strong financial planning and financial management framework is in evidence. The corporate management team is now changing with the recent restructure, in readiness for the ambitions of the new council from 2025. Engagement with key stakeholders, internal and external, continues to be a recommendation in this second CPC.

Moving to the present day, CTC has a CSP that sets out the six key priorities for the council for 2022 – 2026. Updates on progress against the priorities are presented to Strategy and Resources Committee twice a year so that councillors are able to monitor progress against achievement of the actions.

As well as monitoring delivery of actions to achieve corporate priorities, CTC has recently introduced Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for service areas. Again, this provides an opportunity for senior management and councillors to monitor service delivery and activity of the council. The first KPI report was presented to Strategy and Resources Committee at its meeting on 4 December 2024. The introduction of KPIs is further evidence of the council's commitment to improvement.

The report presented was text based and this is understandable as it was the first report. Once further reports are presented, future data will show trends and direction of travel. The peer team recommend that the council consider how best to present that information in a visual format that is easily understood, for example, using a RAG rating table. In addition, as monitoring and reporting of KPIs develops, the council may wish to adapt or change the specific indicators to better evidence outcomes of its actions against the priorities of the council and to ensure understanding of how performance management can be used to inform improvement across the organisation. The right KPIs can also support decision making on most effective use of resources which is particularly important with a limited budget.

As the council develops its performance management framework, it should consider the frequency of reporting, how it will take mitigating action when performance is off target and equally, how it will learn from experience when performance is on target.

5.2 Organisational and place leadership

CTC should be confident in its role and in what it achieves for Chippenham. In the view of the peer team, it is doing a great job for the town and external stakeholders that the peer team met with spoke positively about the council. CTC is described by some partners as impressive, approachable, effective and honest with a great sense of community spirit.

The council has developed a corporate brand and presents well as a professional organisation. However, other partners, whilst positive about the work of the council, felt that the corporate image that the council projects may be a barrier to engagement with some sections of the community. As a result, the council may be missing opportunities for collaboration which could provide additional capacity to support activities.

A new communication and engagement strategy could usefully consider how different approaches and styles might help to better engage grass roots and community organisations.

Whilst the council understands climate implications and is embedding that understanding across the organisation, it needs to replicate such activity for equality issues. For example, reports to council include consideration of climate implications but do not include equality impact assessments.

The council has worked hard and invested to create its sports facilities at Stanley Park, and this is one of the areas where data is used to ensure the facilities and services are accessible and inclusive. However, the peer team noted that a recent presentation on the results of the December 2024 staff survey did not provide a breakdown of findings by protected characteristics. This means that the council does not know the extent to which staff opinions about the council might differ depending on categories such as age, disability, sex and/or race.

Better collection and use of EDI data on communities and staff would help the council to identify opportunities across all assets and facilities to help it meet the Equality Act requirements. Taking action to collect data and better understanding of the demographics of more marginalised areas of the community would address concerns raised by some stakeholders that some parts of the community did not receive the same attention as more high profile areas.

CTC communicates actively on social media and many partners referenced positive examples of communication and engagement that supported effective partnership working. Other partners reflected that a joined-up approach to communications may be helpful to avoid duplication and to ensure partner media content is up to date and messaging is aligned. Partners are ready and willing to work with the council and could potentially provide additional capacity to support the council's delivery of priorities. The council undertaking a co-ordination role would help to facilitate this cross organisational approach, and consideration of the place of councillors in a communication and engagement strategy should be included to support communication activity.

The council has recently undergone a restructure of officers at a senior level and invested in a new corporate management team (CMT) which has only been in place since December 2024. This new senior officer structure will provide greater capacity and diversity of views at a strategic level. The chief executive demonstrated a passion both for the place and the organisation which was echoed by the new CMT.

Whilst senior managers are clear on the drivers for the restructure, it came as a surprise to some of the officers who don't have clarity on the benefits to the council. Further communication to teams on how the new CMT is supporting service areas to continue to provide and improve service delivery will help with overall understanding throughout the organisation.

5.3 Governance and culture

Councillors and officers generally have a positive working relationship and there is clarity of roles between the two. The chief executive and leader clearly worked well together. The corporate management team meet with the leaders of the political

groups (and Independent group) monthly.

Councillors expressed pride in the work of the council's staff and a desire to be involved in supporting events that the council organises for the benefit of the community. This will help councillors to demonstrate their local leadership role and will also help to understand the demographic profile as they engage with different areas of the community.

Whilst the CMT is new, the team are all existing members of staff and there is no reason to doubt that they have a respectful working relationship.

The Standing Orders of the council are currently being reviewed ahead of the May elections. This review will be an opportunity for all councillor's views to be considered so that there is collective understanding and ownership of the Standing Orders and the rules and regulations therein.

The council will have elections in May 2025. The timing of these elections, along with the introduction of the new CMT, the review of the Standing Orders and development of a new CSP and MTFP present a rare opportunity for the council to align the governance and culture of the organisation. The peer team recommend that the council take this opportunity and create a governance and culture framework that will support the council in the years to come.

Now that the new CMT is in place, and there is an opportunity to reflect on the internal culture of the organisation, the council should consider working with staff teams to embed positive values and behaviours. The council values of working together, embracing change and taking responsibility are not widely known or embedded. With a refresh of the culture of the organisation, there is an opportunity to revisit the values with staff, many of whom described their own values in conversation with the peer team such as caring for the town and taking pride in their work.

The recent restructure and changing work patterns since Covid present opportunities for the improvement of communication across the organisation. For example, perhaps the members of CMT could take turns in updating on the work of their services areas, perhaps opportunities for two way communication sessions, up as

well as down the organisation could be considered.

5.4 Financial planning and management

CTC approved the council 's budget and precept for 2025/26 at its council meeting on 8 January 2025.

The budget papers confirm that the council continues to maintain a general reserve of 25% of its annual precept, as recommended by the Society of Local Council Clerks and NALC and in line with the council's financial regulations. This ensures the council is able to respond to unexpected items of expenditure.

The Responsible Financial Officer maintains a medium term financial plan (MTFP) for the revenue budget. A MTFP for the capital budget until 2028/29 was included as part of the budget report presented on 8 January 2025.

Following the election, a new MTFP will be developed to align with the new CSP. It is important that the two documents align so that the priorities within the new CSP are resourced and this will ensure that councillors are able to make informed decisions on priority spending within a limited resource envelope.

The peer team recommend that the RFO continues to keep current and future year forecasts of income and expenditure under robust review and that this data should be reported regularly to councillors in a format that is easily and widely understood. This will enable councillors to make decisions on revenue and capital spend with the most up to date information. For example, the Carbon Net Zero Working Party is expected to make recommendations on options to 'green' the council's assets and these will come at a cost. Councillors must have up to date and detailed information available when they make decisions on which options to take forward.

The council has a diverse range of investments and agreed at its meeting on 27 March 2024 to adopt a new Investment Strategy. The new strategy has been developed in partnership with the council's treasury advisors who will advise on how to ensure the most effective return on investments. This is a positive and progressive step and will support income generation for the council.

The council has a risk register in place. Regular monitoring by the Corporate

Management Team and by councillors will support organisation wide understanding of how the council identifies and manages potential risks and mitigations that CTC has put in place to make sure the council continues to operate.

CTC has both an internal and external auditor. The internal auditor in their most recent report reminded the council of the need to periodically review Standing Orders and Financial Regulations. A Working Party has now been set up to do this. When the Working Party reports its findings back to council it will be an opportunity for all councillors to raise any issues or concerns regarding processes governed by Standing Orders and in doing so will support collective ownership of the revised Standing Orders once approved.

The external auditor has confirmed no matters giving cause for concern at CTC.

5.5 Capacity for improvement

CTC is fortunate to have the benefit of a number of volunteers without whom it would not be able to deliver the services that it does. The peer team met some of the volunteers from the museum and the CCTV service and they demonstrated a passion for the work that they do. They are a valuable resource that support the council and provide increased capacity for service delivery, enabling the council to achieve as much as it does in specific areas, for example, the Purple Flag Award.

The recent restructure of the corporate management team (CMT) has strengthened capacity and added diversity at a strategic level of the organisation. The added capacity could be used to develop networks and relationships with external stakeholders such as community groups and the voluntary sector and in doing so would mitigate the risk of overreliance on the chief executive. There is also the potential to expand capacity to deliver services with clearly defined partnership working.

Following the election, work will begin on a new CSP. As councillors develop their priorities for the next four years, this could usefully coincide with an internal focus for officers on the culture and values of the organisation. This work can then drive reviews of the wider HR policy framework including training and development, staff wellbeing and recruitment and retention.

The council ensures that health and safety and other critical training is provided to staff. Whilst the council has a training budget, the peer team found that opportunities for training and development were not consistent across the organisation.

There were also differing views expressed on the appraisal process. A review of the appraisal process to ensure that it is congruent with the internal culture of the organisation and effective across the organisation will support a consistent approach to the current offer of training and development opportunities being made available to staff.

6. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. Following publication of CPC report you need to produce and publish an Action Plan within 5 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 Chippenham Town Council will be November 2025.

In the meantime, Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for the South West, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association paul.clarke@local.gov.uk. In addition, NALC is able to discuss any further support that you may require by emailing anders.hanson@nalc.gov.uk.