



A mirror to success

The peer review process shows that Chippenham Town Council should be confident about what it achieves for the local community, says **Mark Smith**

In January 2025, Chippenham Town Council (CTC) hosted an independent peer review corporate peer challenge, delivered by the Local Government Association (LGA).

CTC was the first ever local authority to take part in a CPC in 2019 after wide-ranging discussions between the LGA, the National Association of Local Councils, Chippenham and myself in 2018-19.

Since then, several of the larger town councils have taken up the offer of a corporate peer challenge.

As a clear indication of our desire for continuous improvement, the council was also the first to go through the process for a second time. We had evolved and changed over the last five years and wanted an external sense check of how we were performing. It was excellent to have that mirror of self-reflection held up to point out some areas where we could further improve.

The LGA was extremely helpful in

supporting us to mobilise this second corporate peer challenge. I first raised the matter in May 2024 and on the 28 January 2025 the peer challenge team arrived on site.

The challenge offered an opportunity for us to consider our position and evaluate on a strategic level the positive impact everyone has in driving the council forward

The team comprised a chief executive, a unitary/town councillor, a place expert and an officer from the LGA.

A local government finance expert had already scrutinised the council's finances prior to the team's arrival. They spent three

days onsite, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information and views from more than 15 separate focus group meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Talked to almost 50 people including a range of council staff, councillors and external stakeholders.

While the numbers of peers on the team and the number of focus group meetings and people talked to may seem low to colleagues in principal councils, the team had a far greater opportunity to perform a deep dive into specific areas.

The corporate peer challenge, in common with the process in the principal council sector, focused on five core themes:

- Local priorities and outcomes
- Organisational and place leadership
- Governance and culture
- Financial planning and management
- Does the council have a grip on its current financial position?

We received some amazingly positive feedback from the process, which included: 'Chippenham Town Council should be confident in what it achieves for Chippenham.'

'In the view of an independent peer team, it is doing a great job for the town. The external stakeholders 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 the staff the peer team spoke to were passionate about what they do and clearly care about the town of Chippenham.'

The corporate peer challenge report was an excellent outcome for the town council and is evidence of the fantastic work it achieves in its commitment in delivering services for the town. It has left us with much to reflect on and celebrate.

I was pleased to see the report noted how well we work with our partners and stakeholders. It is also reassuring that the report acknowledges the council's finances are well managed.

We, of course, welcome the observations on improvements which can be made and have already produced an action plan that will identify how these will be accomplished. This was agreed by the council's strategy and resources committee in April.

Would we do it again? Absolutely. I am a firm believer in sector-led improvement and a big fan of the LGA's corporate peer challenge process. But it takes courage, self-awareness and openness to allow outsiders to come into your organisation, hold up a mirror and reflect back what they see.

I also believe the experience was of benefit to the wider team. The challenge offered an opportunity for us to consider our position within the structure of the town council and evaluate on a strategic level the positive impact everyone has in driving the council forward in its delivery of services for the local community.

Taking a moment to reflect on how and why we work in the way we do enables the team to embrace improvements.

I would like to think we are a learning organisation and we certainly embrace external challenge and continual improvement.

I can understand why some town councils would be nervous of going through this exercise but think the process should be mandatory for all large town councils, perhaps those with a budget of more than £5m.

If we are to believe the aspirations of the English Devolution White Paper and the planned demise of district and borough councils by 2027, the role of large town councils such as Chippenham will be even more prominent and that is another reason for them to go through an external challenge process such as a corporate peer challenge. ▀

Mark Smith is chief executive of Chippenham Town Council