

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

North West Leicestershire District
Council

26th – 28th June 2024

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge



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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 on site at North West Leicestershire 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

North West Leicestershire District Council (NWLDC) is in the centre of England, at the heart of various key centres of economic development. It has enjoyed a strong period of growth, maximising the benefits of the business rates locally. Partly as a result of this growth, and because of the political stability, it did not raise council tax for 15 years until an increase was implemented in 2024/25.

There is a renewed energy in the council after the peer challenge in 2019. There is a new Chief Executive with a refreshed and partly new group of senior officers, new headquarters, a new approach to communications. There is a positive feel in the

council offices, and staff reported it was a good place to work.

The 2023 election left no party in overall control. This was the first time in sixteen years that the council was not a Conservative majority administration. The council is now led by an Alliance of Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Independent councillors, but has retained the same Leader as under the previous Conservative administrations, providing some stability at a time of flux. The administration is working well together, although there have been some challenges between officers and councillors getting used to their new roles and relationships. The council has demonstrated a willingness to address this. Councillors described the Alliance to the peer team as “a loose affiliation of political groups”, whilst at the same time clearly working well together. This can be disconcerting to officers and to partners when the Alliance uses language that sound like the administration is fragile, even though they are confident that it is stable. The peer team suggest that the Alliance use language that demonstrates the stability of the administration.

Several partners (public and private) told the peer team that they would like to work closer with the council and see more councillors active in the regional arena. NWLDC is confident that it has a good relationship with district councils in the county as well as Leicestershire County Council as well as a range of other partners. Some work may be needed to address perceptions externally to ensure that others view the council’s partnership commitments the way NWLDC would like them to.

There are no major current risks on financial sustainability, with good levels of income but, like many councils, there is significant delay on statutory financial reports. It is important to ensure a good transition to the new auditor and the council reported that onboarding discussions have already taken place. Corporate and Service Risk Registers are in place, however, there were some fundamental risks that the team expected to see which weren’t on the Corporate Risk Register for example, the East Midlands Freeport delivery. It is important that councillors understand corporate risks and are providing challenge to ensure that Officers are taking mitigating actions where needed. The risk register is considered at every Audit and Governance meeting to provide councillors with the information they need.

The council could make more of its use of its Annual Governance Statement each

year to provide a narrative to the council's priorities and actions. This would help to link strategic issues together, eg risk management and governance arrangements.

The Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) is currently high-level and does not allow for scenario planning for different future possibilities. Some flexibility will need to be built in. The ambitions for reaching zero carbon need to be built into the MTFP. At the time of the review, this was being done but had not been completed.

3. Key Recommendations

There are several observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

3.1 Recommendation 1: Build relations between councillors, and between councillors and officers through a programme of development workshops to build trust and openness

The Alliance could be strengthened through top team development to enable councillors in the Cabinet to better step up to their role and provide a collegiate front for the council. Building on the developing relationships between the political leadership and the Corporate Leadership Team, there could be further development sessions helping to introduce more honest conversations about ways of working, so that councillors and officers all recognise and accept their specific role in the council moving forwards.

3.2 Recommendation 2: Use the Risk Register and the Annual Governance Statement to raise situational awareness and future concerns

These documents could be better used to manage the council's risk appetite. Review the approach to both and consider the sector's best practice to make both documents work for you, as well as a strategic communications tool.

3.3 Recommendation 3: Ensure that financial transactions and contracts are under consistent and robust review

This includes fees, charges, the Leisure contract and commercial property investments. Regular robust reporting at Corporate Scrutiny of all major financial

transactions, or actions that will have an impact on finance (such as the Transformation Programme and the Finance Improvement Programme) will help ensure that councillors are fully abreast of financial, commercial and savings matters when looking to establish corporate strategies. The council uses PowerBI as a benchmarking tool, but the peer team was not shown how this was being used to inform strategic and operational planning.

3.4 Recommendation 4: Establish a thorough two-way Corporate Communications Engagement Plan

The Chief Executive communicates frequently and regularly internally, and this is appreciated by staff. However, staff reported that this is mostly information giving, rather than encouraging two-way engagement. The recent staff roadshows provided valuable feedback on how to improve this and the council has taken this on board. The skilled staff in the Communications Team can advise and lead on how to ensure that internal communications are engaging and empowering. Explore how two-way engagement with internal and external stakeholders can maximise benefits for residents and businesses.

3.5 Recommendation 5: Enhance the newly adopted Transformation Plan with a clear set of financial outcomes, deliverable dates, benefits, third party dependencies and risks across all programme areas

Enhance the recently agreed high level transformation plan to ensure that aims, deliverables and expected outcomes are agreed between Cabinet and senior officers, with appropriate levels of flexibility, as soon as possible. Involve communications professionals from the start of the process to help identify how staff can be genuinely engaged with the process, and potential or perceived impacts can be communicated.

3.6 Recommendation 6: Conduct a wholesale process mapping and review of systems in Housing Repairs

The peer team recommends a wholesale process mapping and review of systems and processes as part of the Transformation agenda. Inefficient processes are reported to be hampering the council's determination to clear the backlog of repairs.

The Council has begun to address the issues in Housing, particularly through Scrutiny and Cabinet. It has established a Housing Improvement Board which has a plan for action. The Housing Regulator will look at repairs and tenant satisfaction, so it is imperative that the cultural issues within the service are tackled, alongside setting up clear, efficient systems and processes as a matter of urgency as soon as possible after the mapping exercise.

3.7 Recommendation 7: Engage more proactively in partnership working in all settings, ensuring the maximum benefit for the district's businesses and residents

NWLDC is in a strong position to lead some of the partnership working, such as the network of councils directly affected by the Freeport. This involves building relationships with other councils involved, but also other partners. This will help to ensure that the council influences and directs the economic development in the district. Maximise the opportunities afforded by the different large-scale developments to enable the council to deliver what it wants for its residents.

4. Summary of peer challenge approach

4.1 The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced councillors and officer peers. The peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected by the LGA for their relevant expertise. The team was:

- Councillor Abi Brown OBE, former leader, Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- Councillor Tony Dale, Cotswold District Council
- Larissa Reed, Chief Executive, Swale Borough Council
- Paul Bellotti, Executive Director, East Riding Council
- Adam Broome, LGA Finance Associate
- Katie Goodger - Regional Adviser, LGA
- Becca Singh - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

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 repairs, regeneration and economic growth. This feedback has been included in the main five themes.

4.3 The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals and nor is it an inspection. 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 NWLDC 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 on site at NWLDC, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than forty meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke and listened to around 110 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders.
- Collectively spent nearly 300 hours working on the peer challenge. This is the equivalent of one consultant spending nearly nine weeks in the council full time.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and councillors.

5. Feedback

5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

Conditions for growth are outstanding in North West Leicestershire, which is one of the fastest growing districts in the country. The peer team saw great progress on the development of the principal town of Coalville, and a district-wide regeneration plan is in the final stages of its development, reflecting the diverse towns and villages across the area. Some voices from local communities are concerned about the understandable strong focus on regenerating Coalville; consultation on the new strategy should ensure that residents and businesses clearly understand the council's district-wide approach. There was strong engagement with residents on the Waste Services Review. This is a good learning opportunity to help improve engagement on other issues and reviews.

The council has been part of a national pilot on design coding and is developing a new local design code. The team heard good feedback on this work.

The council has an ambitious target for an increase in 1,000 new affordable homes by 2026. This depends on ongoing partnership working, as they will need to be delivered by a variety of partners, including Registered Providers, Section 106 money and any direct building work the council may be able to do. NWLDC faces substantial challenges with reduced supply from planning gain due to viability and reduced take up by registered providers. Council resourcing issues have also slowed the roll-out of the delivery of new affordable Council homes. This is critical and important work to provide decent affordable homes for families, children and older residents on the Council's waiting list to secure their future well-being.

The council has a good record on relationships with local businesses, prioritising start-up businesses and a growing apprenticeship programme. Currently the council has ten apprentices in post, plus four employees undertaking apprenticeship-funded training. It is also benefiting from the LGA's New Graduate Development Programme

with a graduate recruited and due to commence in September 2024. The council engages with several training providers to support a range of skills development amongst local communities.

The new leisure centre and improvements to the Ashby Leisure Centre have been well-received by residents and are highly valued. However, given the long-term nature of the leisure contract it will be important to ensure that established close working relations include robust reporting arrangements to help early identification of any risks.

Relationships with Parish and town councils are mixed. Feedback is very good for the staff in the Community Focus team whose role it is to liaise with Parish Councils, but the parish councils would feel more included in discussions if senior staff and councillors attended meetings when there is a particularly contentious issue, or something which requires more technical understanding.

There is an ambitious zero carbon policy, with a roadmap to achieve by 2030. At the time of the review, there was no clear link to the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP). This is in development to ensure a clearer, direct link to the finances of the council. The LGA's [sustainability hub](#) includes a range of resources to help the council measure, monitor and reduce emissions, as well an opportunity to network and share experiences with other councils. The LGA's [Councillor Workbook on the local pathway to net zero](#) could assist councillors in developing their skills further to help the authority progress this agenda.

There is scope for better and more widespread understanding of the needs of different communities in the district. At the last census, 4.1% of the population are from a black or minority ethnic background, and 7.9% described themselves as non-white UK. 20% of the population is over 65 years of age and 19.9% are under 18.

According to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, NWLDC is ranked 214 out of 326 authorities in England, with 1 being the most deprived. At the time of the peer challenge, Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) issues were not fully embedded in strategies, such as economic growth and waste management, nor were those issues included in action planning for service delivery. A new EDI Strategy is due to be

presented to councillors later this year. The recent waste review, with considerable resident responses, were analysed by gender, ethnicity and a range of other indicators which should assist in action planning for the new service. The new district-wide regeneration framework will need to ensure that EDI, and the needs of different communities, is reflected adequately.

5.1.1 Performance

The Council's performance metrics are good against the benchmarking data from LG Inform (mostly 2022/23 performance data except where stated) although there are several areas where data is missing including spending on health and leisure, housing levels of spend, net budget on economic development (2023/24 data), unemployment levels, and community safety spending. The full [LG Inform report](#) prepared for this CPC is available online.

Council tax collection rates are good, with 97.15% collected compared to 97.9% in the CIPFA group of nearest neighbours. Non-domestic rates collections are also good with 99.1% of business rates collected compared to 96.76% in England and average of 98.13% within the CIPFA group.

There were 17.5 households per thousand households on the housing waiting list, compared to 70.89 nationally, and an average of 38.2 households per thousand in the CIPFA group. 0.47 households per thousand were living in temporary accommodation compared to 4.7 households per thousand nationally, and an average of 1.03 in the CIPFA group. 73 affordable homes were built compared to 125 in the CIPFA comparison group.

Planning Services in 2023 Q4 demonstrated that NWLDC processed 91.4% of planning applications for major developments on time compared to 87.7% in England and 86.2% in the CIPFA group. On non-major developments, the council processed 86.5% of applications compared to 86.8% in England and 85.6% of in the CIPFA group. The new Local Plan has been out to consultation, resulting in around 650 responses. After these have been analysed and considered, the intention was to submit the plan for examination in mid-2025. In response to the new Government's priorities, this timetable has shifted appropriately.

Recycling and waste figures are good compared to the council's CIPFA nearest

neighbour median amounts: 43% of household waste recycled (CIPFA group median 42.9%), residual waste (non-recycled) collected per household was 465.1kg CIPFA group median amount of 469.5kg). No data was available for recycling contamination.

There were 51.4 new businesses registered per 10,000 of the registered population aged 16 and above. This compared to 64.6 per 10,000 nationally and 55.8 per 10,000 in the CIPFA group.

Council Tax, along with fees and charges, has increased for 2024/25 after a long freeze period, with increases planned for future years. The council uses Power BI for benchmarking, which led them to identify the need for reviews of Waste and Parking. However, this was not made available to the Peer Team at the time of the peer challenge. The council could make more of the benchmarking so that residents, businesses and partners understand how NWLDC compares to other similar councils, for example through performance information on its website. The peer team recommends that NWLDC demonstrates its use of benchmarking to identify further opportunities for service efficiencies and financial savings.

Staff reported that there is a new performance management system which is bedding in. Staff the peer team engaged with, reported a lack of understanding how their role fits in with the wider picture, and a sense that councillors are not aware of the pressures that different roles have, particularly at different times of year.

The Council Delivery Plan (CDP) sets out the Alliance's eighteen key objectives. The Leader, Deputy Leader and Cabinet appear well aligned with their priorities. However, these priorities have not been turned into a strategic vision. Most of the 'business as usual' work of the Council consciously does not appear in the CDP. This is set out in Business and Service Plans, which councillors are briefed on at their regular portfolio and shadow portfolio briefings. Councillors could, however, be made more aware of the daily pressures staff face at these briefings. The peer team heard several times from staff that there is a lack of 'golden thread' between high level priorities and the day-to-day business of the council and its services. The peer team heard from councillors that they don't always see progress on their priorities and staff reported not being able to see what they are aiming for, nor how their own

work fits in. All staff have access to an individual development review, where this can be explored in more depth. The peer team recommend reinforcing the links between the Council Delivery Plan, the Business and Service Plans, and individual Development Reviews, and ensure that the CDP, and associated business and service plans, continue to reflect the priorities for residents and businesses.

5.1.2 Housing Repairs

The council's concerns about Housing Repairs were a focus for this peer challenge, and the peers took time to consider this area carefully. It was not always clear whilst the team was on site what was known about, and what was already planned. This was because the Director with responsibility for Housing was on leave during the onsite work, and although there was a very positive and useful Teams meeting with the housing lead on the peer team before they were on leave, this did not allow for the usual further discussions at a senior level as evidence was collated.

The feedback below is to encourage NWLDC to continue along its path, and to be aware of the long-term nature of some of the changes it wants to make. The team also wants to ensure that councillors are aware of the depths of the challenges, and how much this may take officers away from some of the council's other priorities. In addition, the peer team would like to strongly encourage NWLDC to work with others, including the LGA's transformation programme, and other councils that have been in similar situations, to enable them to advance quickly on its improvement journey.

It is important to note that the peers were impressed with the dedication of Housing staff, who are passionate about the role of housing services but are very concerned about the quality and the impact of the housing repairs service.

NWLDC is aware of the need to improve the service, and has set up a Housing Improvement Plan, supported by a Board of councillors, to oversee the recovery of the service. New managers are in place, and a service restructure is beginning to take shape. The backlog of repairs is significant, and the council has appointed an external contractor specifically to clear this. The peer team agreed that this was a

good way forward.

Staffing, systems, processes and culture in the service mean that repairs are not adequately recorded or managed, and this leads to errors at all stages. Staff reported that the council cannot currently satisfy itself that the repairs backlog or current planned repairs lists are accurate. Whilst on site, live examples of this inefficiency were provided to the peer team involving separate incidents on the same day. A new team manager role has been created as part of the restructure to address this issue specifically. The technology that is already available is not being maximised, and staff reported little transactional capability on the tenant portal.

Furthermore, there is a disconnect between those taking repairs calls, and operatives carrying out those repairs. The repairs are reported to be not always allocated in a way which maximises the skills and time of the operatives, which can lead to inefficiencies and delays. The peer team heard that poor behaviours were being reported but changes in behaviour were not always apparent or leading to improved efficiency. At the time of the review, there were also vacancies across two management tiers, leading to understandable reduced management support for improvement to the culture of the service.

The peer team recommends a wholesale process mapping and review of systems and processes as part of the Transformation agenda to satisfy the council that the issues will not recur. Since the review, the council reported that this is in place. When this exercise is completed, and relevant changes implemented, this should lead to a marked improvement in efficiency and productivity.

Twelve tenant satisfaction measures are much lower than the council would want to hear from its tenants, for example, 36% of tenants are dissatisfied with the repairs service. This is an area that the Housing Regulator will explore. The Council is working to address this; however, no comparator data was available to compare the Council with at the time of the review.

Culture change takes time, and usually meets with resistance before it embeds in any organisation. The peer team encourages NWLDC to continue apace with its plans for Housing Repairs but to be patient about how long it might take for plans to

be fully realised.

5.1.3 Economic Growth

This was one of the focus areas for the council, and the peer team spent considerable time on this area. The peer team feel that the council is taking advantage of its good fortune being centrally located and has excellent road transport links to the rest of the country. There are several key development zones within the district and the council is in the enviable position of having one of the highest economic growth rates in the country.

These circumstances are beneficial to the council and its residents, partly with the income from Business Rates retention, but also because of the employment opportunities this provides for the residents of the district. Local firms in supply chains could benefit from the economic development that others may be driving which brings positive outcomes from NWLDC residents and businesses. The peer team visited one of the sites being developed, talked with several different partners and read documents provided to the team by the council.

There are misconceptions locally, including within the councillor cohort about the logistics sector. Such developments were referred to, several times during the peer challenge by different councillors, as “just big sheds” and being all low grade and low paid jobs “not what we want”. However, the logistics sector has a wide variety of jobs including highly technical and highly skilled. There are roles for local residents with varying levels of education and experience. The council has a role in addressing these myths and ensuring residents see the opportunities they could have.

The council is developing a new Local Plan. The peer team highly recommends that the council maximises every opportunity for networking to continue to build relationships across relevant sectors, and subsequently direct development in the way that it wants. Otherwise, the council risks the situation where developments and growth happen ‘to’ the district, rather than ‘with’ the district. The council needs to be at the heart of influencing and leading the growth that it wants to see. The peer team saw and heard several strong examples of where NWLDC had outlined its expectation of new developments to a very high standard, which had subsequently been delivered. NWLDC shouldn’t underestimate its ability to influence appropriate

development.

The East Midlands Freeport is an important part of the economic growth picture for the district. The council has been involved in the development of the Freeport company, with a councillor a regular and active attender of board meetings, as well as legal and planning work. The councillor representing NWLDC on the board was not available to talk to the peer team, so feedback from the team is therefore only able to report on what it heard, saw and read whilst on site and in background reading.

The LGA and the peer team recognise that some of the issues that arise for the development that goes alongside the Freeport are challenging and can be political contentious and very sensitive for different communities. Some decisions may be outside the reach of the District Council and that they may be hard to reconcile with local priorities. Communication is key to how decisions are felt by the council, local residents and businesses. The peer team recommends working more closely with the Freeport team in the [Planning Advisory Service \(PAS\)](#) to help navigate those challenging areas sensitively.

Every freeport site is different, but there is value in engaging with different councils working with different freeports, sharing challenges and successes with this new way of working. This should help ensure that locally, NWLDC leads some developments, and influences others as much as possible to come out with the best options for its residents and businesses. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself, providing a great opportunity to create more jobs, drive regeneration and improve the skills and aspirations for local residents complementing the regeneration and other economic work that the council is doing. It is worth noting, however, that the impact of the Freeport is a high corporate and economic risk, and the peer team would expect that it is included on the Corporate Risk Register. The peer team recommends that NWLDC continues to engage actively and positively with the Freeport. Its role as Community leader is not to be underestimated when dispelling myths and addressing resident concerns.

At the time of the peer challenge, the District-wide regeneration plan was in development and was not available to the peer team. The team suggests that

external communications around all the various economic development projects and sites, regardless of which organisation is leading it, could be brought together to maximise the benefits of all the work that the council is doing, and the opportunities all the developments bring to the residents and businesses in the district. This includes the Coalville regeneration programme, the District-wide regeneration programme, and the overall Economic Growth Strategy (including the work with the Freeport where appropriate).

5.2 Organisational and place leadership

The Chief Executive and Leader are both well respected by partners who spoke highly of NWLDC. However, there are examples where improved partnership working could boost the reputation of the council, and influence decisions taken at a regional and sub-regional level to maximise the benefits to the residents and businesses in the district. Relationships are good with the County Council on one level, but there are reports that partners within the district would appreciate support from NWLDC in working with the County.

The peer team recognises that the work that the council has done to date has been supporting setting up the East Midlands Freeport (EMF). Members took decisions to enable the council to be part of the EMF company once formed and the council's engagement will move to the next phase of work. The peer team recognises the sensitivities around the EMF and recommend that NWLDC works with PAS to help the balance of its various roles as Planning Authority, Interested Party, and Community Leader.

Relations between councillors and officers are broadly good. However, there are examples where increased two-way trust would lead to a more productive relationship, and subsequently better service delivery. The peer team recommends that the council considered how senior councillors and senior officers work together to demonstrate local leadership from a united council. Further work could be considered on developing increased understanding by councillors of how strategic decisions relate to 'business as usual'. The council could also identify opportunities for councillors to have a higher profile both internally and externally, with the support of senior officers, without becoming operational managers. The LGA can help with

relevant development workshops.

The nuances of the current political arrangements are well managed but a longer-term view of this is needed. Full Council meetings can feel like an unknown quantity, and officers must prepare for multiple scenarios before every meeting. This increases the workload and reduces efficiency. The peer team recommends that all councillors recognise the impact this has on how effectively staff can work and consider ways to minimise this effect.

Positive advocacy of cross-regional working by Councillors would strengthen the council's reputation and voice as a significant place in the region. It would strengthen the district's visibility and increase the impact and influence with partners and inward investment (for example EMF). NWLDC also has some strong examples it could use to raise its own profile within the region and indeed the sector, whether in regeneration or adapting to a changing political landscape.

Having now worked together for just over a year, there is also the opportunity for leading councillors to reflect on how they view a longer-term arrangement, to the next election. The peer team recommends that councillors consider what has worked well so far, and what could be improved in both their political relationships, and with senior officers.

5.3 Governance and culture

The Leader has provided stability in an environment of 'No Overall Control'. However, the political change is beginning to be felt by officers. Honest, strategic conversations are needed between the Cabinet and senior officers, and with the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) to ensure that the focus is on the long-term future for the council.

The Risk Register is a live document demonstrating how risks are mitigated. Councillors are aware of its importance and the consequence of different corporate risks. The East Midlands Freeport did not appear on the Corporate Risk Register, despite it having a significant impact on future economic, employment and development prospects. The Annual Governance Statement (AGS) provides an opportunity to demonstrate Councillors' oversight and management of risk.

The emerging People Strategy needs to reflect and address the high levels of staff turnover in key areas, particularly where there are critical vacancies, for example in Housing. The council should continue to look at what it can do differently to help recruit in these areas. NWLDC is part of an East Midlands Councils group focusing on recruitment and retention, which has enabled shared learning and ideas. It could also work with neighbouring authorities to explore partnership recruitment possibilities. The council is also participating in Impact – The Local Government Graduate Development Programme and has a graduate starting in September 2024.

The Transformation programme was in its infancy at the time of the Peer Challenge. Councillors backed the programme at a high level with a budget of £500,000, but key dates and goals will need to be agreed to ensure the programme's success. A clear programme of activities, owners, milestones, benefits realisation, dependent parties and councillor involvement would help add focus to delivery.

This is an opportunity to comprehensively oversee what the council does, and what it wants to do, and review how to deliver its aims. The LGA's Transformation Programme can help NWLDC with specific elements or overall with its transformation agenda through resources and information on its [Transformation Hub](#). Support is provided to councillors as well as officers to enable them to engage fully with the transformation process and ensure that the council is driving forward in the same direction. The peer team encourages NWLDC to engage with this support, most of which is available free of charge.

Since the peer challenge, the council reports that things have moved on with the Transformation Programme. Key staff posts have been advertised, and concrete plans have been developed. A Communications Plan has now been developed, alongside the Transformation Programme. The Communications Team has already been identified as needing an uplift in resources to ensure the extra demands needed by the Transformation Programme. Plans are owned by the Cabinet who monitor performance regularly and Scrutiny is also involved. The peer challenge took place too early in the process for this work to have started, and the peer team did not hear about this work. It is good to see progress is being made.

Current regular internal communications tend to be in a broadcast style. Staff

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18 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ www.local.gov.uk Telephone 020 7664 3000 Email info@local.gov.uk

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

roadshows were held to capture ideas from staff to help shape the Transformation Programme, but the council could maximise the skills and knowledge of the skilled staff in the Communications Team more, who can advise how to ensure that staff can be actively engaged, using multiple channels of empowering two-way engagement. The Internal Comms plan was not available at the time of the Peer Challenge, and the Transformation Communications Plan was being developed. Enabling the Communications team to lead more on internal comms with additional capacity will support the Transformation work. The peer team recommend that NWLDC continues its engagement with LGA Communications, more information available: [Comms Hub – communications support | Local Government Association](#)

5.4 Financial planning and management

The last audited accounts for the council were 2020/21, signed off unqualified in April 2023. There were no identified risks of significant weakness in relation to Financial Sustainability, Governance, or improving economy efficiency and effectiveness. Risks of significant weakness were identified for Governance linked to statutory financial reporting, because of inaccurate property records and insufficient capacity in the Finance Team. However, this is some time in the past, and officers have been working with external auditors since that time to address this.

NWLDC will be changing external auditors for the audit of 2023/24 Statement of Accounts onwards. It will be important that the council manages well the production of remaining outstanding financial statements and the transition from current to new external auditors. The council has recognised that need, and reports that engagement with the new auditors is progressing well.

The council is forecasting a General Fund revenue overspend for 2023/34 of £333,000. In-year pressures for 2023/24 have been largely offset by additional investment income and savings on financing costs due to slippage on the Capital programme. The council has set a balanced budget for 2024/25 with savings of £1.7m in place but it was not completely clear at the time of the peer challenge what the methodology was for identifying, delivering and capturing savings for 2024/25 onwards. It will be important to robustly manage delivery of these savings. The council has taken steps to reduce the forecast scale of deficit for 2028/29 from circa

£4m to £1.9m.

The council receives significant funding from the Business Rates Retention scheme. The new UK government may review this scheme and NWLDC will need to consider as a potential risk, what effect this might have on its local forecasting. Timescales on reviewing the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) need to be clear, along with managing and delivering outcomes. The council recognises that this is something it needs to keep abreast of.

The Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) is high-level. It could be affected by the new UK government's plans. The MTFP does not yet capture costs associated with the council's plans to be carbon neutral by 2030. Since the peer challenge, the council has reported that this is being done. The peer team recommends scenario planning, considering how to reflect its future pressures, and looking at a variety of outcomes, including potential changes to business rates income and how these might affect the scale of savings plans required.

The Council is currently developing a Finance Improvement Plan to clearly capture all planned improvements underway in the Finance Service, Systems and Processes and to set clear delivery objectives and timescales. The peer team recommends that it will be important to keep under robust review and to report management, performance and value of Commercial Property Investments.

5.5 Capacity for improvement

Staff are motivated and enthusiastic about delivering good work. They are keen to support the new political administration in achieving its aims. There is some very good work being done around staff welfare, including informal social activities as well as formal support. However, not all activities are accessible to all staff, particularly if they are not based in the Whitwick Business Centre. NWLDC recognises this risk, and a health and wellbeing plan has recently been developed to address this.

Staff are understandably nervous about the future, and what the Transformation agenda may hold for them, but new senior staff, including a new Chief Executive, have helped to enthuse officers and renew their commitment to the district.

The work that NWLDC did with the LGA to develop a council narrative is being

embedded across the council. It has been used in full in the Council Delivery Plan, words and phrases are used in the Communications Strategy and is being used in recruitment and in customer contacts.

NWLDC has gained Investors In People at Silver which is an excellent achievement and the trajectory to Gold by 2025 is sound and progressive. However, the peer team heard that a high level of sickness absence in public facing services such as Waste and Housing is having a detrimental effect on managing change in those areas, and the team did not see a plan to address this, although it was identified in the Transformation Plan.


Support is provided by Human Resources (HR) to raise awareness of the impacts of making assumptions and unconscious bias, neurodiversity, and value of Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) on the internal leadership programme. However, it is not clear if the impact of this support has been evaluated to demonstrate if this is making a difference.

In enhancing both customer contact and communications the peer team noted exceptional commitment of the officers involved and the clarity of their thinking on the opportunities that exist to improve the web site and their willingness to create new ways of working.

The Customer Contact programme is designed with a clear understanding of the potential benefits and articulation of the resources required to achieve an improvement in Customer Experience. The £33k opportunity needs to be translated into deliverable savings for the Council, more commensurate with the investment levels, with clarity on how reduced officer hours will translate into actual payroll savings or redeployment to vacant roles. There may be external third-party dependencies and unidentified costs in redesigning e-forms for revenues and benefits claims as they are delivered through the shared services organization.

6. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. The LGA will continue to provide on-going



support to the council. 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 Progress Review at North West Leicestershire District Council is due by the end of April 2025.

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

Mark.Edgell@local.gov.uk.