


LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Swale Borough Council

13th – 16th March 2023

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

Swale Borough Council provides district Council services to an area of North Kent, including the Isle of Sheppey, Faversham, Sittingbourne, and surrounding rural villages. Elected members and the workforce have much to be proud of over the past few years, including providing good core service, impressive and well-run shared services arrangements with other Kent authorities, and having a response to the Covid-19 pandemic that showed high levels of adaptability and innovation, and which was praised by partners and residents.

A success of the Council, which they should be rightly proud of and celebrate, is securing £20 million in 2022 of Government Levelling Up Funding (LUF) for the Sheerness Project. The work of officers, members, and partners in crafting a project that met the funding scope, in a limited bidding window, coalescing around this bid as allies for the good of the community on the Isle of Sheppey, is an excellent example of a good working partnership as well as strong political ambition and leadership.

The fund will enable the Council to transform the Sheerness town centre, turning the Beachfields seafront into a community hotspot including a new café, and extending the healthy living centre to include an outdoor gym, soft-play, and adventure golf areas. Funding will also expand the further education college and make space for new offices and studios for local small businesses.

The knowledge within the Council about Swale the place and the challenge for its communities is impressive, with the excitement and passion for the LUF project among members and staff evident to the review team. The resourcing and management of successful LUF bids is a challenge for all those successful councils. Resources will need to be prioritised and allocated in order to deliver the scale of projects.

In recent years, the Council has championed a local offer, with a focus on ward-based activities and priorities, leading to the successful delivery of many local projects. The Council's Corporate Plan runs from 2020 to 2023 with priorities and projects having been refreshed post-pandemic. The Council is embarking upon a process of creating a new Corporate Plan, with the new 2023 administration led by a new Council Leader, around a coalition of 3 parties. It is important that the Corporate Plan is co-created in the Council and with the residents. It is also essential for the effective working of the

Council in the future that this plan is clear, encourages collaboration, and sets a vision and priorities that reflect the current realities in the borough. These include the need to effectively manage legacy projects and define the scope of activity that is possible with the Council's reduced spending power and limited Council reserves. As a result, it is likely there will be fewer opportunities for spend on locally championed projects, as there were in previous years. Through refreshing the Corporate Plan, Swale Borough Council can build a vision for Swale the place and prioritise what needs to be achieved in the next 4 years. This also creates an opportunity to reset the existing relationships between members and officers, as well as members of all political groups, and with partners and residents.

The democratic make-up of the Council is complex, with the Council managing through coalition administrations since 2019. At the time of the review, the Council was a 'rainbow coalition' with an Independent Leader; since the May 2023 local elections, the Council remains in a coalition, however the leadership has moved to the Labour Party. During the previous administration, Swale moved from a cabinet to a committee system, with the new system still embedding at the time of the review.

Members' ability to hold a stable and functioning administration, including setting the 2023/24 budget is a testament to the dedication of the Councillors to overcome differences, seek compromise where they can, and ultimately, work for the overall good of the community. These are strengths that the team recognised and recommend the Council celebrate and harness for the challenges ahead.

At the time of the review, the team identified issues and tensions in the way some members and staff communicate with each other. These will need concerted time and effort to improve. It is imperative that time and resources are invested in building relationships within the coalition as well as between all members across the political groups, encouraging their participation and building their knowledge of the successes and challenges of the Council. Swale Council should seek ways to provide opportunities for officers and members to collaborate more and encourage a culture of trust in officer expertise in operational delivery. Improving relationships between members and officers at all levels will help to support the administration's ability to operate as a coalition, provide effective political leadership and strategic direction.

The Council benefits from recognised and visible leadership from both the Leader and

the Chief Executive. The professionalism and commitment of the workforce, in particular the Directors and Heads of Service, are an asset to the organisation, with officers showing high levels of dedication and motivation to serve the organisation and be effective leaders in their organisation and place. Staff expressed wanting to see a more clearly defined strategic direction for the Council for the next 4 years.

The Council has many strong partnerships in place, with Swale described as “*an enthusiastic partner*”, and “*with members that genuinely want to make a difference for local people*”. Swale’s work on the cost-of-living crisis was highlighted by partners in the voluntary and community sector (VCS) as an example of where Swale Council was leading the field in responding to new and emerging needs in their community with speed, humility, and proactivity. VCS partners are keen to be part of more formal arrangements with Swale Council and expressed an appetite to build on the existing positive relationships and work more collaboratively with the Council.

During the review the comment was made that “innovation is a contact sport” and there is opportunity to broaden and deepen the relationships with businesses in the area, using them to help deliver some of the ambitions the Council has for its communities.

Swale, like many Councils, has experienced a history of reduced grant funding and is working hard to manage that alongside the current pressures with inflation, post-Covid-19 costs, and the cost-of-living crisis. There is a good understanding of the Council’s financial position across members and officers. The Council has spending controls in place and savings targets identified across service areas and understands the need to proactively work on ensuring these are monitored and owned by both members and officers. The financial position in Swale has changed in recent years, Central government funding has declined, and the Council’s financial reserves are low whilst the Council works to maintain the running of services. This leaves the authority, and many authorities throughout the country, in difficult and unfamiliar territory, needing to further sharpen focus on finances, committing to and delivering savings to ensure they can deliver core services to their residents in the coming years. Upon deciding priorities and the levels of services that can be provided, ensuring these are communicated to residents and stakeholders, will be key to maintaining trust with communities and partners.

The Council needs to rally its members and staff at this critical juncture as it moves to a refreshed Corporate Plan for 2023 to 2027, scheduled for delivery in the Autumn/Winter. Now is also the time to seize the opportunity to refocus the Council on an overall strategic vision for the place, elevating members to a position of setting the strategy and vision, then monitoring its delivery and giving officers the direction needed to create, manage, and deliver the operational activities to achieve the priorities and targets set by the political leaders at the Council.

2. Key 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:

2.1. Work at pace to develop a new Corporate Plan that has a clear and well-defined strategic vision with strategic priorities, owned by members and clearly communicated to staff, residents and partners.

Having a Corporate Plan, supported by the agreed budget and a financial sustainability plan, is crucial for ensuring all staff, members and stakeholders understand what the Council is seeking to achieve and how staff, members, partners, and stakeholders can share the responsibility in delivering these goals. Now is the time to work together to agree on and deliver a new Council Corporate Plan

2.2. Develop and embed joint values and behaviours for Swale BC members and officers.

It is important that joint values for the organisation are in place, lived and modelled by all the senior leaders in the organisation. Having these in place will help the Council develop a culture of trust and respect between members and officers.

2.3. Develop a robust and detailed savings plan, ensuring clear ownership of projects/plans by the administration and officers.

Develop a savings plan with both members and officer accountability, and proactively manage this, alongside day-to-day active fiscal management, and controls. Have regular conversations with staff, members, and budget holders communicating Swale's budget position, and instilling ownership of savings plans and projects across the

organisation.

2.4. Continue to work on the member/officer protocol and work to improve member/officer relationships.

There is room for improvement in the levels of collaboration, mutual understanding, and tone of communication between some elected members and staff. Work on this has started, with defining and managing ways of working between members and officers, through the member/officer protocol; it is recommended that work on improving relationships be considered a priority for the new administration.

2.5. Develop a comprehensive induction and support programme for members which includes the statutory roles of the Council, budget responsibilities, and building internal/external positive relationships.

It is important that members are supported to deliver their roles and responsibilities as elected members. Building relationships both internally and externally will enrich the Council and enable groups and external partners to all pull together. Introduce briefings for all members on key issues, providing the opportunity to have open discussions across all parties. These should include training and briefings on financial understanding and monitoring, to enable effective financial scrutiny and decision-making.

2.6. Conduct a review of committee meetings including the number of meetings and capacity to support their frequency. Test further opportunities for wider scrutiny and challenge within the committee system.

Review the number of committees looking at opportunities to reduce duplication and increase efficiency. Also, look at ways of enabling scrutiny as part of the committee system.

2.7. Maximise your links with small and big businesses. Tap into their work on corporate social responsibility activity, employment opportunities and how these can support your local priorities.

Use the current opportunity and goodwill in the business sector to capitalise on the relationships built with the business community during and after the pandemic. With

many large businesses in the borough, proactively engaging with the whole sector could help deliver Swale's ambitions for economic development and expand the apprenticeship and training ambitions and opportunities for local people.

2.8. Prioritise work on developing your communications and engagement strategy.

Having these strategies in place will help to ensure information from the Council to residents, and between members and staff flows effectively. These will be key to ensuring the smooth dissemination of key messages, goals, and initiatives both internally and externally. Swale having clear and well-defined strategies in this area will help with keeping members, staff, and residents informed, aligned, and engaged, fostering a sense of clarity and purpose alongside the new Corporate Plan.

2.9. Celebrate and communicate the Council's successes.

It is important that Swale Borough Council celebrate and effectively communicate the successes of the Council. Doing so will help to boost staff morale, reinforce a positive organisational culture, and may enhance the Council's external reputation.

2.10. Closely monitor the impact of the 34-hour week, considering the impact on the organisation and residents.

It is important to recognise that this policy is a departure from the customary working practices within the Council and local authority sector. Acknowledge that it carries risks as well as benefits. Work to balance the innovative spirit of the policy with a data-driven monitoring and review process to help identify and mitigate risks and inject timely contingencies as needed.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1. 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 on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Ian Davidson, Chief Executive at Tendring DC

- Cllr Hannah Dalton, Leader at Epsom and Ewell BC
- Cllr Duncan McGinty, Leader at Sedgemoor DC
- Cllr Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg, Leader at North Herts DC
- Claire Hughes, Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer, Cheltenham BC and Stroud DC
- Marshall Scott, NGDP management trainee at The Local Government Association
- Rebecca Ireland, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

3.2. 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 the Council's 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?
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?
5. **Capacity for improvement** – Is the organisation able to support the delivery of local priorities? Does the Council have the capacity to improve?

In addition to these themes, the Council asked six additional questions:

1. We would be especially interested in peers' views on how they perceive the effectiveness of the current leadership approach.

2. We would appreciate the peers' views on the appropriateness of this number of committees and a view on how effectively they currently operate.
3. We would welcome a view of the peers on the level of strategic versus operational input from members of the committees.
4. We would be especially interested in peers' views on how effective the mechanisms we are using to build trust are.
5. We would be especially interested in peers' views on the appropriateness of our approach to scrutiny within the committee system.
6. We would be especially interested in peers' views on how officers and members can work together to achieve the savings targets required, whilst not stopping members from delivering their ambitions.

These questions will be addressed within the feedback section of this report.

3.3. 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 to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent four days onsite at Swale Borough Council during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 44 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Visited the Isle of Sheppey.
- Spoke to more than 70 people including a range of Council staff together with members, members of parish councils 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.

4. Feedback

4.1. Local priorities and outcomes

The vision and priorities for Swale Borough Council are combined within Swale's current Corporate Plan, 'Working together for a better borough', published in 2020 to cover the period 2020 to 2023, and a set of current prioritised projects. The plan is based on four overarching priorities and twenty specific objectives.

The priorities are:

- Building the right homes in the right places and supporting quality jobs for all
- Investing in our environment and responding positively to global challenges
- Tackling deprivation and creating equal opportunities for everyone
- Renewing local democracy and making the Council fit for the future

Alongside these, sit approximately 150-member priority projects, ranked in status to assist officers in knowing the Council's priorities. Many have been successfully completed using legacy funding that will not be available to the Council in future years.

The borough of Swale is remarkably diverse with a historic market town, a traditional seaside resort, and an industrialised market town, alongside rural villages. The demographics are similarly diverse with a mix of affluent areas and less affluent communities. In 2019, the indices of multiple deprivation showed Swale's overall position had deteriorated relative to other places, with the borough now the 69th most disadvantaged of 317 shire districts in England, and the second most disadvantaged in Kent. The area's economy has diversified and now has strengths in manufacturing and distribution alongside high-skilled activities including innovative technology and in life sciences. However, much of the borough's employment is still toward the lower end of the skills spectrum and the average weekly earnings are significantly below regional and national averages. Tackling this inequality and deprivation is a key priority of the Council and achieving improvements for residents will require focus and the help of statutory and non-statutory partners.

During the review, the peer team were shown several examples of successful projects meeting local priorities and needs, including the extensive work to manage Covid-19 working alongside partners in the community, a highly praised cost-of-living response

and public sphere work across the borough including the renovation and restoration of existing buildings to provide space for community activities and investment to improve the quality of public spaces. Alongside this, the Council is working hard with other statutory bodies to meet wider needs, including the health needs of the residents of the Isle of Sheppey, with the peer team hearing about the support of the Council in expanding health provision on the island to facilitate services that enable more diagnostic and treatment services on-site in the health centre.

The Council's ambition to tackle deprivation can be seen in their work to secure the Levelling up Funding (LUF) for Sheerness and in their commitment as a strategic partner in education and health to improve outcomes and the well-being of residents on the Isle of Sheppey. Members and staff frequently expressed their aspirations for the communities they serve, including describing ongoing work to influence and improve the educational outcomes for children attending the Oasis Academy Secondary School, quoting the small numbers of students (10%) achieving grade 5 or above in English and Maths GCSE (the local authority average is 46% and the national average is 43%).

Officers and members at Swale Borough Council work extremely hard to deliver good services to the local community. In recent years, the Council has positioned itself to champion *the local offer*, seeking enhanced engagement with local communities and delivering projects on the member priority list. This work is in line with their Corporate Plan priority of renewing local democracy and striving to make the Council fit for the future. One plan priority and a notable aspiration of members was moving from a cabinet to committee system in 2022. In doing so, members have sought to renew local democracy through increased member participation in decision making by extending the number of Councillors directly involved in Council decision making and influencing the strategic direction of the Council via the committee system.

At the time of the peer review, pre-2023 local elections, members and officers were looking forward to creating a new Corporate Plan with a set of revised values. Additionally, the team heard aspirations from members on how the revised plan could strengthen their strategic leadership role in the Council.

There can be inherent uncertainty before elections and sometimes the workforce perceives a vacuum or gap when one system or plan ends, and another begins. The

team encountered staff and members expressing uncertainty about the future direction of the Council and the ability to make seismic changes to the lives of the communities served by a coalition administration. Beyond this, the peer team judged there to be a powerful desire and ambition for the Council to be more strategic, forward-looking, and have a definable vision and lived values. This was married with concerns that members' activity had become more operational of late.

The Council should prioritise updating and reviewing its tourism and visitor strategy and action plan to ensure it remains relevant and effective in meeting the needs of tourists and the local community. A proactive approach by the Council will help to attract more tourists, boosting the local economy and helping to preserve the cultural and natural heritage of the area.

The Council has targets in their Climate and Ecological Emergency Action adopted in April 2020 to make the Council's operations carbon neutral in five years and the borough carbon neutral by 2030. Thoughtful consideration should be given to whether the current plans are likely to be delivered and if not, what changes the Council needs to make.

The peer team observed that members and officers understood their local communities and were able to appreciate the diverse needs of communities and the value of having robust ward-based information. There is an opportunity through the development of the new Corporate Plan to strengthen the use of data and intelligence information across the Council and between services. The peer team also identified several key Council policies that need refreshing to support the delivery of a Corporate Plan.

4.2. Organisational and place leadership

Swale Borough Council have an ambitious political leadership that is dedicated to delivering improvements and better outcomes for the community. The Council is supported by an active and dedicated Chief Executive (CEX) and senior leadership team.

The Leader of the Council at the time of the review demonstrated a clear desire to improve and nurture local democracy, working hard in the coalition to foster wider participation by Councillors in decision-making within the Council structures as well as

understanding of community issues. The 'new' Leader is also keen on developing values and relationships with staff.

The CEX has been praised for her strong and decisive leadership, with partners speaking highly of her place leadership and ability to bring stakeholders together. It was also noted that communication from the Council with external agencies has improved under the current senior leadership team.

A committed and knowledgeable workforce supports the Council, with changes made in the senior leadership team in the last 18 months to align the staff team with evolving business needs. The workforce actively engages in multi-agency collaboration and cultivates strong relationships within the Council and with other statutory bodies. The team heard how the Council demonstrated exemplary leadership during the pandemic and has continued this work with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and residents, taking proactive measures to address cost-of-living concerns.

Swale Council plays an active role in advocating for the needs of the community to Kent County Council and are keen partners with other Kent Authorities looking at opportunities to work together through shared services models and lobby as a group on issues that affect them all. As an active partner, the Council works to contribute to bringing about strategic and systemic changes in healthcare, policing, and education, aiming to enhance outcomes for Swale residents. The coordination of these partnerships necessitates the Council's time and strategic leadership. The Council also collaborates with local businesses, recognising the importance of fostering a thriving economic environment in the area.

Despite changes in the local economy, residents still face challenges in finding skilled work at average or above-average wages. Influencing change in this area, as well as addressing the growing housing needs of the community, requires strong political commitment to advocate for residents. The Council is actively working to meet housing pressures and has developed strong relationships with housing associations operating in the borough. The Council's priorities include not only supporting the delivery of the right homes in the right places but also ensuring that these schemes include training, job creation, and creating desirable places for people to live, work, and spend their free time, benefiting the overall Swale economy.

The Council has established impressive relationships with various sectors in the

community, with the VCS representatives seen by the review team, speaking about the strong relationships they have established with Council departments and staff.

However, there is still room for growth and improvement. The creation of an engagement strategy will help the Council to manage how the organisation engages with the wider community partners and business sector taking account of the staff resources available and ensuring the Council is leveraging these relationships to help deliver on Swale's priorities.

The creation of a new engagement strategy is also an opportunity for the Council to look at how they might use different communication mediums, incorporating digital solutions where appropriate, to engage across service areas with residents and partners. It is important that the Council appreciates and utilises the skills and knowledge of its members and officers. Collecting good quality information, including from exercises like residents' surveys and staff surveys can be a useful way to engage with residents and staff and enable the Council to assess needs, develop policies, evaluate services, and promote transparency.

The policy team within Swale Council has struggled with a lack of resources, which has been acknowledged by the Council; this has led to the suspension of some activities including completing a resident survey and work to renew and refresh key existing policies and strategies. The impact of this has been felt in the organisation and although another post has recently been added, the Council might wish to review the capacity within the team to deliver their duties and support the delivery of a suite of updated and new policies that will underpin the activity of the Council through its new Corporate Plan. Having key strategies and policies in place enables the Council to engage with its residents effectively, deliver high-quality services, and make informed decisions that benefit the community, whilst ensuring activity is prioritised and within the Council's resource limits.

The Council should be rightly proud of some of its achievements in place-making within the area, with multiple projects delivered including Masterton House and the redeveloped playground on Beachfields site. It demonstrates its ambitions for area improvements through successful investments in regeneration and restoration projects and how it is prioritised within the Council to work on the successful LUF bid.

However, the team also observed place-based activities that were localised and

project-based, without a clear demonstrable link to the overarching and strategic priorities of the Council. Key strategic policy documents should underpin this work, with projects not progressing without robust business plans.

Swale Borough Council should prioritise the creation of a revised communications strategy to enhance communication both within and outside the Council. Effective communication is essential for the success of both the officer and political leadership of the Council and the bedrock for forming good organisational relationships. The team heard examples of positive practices, including weekly housekeeping emails and a detailed and user-friendly intranet system. These initiatives demonstrate the Council's commitment to transparency and efficient information-sharing.

In May 2023, the Council implemented a major change to working hours and practices, transitioning to a 34-hour week, and closing the Council offices on Friday afternoons. The understanding of how this would operate in practice varied among the groups the team spoke to while on-site with the Council. The team heard in one session that “the 34-hour week represents lots of change that people weren’t expecting” and support for the change was mixed. This is a new and untested change to working practices and service delivery for all involved, and close monitoring of this change’s impact on the organisation and residents is essential. The impact of this change will vary among different groups, and it is vital that the monitoring mechanisms implemented are sophisticated enough to collect information that enables good analysis of short- and medium-term service trends, staff satisfaction, and wellbeing metrics.

The Council has a strong and developed well-being offer for staff, and the team heard praise and positive feedback from members and staff for the recognition programme ‘Swale Stars’ event.

The team noted that the Council offices have empty floors and noticeboards with out-of-date information. There has been some investment in the building, but further investment in the overall workspace would enhance the well-being offer for staff and may offer revenue generating opportunities.

There is a lot of ambition and positive activity on place-shaping, reducing inequalities, and working on regeneration and restoration in the area. There is a clear political appetite to continue to deliver programmes of importance to local leaders but also an appreciation of the reduced financial capacity of the Council to do so. Work on building

relationships between the political leadership and the senior staff team is key to the Council's success and will be addressed later in this report.

4.3. Governance and culture

The Council has a good approach to governance and an appetite to ensure there is effective scrutiny and challenge within the committee system.

The recent review of the constitution conducted by the Council is a testament to their commitment to good governance and transparency. This review process ensures that the Council's constitution remains up-to-date, relevant, and aligned with the needs and aspirations of the community. It is a positive development that highlights the Council's dedication to ensuring that its operations are conducted in an efficient and accountable manner.

The transition from a cabinet to committee system, although still in the process of embedding, has contributed to increased inclusivity for members in decision-making. This shift allows for a broader range of perspectives and expertise to be considered, ensuring that decisions are comprehensive and representative of the diverse opinions within the Council. This change demonstrates the Council's commitment to creating a democratic and inclusive environment where every member's voice is heard and valued.

Currently, the Council consists of five service committees, four regulatory committees, and four area committees. Each committee is comprised of 12 to 15 members who convene at regular intervals to discuss pertinent matters. The committee meetings serve as a platform for scrutiny, enabling focused examinations of specific topics.

The Council has made considerable progress in transitioning to the committee system, and as part of their commitment to continuous improvement, the team recommends that a thorough review be conducted of how the current system is operating. This would include reviewing the number of meetings, size, frequency, and the capacity within the staff team to support this. The review team noted that other councils of a similar size operate successful committee systems with less frequent meetings and smaller size committees.

It is also recommended that the Council tests further opportunities for wider scrutiny and challenge. To enhance the effectiveness of scrutiny and further develop the

Council's approach, there is an opportunity to empower the committees with greater ownership of their forward plans, budgets, performance monitoring and new objectives outlined in the Corporate Plan. By granting more autonomy to the committees, the Council can foster a sense of responsibility and accountability while ensuring alignment with broader Council goals. The committee system review will enable the Council to optimise and refine the current arrangements.

The reports presented to the committees are of excellent quality, built upon a solid foundation encapsulated in a corporate template that ensures consistency. However, it is worth noting that, on occasion, there have been references to "reports to follow." The Council must be cautious not to normalise this practice, as it could potentially lead to delays in decision-making processes or debates lacking the necessary information.

It is vital to establish robust mechanisms and processes to ensure that audit recommendations marked as "high risk" are promptly addressed and subsequently monitored. This proactive approach will help mitigate potential risks and strengthen the Council's overall governance framework.

In addition to effective scrutiny and risk management, the Council recognises the importance of maintaining key corporate documents such as the Asset Management Strategy, Risk Strategy, Communications Strategy, and Project Management Framework. Regular reviews of these documents will ensure that they remain up-to-date and aligned with the Council's evolving objectives and priorities; work on this will need to be planned and resourced.

The peer team also recommend that the Council look to refresh and relaunch its organisational values alongside the new Corporate Plan. A values framework sets the tone for how a Council deals with customers, partnerships, and stakeholders, and it is an important part of building a collaborative and healthy culture in an organisation.

A significant step towards fostering a harmonious and respectful working environment is the recent adoption of the LGA Model Code of Conduct by the Council. It is imperative for Council business that everyone within the Council operates in a respectful manner, treating each other with dignity and professionalism. In adhering to this code of conduct, members are setting an example of mutual respect and creating a positive atmosphere for constructive dialogue and decision-making processes.

While the peer team heard of some positive member-to-member and member-to-

officer relationships within the Council, it is evident that there is still much work to be done in building an environment of trust and respectful challenge in some parts of the Council. It is crucial for the Council to foster an atmosphere where differing opinions are welcomed, and constructive debates or challenge are encouraged. By promoting open, honest, and respectful member-to-member and member-to-officer communication, the Council can create an environment of trust and collaboration, leading to more effective decision-making processes benefiting the entire community.

The team observed strained relationships between the Leader and senior staff within the Council at the time of the review. The team also heard examples of members being uncomfortable about the way some other members spoke to staff, and staff being unhappy about the method and tone of challenges in meetings and committees. Adopting the LGA Model Code of Conduct is a positive step, and the team would recommend exploring the support of the LGA and member peers.

The Council recognises that improving relationships will lead to more effective decision-making and operational management, and ultimately benefit the constituents served by the Council. The peer team recommend that time and resources be invested in building stronger and more trusting relationships between members and staff. By ensuring both staff and members are clear about their roles and responsibilities, space is created for a respectful, constructive challenge. Improving the relationships should be a priority area for the Council, and they will also be crucial for the organisation's workforce stability, satisfaction, and staff retention, at a time when workforce challenges in the sector are acute.

By addressing the communication gaps, aligning priorities, building trust, and clarifying roles, the Council can work towards resolving these issues and fostering a more collaborative, productive, and respectful environment.

Overall, the Council's ability to manage through a coalition administration, adopt a model code of conduct, review the constitution, and transition to a committee system all in the last 18 months is commendable. These efforts demonstrate the Council's commitment to good governance, inclusivity, and working for the overall benefit of the community. With continued dedication and a sharp focus on building positive relationships, the Council has the potential to create a more effective and cohesive working environment for the betterment of the Council.

4.4. Financial planning and management

Members and the executive team at Swale Council know the financial position and understand the difficult financial climate that local government are currently operating in. Swale, like many Councils, has experienced a history of reduced grant funding and is working hard to manage that alongside the current pressures with inflation, post-Covid-19 costs, and the cost-of-living crisis. There is a good understanding of the Council's financial position across members, though more work could be done to instil greater financial ownership and accountability in committees.

The Council has spending controls in place and savings targets identified across service areas and understands the need to proactively work on ensuring they are monitored and owned by both members and officers. Work has started, led by the new s.151 officer, to increase financial literacy and transparency in the organisation.

The resourcing and management of successful LUF bids is a challenge for all those successful councils. To resource and deliver £20m projects is hugely challenging. The Council is rightly proud of the successful bid, but resources will need to be allocated in order to deliver the scale of projects.

The financial position in Swale has changed in recent years, with the Council's reserves reduced, needing to be used to maintain the running of the Council as central government funding has declined. This leaves the authority, and many authorities throughout the country, in difficult and unfamiliar territory, needing to have an incredibly sharp focus on the finances, and committing to and delivering savings to ensure they can deliver core services to their residents. Understanding the financial position and communicating the Council's priorities to officers, residents and stakeholders will be key to ensuring and maintaining a focus on what is able to be delivered and building trust with communities and partners.

Questions were posed to the team while on-site as to how to lead and motivate members and set a vision that is rooted in local democracy, without the funding that Swale had historically to deliver some of the very local priorities and projects the members championed. This dilemma is one that many Councils are facing as the financial position of Councils continues to become more perilous. What the team did observe were dedicated and knowledgeable members who were keen to deliver for residents, including ensuring core services are excellent value for money and

completed on time.

Swale should ensure it has a strong communications and engagement strategy in place to help enable two-way communication with the members and the community it serves on any changes the Council may need to make to ensure a balanced budget.

The budget challenges require the Council to explore opportunities and review the resource base at the Council, ensuring the resources available are in the right places. There is an opportunity to review the Council's assets and ensure they are working for the Council. However, this work requires an effective project team, political buy-in for the objectives, and time, as changes to an asset base often take years to complete and for benefits to be felt.

The peer team found the financial monitoring at Swale to be satisfactory with the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) in place and updated reflecting the changing financial position of the Council and wider changes to the sector. It is important that any expected changes in statutory requirements are also incorporated into the MTFP.

Swale residents, many on low and medium incomes, struggle to access affordable, good quality accommodation. Demand for Council help with housing is increasing, and there is significant pressure for homelessness services, with increasing numbers of residents needing temporary accommodation. The Council are working to mitigate some of the causes of homelessness with a more prevention-led service, but the lack of affordable accommodation is a national issue including in Swale; thus, further pressure will be put on the Council to step in and provide costly temporary accommodation to fill the gap. The Council is alive to the issue and has put forward mitigation proposals alongside its work with the local housing association sector to support the creation of more affordable homes. Costs in this area are a concern for the Council and are being closely monitored.

4.5. Capacity for improvement

The Council has a positive and committed workforce exemplified by the dedication of staff during the pandemic, leading and exceeding expectations in responding to Covid-19. It is important that the Council takes to time to celebrate its successes and thank staff and members for their hard work, making them feel valued and appreciated.

The peer team found the workforce highly motivated. A new vision with prioritisation of

activity, if clearly communicated vertically through the organisational tiers, will set the Council on a strong path to delivering the desired outputs. Given the opportunity, staff will develop innovative ideas for smarter ways of working and mechanisms should be put in place to capture and test these. The Council could consider developing a framework for these opportunities to be explored.

To optimise the Council's operations, there must be a prioritisation of all activities by members and staff, and these need to be budgeted for. The new Corporate Plan should address this. It is imperative to identify key areas that require immediate attention and allocate resources accordingly. The team have recommended that several key strategies and policies be refreshed. As part of this it is essential that the policy team and staff managing external communication and engagement are resourced to complete these activities. This will ensure that the Council's efforts align with its strategic goals and objectives as well as the resources available.

The development of the Corporate Plan presents an opportunity to invigorate the Council. Use this opportunity to not only to harness this new energy and enthusiasm of members but also engage them, as a springboard for refocusing the organisation's activities and re-evaluating its values. Emphasising a renewed sense of purpose and vision will foster a positive environment that encourages innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Use the collaboration time in creating the plan as an opportunity to make sure information flows both ways and in easily accessible formats.

Another crucial aspect that will impact Swale's capacity to improve is the quality of relationships within the Council. The Council should invest in relationship building, providing space for open dialogue, discussion, and healthy debate that allows for the exchange of diverse perspectives and promotes informed decision-making.

Encouraging respectful challenge within the Council ensures that decisions are thoroughly scrutinised and leads to stronger outcomes. Behaviour that does not meet the high standards expected should be dealt with under processes defined in the Code of Conduct. The leaders in the Council should use this time post-election as an opportunity to draw a line under previous disagreements and reset, modelling this behaviour for the wider Councillor group and workforce.

To meet aspirations on economic development the Council should look to harness the goodwill and new relationships forged in the pandemic to widen their communication

and work with both small and large businesses.

LUF has shown how building successful coalitions, to effect change is possible. Effective coalition-building whether that be politically in an administration or amongst external partners requires active engagement and participation from all members. Ensuring that every member is adequately informed and able to contribute constructively necessitates investment in resources such as information-sharing platforms, training programmes, and coordination mechanisms. Only through such comprehensive support can the Council foster meaningful collaborations that lead to impactful change.


Lastly, the Council should prioritise the design and implementation of a robust and useful induction, training, and information session for its members. Introducing briefings for all members on key issues, will help increase the knowledge base across all members and provide the opportunity for open discussions across all parties. This should include training and briefings on financial understanding and effectiveness. Investing in their development and equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills is crucial for effective governance. Providing comprehensive training on relevant policies, procedures, and governance principles ensures that members can confidently fulfil their roles and contribute meaningfully to the Council's work.

In conclusion, this peer review highlights several key observations and offers advice that the Council should consider and can help in the Council's journey of continuous improvement. By leveraging the strength of its workforce, prioritising activities through the creation of a new corporate plan, refocusing its activities and values, and investing in relationships, the Council can enhance its performance and effectiveness. These recommendations aim to guide the Council towards achieving its goals while adapting to the evolving needs of the community it serves.

5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss, and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a six-month check-in session, which



provides space for the Council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

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

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