

Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan

October 2023



In March 2023 the council took part in a Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge. Peer challenges are delivered by experienced member and officer peers from across the country. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected based on their relevant expertise.

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?

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 respect, challenge and scrutiny?

4. Financial planning and management -

Does the council have a good understanding of its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a clear plan to address its financial challenges?

5. Capacity for improvement -

Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities?

Does the council have the capacity to improve?

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

1. how they perceive the effectiveness of the current leadership approach;
2. what they thought about the appropriateness of the number of committees and how effectively they currently operate;
3. what they thought about the level of strategic versus operational input from members of the committees;
4. how effective the mechanisms we are using to build trust are;
5. how appropriate is our approach to scrutiny within the committee system; and
6. how officers and members can work together to achieve the savings targets required, whilst not stopping members from delivering their ambitions.

**The Peers
highlighted
10 key
recommendations
and this action
plan outlines
the council's
response to make
the changes
required**

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 2 - Develop and embed joint values and behaviours for Swale members and officers.

Recommendation 3 - Develop a robust and detailed savings plan, ensuring clear ownership of projects/plans by the administration and officers.

Recommendation 4 - Continue to work on the member/officer protocol and work to improve member/officer relationships.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 8 - Prioritise work on developing your communications and engagement strategy.

Recommendation 9 - Celebrate and communicate the council's successes.

Recommendation 10 - Closely monitor the impact of the 34-hour week, considering the impact on the organisation and residents.

<p>Recommendation:</p>	<p>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.</p>	
<p>What the Peers said:</p>	<p>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 Corporate Plan.</p>	<p>Target date:</p>
<p>What do we plan to do:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We have started to develop the new Corporate Plan with the administration and officers working together to agree the strategic priorities. 2. We will analyse the feedback parish/town councils and residents have given at Area Committees following the presentation of the proposed priorities at the September 2023 round of meetings. 3. We will develop the strategic priorities in more detail by Service Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs working with heads of service, to make sure that everyone understands how they will be achieved within the agreed budget. 4. We will carry out sessions with staff, members, partners and stakeholders to communicate what the council is seeking to achieve and to encourage shared responsibility in delivering the goals. 	<p>February 2024</p>

Recommendation:	Develop and embed joint values and behaviours for Swale members and officers.	
What the Peers said:	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.	Target date:
What do we plan to do:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We plan to hold sessions with members and officers at all levels to agree and develop joint values and behaviours. 2. We will work with Members to agree how the values and behaviours fit with the staff code of conduct, the member code of conduct and the officer/member protocol. 3. We will provide training in neurodivergence to assist with everyone having a better understanding of individuals different ways of working, learning, communicating, and perceiving the environment. 4. Once the joint values and behaviours have been agreed we will ensure they are embedded and promoted in the organisation through regular Member and officer training sessions. 	End March 2024

Recommendation:	Develop a robust and detailed savings plan, ensuring clear ownership of projects/plans by the administration and officers.	
What the Peers said:	Develop a savings plan with both the administration 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.	Target date:
What do we plan to do:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We will work towards communicating the budget position to staff and members on a regular basis. This will be done through regular all-staff briefings and six-monthly budget briefings with all members. 2. We will provide accountable managers and the administration with more in-depth briefings on the budget position which will include information on overachieving and underachieving income streams, risks and budget gaps to assist with making decisions on savings plans and projects. 3. The finance sub-group will continue to work on developing measures to recommend to Full Council to ensure the council set a balanced budget and have a robust Medium Term Financial Plan. 4. These actions will ensure that the administration will have clarity on the budget position and the requirement for savings in the short term and in future years. 	End February 2024

Recommendation:	Continue to work on the member/officer protocol and work to improve member/officer relationships.	
What the Peers said:	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.	Target date:
What do we plan to do:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The work on developing joint values and behaviours will assist with achieving mutual understanding and tone of communication between some elected members and staff. 2. We will take a proposed protocol, which unions will have been consulted on, to the Standards Committee. Once agreed it will be communicated to members and staff. 3. The Communications Strategy to reflect how the member/officer protocol should be communicated. 4. We will put more robust mechanisms in place to better communicate the issues raised at exit interviews and take action where necessary. 5. We will put in place a safe-space for people to talk about problems that may arise with member/officer relationships and provide external mediation where necessary. 	January 2024

Recommendation:	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.	
What the Peers said:	<p>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.</p>	Target date:
What do we plan to do:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Although there is already an extensive member training programme in place, we will carry out a review with members to identify any gaps. 2. We will implement a four-year rolling training programme for members including refresher training and to ensure continued reinforcement of principals. 3. We will record training sessions so they are available for members to watch at a later date. 4. We will link members to the Employee Assistance Programme. 5. We will set up two-way training with external partners so that members understand how they work with the council and partners understand local government and political processes. 	This work is ongoing year-on-year

Recommendation:	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.	
What the Peers said:	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.	Target date:
What do we plan to do:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We will work with the Leader to conduct a review of committees including the number of committees, the frequency of meetings and agenda items. 2. We will discuss with members how scrutiny is carried out and develop an annual scrutiny programme within the committee system. 	May 2024

Recommendation:	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.	
What the Peers said:	<p>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.</p>	Target date:
What do we plan to do:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We will agree with members expectations and resource within existing budgets to work with businesses. 2. There are already a number of established links with local businesses, the council’s vision is to develop further engagement with businesses and how we work with them. 3. We will signpost and co-ordinate relationships between businesses to maximise links and encourage joint working. 4. We will share the council’s unspent Apprenticeship Levy with businesses that can develop a programme that will benefit the council and businesses. 	Work is ongoing and linked with the Corporate Plan

Recommendation:	Prioritise work on developing your communications and engagement strategy.	
What the Peers said:	<p>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.</p>	Target date:
What do we plan to do:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We are in the process of developing a corporate communications strategy alongside the Corporate Plan. 2. The strategy will ensure there is an effective flow of information both externally with residents and internally with members and staff. 3. We will encourage and train members and staff to be proactive in photographing and filming news of the Council’s achievements. 4. We will encourage and train members and appropriate staff to effectively use social media to communicate news of the Council’s achievements and share information that is of value to residents. 5. We will provide more diverse information on cultural events. The communications team will develop a diary of cultural events, including awareness days. 6. We will give accessibility guidance to members and staff to ensure that any communications are easily accessible to all residents equally. 7. We are developing different approaches to community engagement to ensure effective consultation takes place. 	<p>February 2024.</p> <p>Other actions will be ongoing year-on-year</p>

Recommendation:	Celebrate and communicate the Council's successes.	
What the Peers said:	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.	Target date:
What do we plan to do:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We will improve service engagement and information sharing from and to service areas. 2. We will celebrate and communicate staff achievements. This year we have reintroduced the Swale Stars awards which celebrates staff achievements. Feedback from staff has been positive. 3. We include an award for external partner engagement. 	This work is ongoing year-on-year

Recommendation:	Closely monitor the impact of the 34-hour week, considering the impact on the organisation and residents.	
What the Peers said:	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.	Target date:
What do we plan to do:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We carry out monthly staff surveys to monitor the impact of the introduction of the 34-hour week. We will share the findings with members. 2. We will capture individual teams' views and ensure regular discussions at team meetings and one to one check-ins with staff are taking place. Heads of service will make themselves available at drop-in sessions should staff feel more comfortable giving feedback in that way. 3. We will ensure the feedback managers receive from staff is passed onto the 34-hour implementation group. 4. We will run sessions with officers before the permanent move to a 34-hour week takes place. 	January 2024