

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Houghton Regis Town Council

Tuesday 3 December 2024

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

Houghton Regis Town Council (Houghton Regis) undertook a Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) Tuesday 26 to Thursday 28 March 2024 and promptly published the full report and an action plan.

Progress Review is an integral part of the CPC process. Taking place approximately 10 months after the CPC, it provides space for the council's senior leadership to:

- receive peer team feedback on the council's early progress against the CPC main recommendations and the council's RAG (red, amber, green) rated action plan
- consider peers' reflections on any new opportunities, challenges and support needs that may have arisen since the peer team was onsite for the CPC
- discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.

The LGA would like to thank the council for its commitment to sector led improvement. This Progress Review was the next step in this ongoing, open and close relationship the council has with LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

Houghton Regis's Progress Review took place onsite on Tuesday 3 December 2024. The review focussed on each of the CPC's main recommendations:

1. set formal annual committee and staff objectives to progress your corporate plan, including the setting of measurable, annual targets
2. delegate committee and senior management team (SMT) operational decision-making and activities to your staff so your senior politicians and management team can focus on strategic issues
3. improve the quality of your decision-making by focusing on strategic issues at your council meetings – ensure your agendas give necessary weight to those issues
4. develop long-term financial planning, eg a lifecycle plan of assets maintenance and their refurbishment, at least a three-year budget, and a reserves strategy that

allocates funding to long-term projects and long-term maintenance

5. reset your relationship with Central Bedfordshire Council (Central Bedfordshire) at strategic level to agree and prioritise shared objectives, for example regarding the Houghton Regis town centre action plan and the devolvement of assets, and make further use of your existing relationships with other local partners
6. develop a plan to further improve and/or move your offices, including immediately making the reception area more welcoming and informative, so they are fit for future purpose
7. improve your communications strategy so you do not just promote your own services but also those throughout the whole of Houghton Regis, including those delivered by community groups, via for example your Town Crier magazine, website, leaflets and phone
8. develop a plan to create your community centres – in the town centre and in all your estates
9. create an implementation group to ensure you deliver your neighbourhood plan, and set a renewal date to review and rewrite.

For this Progress Review, the following original CPC team members were involved:

- Member Peer – Cllr Ian Davis, Chair, Newton & Biggin Parish Council and Warwickshire Association of Local Councils
- Town Clerk Peer – Shar Roselman, Town Clerk, Newport Pagnell Town Council
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager – Vicki Goddard
- (LGA Project Support Officer – Onyekachi Abajingin (offsite)).

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Of the CPC's main recommendations, the council's RAG rated action plan reports that 100 per cent of actions are completed/progressed.

Overall comments

Houghton Regis is already a 'super council', as defined by the National Association

of Local Councils (NALC), who has shortlisted Houghton Regis for its Council of the Year award. The council provides services and community leadership to a population of more than 20,000 people, which is set for further substantial growth through its developing Bidwell and Linnere housing developments. With 14 councillors, 22 members of staff - some full time and some part time - and plans to increase staffing to deliver its corporate and neighbourhood agendas, Houghton Regis is now a sizeable local council compared to many. The peer team reflected however that Houghton Regis's structures and culture are more like a smaller parish council, whereby committees can focus more on detailed operational work. This is resulting in less committee time to progress the council's strategic agenda, including delivery of the council's corporate and neighbourhood plans. Some strategic issues remain static on committee agendas for a long time, as standing items without updates or otherwise not being addressed, whilst committees address other urgent but less important matters. Houghton Regis recognises that to embrace this strategic role, it must set longer-term corporate objectives and has made progress on this in various ways, as outlined in this report. The council could also consider replacing various committee meetings with more effective short term working/task and finish groups. These could address single issues in defined timescales. Additionally, council committees need to delegate operational matters to their Town Clerk and staff, so committees can focus on their strategic agendas. If the council does not address this whole strategic issue, it will be difficult for the council to progress its corporate plan, even outside of its four-year timeframe. This report therefore outlines the peer team's observations and suggestions as to how the council can address this, particularly regarding leadership, structures and delegation of decision making. This is to help the council make itself fit for the future in its changing role of leading and engaging with its community.

The peer team nevertheless remained impressed with the council's work since its original CPC. Much of the council's work continues to be around the new, expansive Bidwell and Linnere housing developments. Houghton Regis's work will need to grow as the developments do, alongside related work of its principal council Central Bedfordshire and other partners, to support the needs of the new as well as existing populations. Houghton Regis will need to more strategic in addressing these

increasing needs, and this report includes the peer team's observations on this issue and suggestions as to how the council could do this. Houghton Regis's overall positive situation however gives the council opportunity to show its further potential and take ever more bolder decisions, as its strategic experience and agenda grows.

As with this original CPC, the peer team was also impressed with the council's on-going open and learning approach towards the CPC process. The council recognises that this process will help it further improve, particularly as its challenging but exciting work programme continues to develop.

Recommendation 1 - set formal annual committee and staff objectives to progress your corporate plan, including setting of measurable, annual targets

Houghton Regis has set and allocated initial, specific and measurable corporate and CPC action plan objectives to its staff via the staff appraisal process. It is not clear though if the council has set measurable objectives for committees to achieve. There are action plans for committees but these are not measurable objectives, which are needed to ensure committees as well as staff deliver accordingly. In addition to clarity over specific objectives for committees, it will now be important for **the council to continually and annually monitor and progress these objectives. It should also develop new objectives and action plans as required** to ensure committees and staff deliver their corporate plan.

The council has also undertaken a staff review, enabling a five-year staffing forecast and plan. Houghton Regis's senior management team uses this plan to help deliver its corporate plan, for example through new staff, or training and development for existing staff. It is positive that council committees are involved in the strategy and planning of staffing. The peer team heard however of examples where the committees are becoming too involved in operational detail of specific staffing issues. This is taking time and focus away from more strategic matters they should focus on, which is also raised under Recommendation 2. Having agreed its budget, the **council should delegate decisions on operational staffing matters and levels to the Town Clerk.**

Recommendation 2 - delegate committee and SMT operational decision-making and activities to your staff so your senior politicians and management team

can focus on strategic issues

Houghton Regis reviewed and relaunched its latest Scheme of Delegation in May 2024, which has been working well since. The Town Clerk delegates more operational work to her staff, which is giving her more time to work on strategic matters. This is positive progress.

The peer team heard how council committees are also positively delegating more operational matters to staff, for example through its planning and finance work.

Houghton Regis's committees still however focus too much on operational matters, such as the staffing matters mentioned earlier, which they could delegate to staff. This is taking time and focus away from strategic matters and political decisions they could be better engaged in to make the most of their roles.

A related point that came out of this progress review is that whilst council committees are responsible for their own strategic agendas, Houghton Regis does not have, on reflection, a real comprehensive overview of its whole strategic agenda. This 'overall overview' is however vital for Houghton Regis, particularly regarding its work to support the expanding population of the Bidwell and Linmere housing developments. **Houghton Regis should therefore review its current political governance model and whole committee structure, and consider other possible models, for example a leader and cabinet (comprising committee chairs),** whilst retaining its civic leader role. Ideally, should the council choose such a model, it should choose its council leader (as opposed to the Mayor/civic leader) to serve the longest time possible within a four-year election schedule. Any new model the council adopts may require new officer support to help it develop and settle. There is not a statutory power for town councils to have such a leader and cabinet model, as there is for principal authorities, but NALC is aware of local councils that have done this. **The council should also consider extending the term of its committee chair and vice-chairships. Additionally, the council should offer its councillors further training and development, for example through NALC and the Bedfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils, to progress their strategic and political skills.** All these developments, and the further committee delegations to

officers suggested above, would give Houghton Regis more political overview, drive, management, time and continuity to deliver its longer-term strategic plans.

The peer team was pleased to hear about examples of stronger cross-party working across the council. This includes at least two of Houghton Regis's political groups' having agreements to work better together and putting those into practice. Such positive work is helping to reduce political infighting raised in Houghton Regis's previous CPC report, and indeed enhancing these relationships positively. The council acknowledged however through its discussions with the peer team through this progress review that some tensions are still playing out between its political groups, especially on social media and via council meetings.

Houghton Regis councillors and staff raised several instances for example with the peer team, whereby not all councillors remember the corporate, neighbourhood and CPC action plans they previously agreed to. This most notably becomes an issue at council meetings, when councillors are perceived to have voted politically against certain decisions that would progress agendas they had previously voted for.

Resulting political disagreements, a lack of shared, corporate focus and direction, are hindering Houghton Regis's ability to best prioritise and allocate resources in timely ways to deliver previously agreed corporate plans. **These are other reasons why the peer team suggests the council review its current political governance model and committee structure in light of other possible models**, as a new approach could help identify and address political and strategic issues like these.

Recommendation 3 - improve the quality of your decision-making by focusing on strategic issues at your council meetings – ensure your agendas give necessary weight to those issues

Council committee agendas have not substantially changed since the CPC to become more strategic. There were standing items for strategic updates, but these updates were rarely presented, as various sets of committee agendas and minutes show, in phrases like “No substantive update to report”. These items have therefore been removed from committee agendas. Houghton Regis recognises however that its committees need to own and drive the council's strategic agenda, given the scale and importance of it.

The Town Council is therefore considering, as part of its December 2024 meeting, establishing two new committees in May 2025:

- a futures committee or sub-committee - to give the council time and space to focus on and drive its overall strategic vision, agenda and budgets for the whole Houghton Regis area
- a neighbourhood plan implementation sub-committee, which is further commented on under Recommendation 9, to similarly give the council specific time and space to focus on this.

This would give existing council committees more time to focus on their respective strategic agenda, for example communities and the environment. These committees could however use this extra time to continue focusing on more operational matters. Further consideration of these committees would also need to feature in any review of the council's current political governance model.

The terms of reference and agenda for any new and existing committees will therefore be key to clarify the purpose, focus and work of each, and avoid overlaps, duplication and any confusion between their remits.

Membership will also be key to ensure councillors devote the required time and have specific focus for any new or existing committee they are members of.

Additionally, the peer team heard how some Houghton Regis councillors are starting to give up on, and are wary of, raising various issues and jointly working with their principal authority, Central Bedfordshire. This is because they regularly feel Central Bedfordshire ignores them, or responds too slowly to the issues they raise. **The peer team however encourages Houghton Regis to continue working with Central Bedfordshire to raise, explore and address such issues.** Both the town and principal councils serve the same Houghton Regis populations and therefore need to work effectively together to best do so. Recommendation 5 explores this further.

Recommendation 4 - develop long-term financial planning, eg a lifecycle plan of assets maintenance and their refurbishment, at least a three-year budget, and a reserves strategy that allocates funding to long-term projects and long-term maintenance

As part of addressing this recommendation, the Town Clerk has developed an initial three-year financial forecast for 2026/29. This is based on available capital and revenue expenditure figures, and other intelligence including the council's corporate, CPC and neighbourhood action plans. Houghton Regis's developing asset renewal and maintenance plan will further inform the forecast whilst ensuring the best use and longevity of the council's assets.

Houghton Regis has also developed a reserves policy in relation to this recommendation, including its desired general reserves levels and intention not to use them for revenue expenditure. The council is additionally drafting a reserves strategy to establish how to allocate its reserves to long-term projects, including its asset renewal and maintenance plan.

In preparing its 2025/26 budget however, Houghton Regis has identified a potential deficit of approximately £250,000 unless it can find ways to mitigate it, such as service cuts and/or increased council tax. The reasons for this potential deficit include: increased costs for any new staff, teams and delivery of their work, training and development, national insurance contributions further to the Autumn Budget 2024, and staff review outcomes including spinal pay increases.

To help tackle this deficit, and manage the council's finances more generally, Houghton Regis's councillors need to have a good understanding of the council's finances. The peer team heard from councillors and staff through this progress review however that councillors receive a lot of financial information but do not always understand it. This could impede the council's ability to best budget for and deliver its services for its residents and businesses. The Corporate Service Committee undertakes much of this work but it is ultimately the Town Council that needs to approve its budget via a full council meeting. **Houghton Regis should therefore offer all its councillors further finance training and development as soon as possible, again possibly through NALC and the Bedfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils. Council officers should also present key financial facts and context clearly and succinctly to their councillors.** This will help inform councillors so they can influence and approve the council's budgets as effectively as possible.

Recommendation 5 - reset your relationship with Central Bedfordshire at strategic level to agree and prioritise shared objectives, for example regarding the Houghton Regis town centre action plan and the devolvement of assets, and make further use of your existing relationships with other local partners

Since its original CPC, the council has worked hard, including via the Town Clerk's actions, to strengthen engagement and ways of working with Central Bedfordshire. This includes productive relationship building between the Town Clerk and Central Bedfordshire's Chief Executive. Following an initial positive first meeting between the two, with its clear, jointly agreed agenda, they have agreed to meet every six months to discuss and progress shared strategic issues, which is positive progress.

The peer team heard that there have been some challenges with the Houghton Regis Partnership Committee including the principal authority's reduced attendance.

Houghton Regis should engage with the principal authority to establish and address the cause of this reduced attendance so enhanced attendance can benefit the committee's work.

To assist this, the council recognises it should build on recent positive partnership meetings, such as those that have positively considered the transfer of the sports centre.

Forging better relationships and work between the two councils through these meetings could lead to further opportunities. They could for example set up one-to-one meetings between Houghton Regis and Central Bedfordshire councillors with the same portfolios, twin hatters (whereby councillors represent both councils) and/or between councillors at both councils who represent the same ward. Joint meetings like this could lead to more beneficial, mutual work on sports hall provision, and community centres as particularly relevant to Recommendation 8 of this report.

Recommendation 6 - develop a plan to further improve and/or move your offices, including immediately making the reception area more welcoming and informative, so they are fit for future purpose

After extensive research and consideration of potential sites to move to, Houghton Regis has decided to remain at its existing location. A key reason for this is the council already owning its offices. This avoids: additional costs in setting up and

residing in new premises, and a likely negative view of the council spending on itself rather than the communities it serves. The council has also appointed architectural consultants to review and improve its current offices as per this CPC recommendation. **Houghton Regis should allow the architectural consultants to innovatively consider all possible options for its offices** and not rule anything out, to make the most of this opportunity.

Recommendation 7 - improve your communications strategy so you do not just promote your own services but also those throughout the whole of Houghton Regis, including those delivered by community groups, via for example your Town Crier magazine, website, leaflets and phone

Houghton Regis has increased its drive and made significant improvements in communicating with its residents. This includes: reviewing and improving the council's website; plans for new physical and digital noticeboards to promote local stakeholders' events, services and other opportunities; and reviewing, rebranding and reintroducing the town's previous mascot Regis the lion.

The council has also notably improved its communications and engagement with wider stakeholders, especially its Bidwell and Linmere housing developers and residents. Houghton Regis specifically invites Linmere and Bidwell housing development representatives to attend the council's Community Engagement Sub Committee, and these meetings are open to the public. Developers are transferring allotments and could potentially transfer other assets and the management of them and related funding to the council, for local community use. Work like this is increasing stakeholders' understanding of what the council does, and how they can better work together. Additionally, this will help current and future boundary review discussions, for example as more local residents and other stakeholders see how they identify with and belong to the existing, expanding Houghton Regis area. Work with these new housing developments should not be to the detriment of other Houghton Regis residents, many of whom have lived in the more established town and area for a long time. **The council must therefore continue to engage with all its communities, not just its newest ones.**

Additionally, Houghton Regis has commissioned external advisory support from December 2024 to February 2025 to review and improve the council's overall communications strategy. This will bring together and review the effectiveness all Houghton Regis' communications work, including that outlined above, into one comprehensive approach that the council can develop further. Houghton Regis will then be able to most effectively promote its work and services to local residents, businesses and visitors, ensuring they recognise the opportunities available, how to use them, and how to engage with the council as needed.

Recommendation 8 - develop a plan to create your community centres – in the town centre and in all your estates

In starting this work, the council went right back to basics. This included exploring and defining for itself what a community centre is, for example a community space for hire, or a space that hosts managed services, from libraries to cafés. The council is using its definition to comprehensively list and map all possible, existing community centres within the Houghton Regis area. Once the council has completed this, it will review each existing centre's owner, location, current and future use and demand, viability, issues and gaps to identify its maximum potential. Houghton Regis will then use this analysis to consider, develop and agree its best options as a crucial part of delivering its corporate plan. Council officers will present this analysis and options appraisal to the Town Council in the new year for agreement of next steps.

As part of this work, the peer team strongly suggests that Houghton Regis:

- establishes which Central Bedfordshire councillor leads on/has portfolio responsibility for the devolvement of such centre/asset ownership and/or management – and builds a good relationship with them to progress this agenda
- prioritises the identification of centres/assets with community designation – that is to say those for community use. This is so for example any stakeholder acquiring these assets can own, share or run them for the longest time at the most affordable rates as required for the benefit of local communities. Centres'/assets' owners could otherwise refurbish and sell them for maximum commercial or other gain, which could mean much shorter lifespans as community spaces, if the owners were able to sell them at all on this basis

- talks to owners of centres/assets the council wants to prioritise about transferring those centres/assets to, or sharing them with Houghton Regis via agreed contracts of specified lengths. The council must negotiate and agree such contracts on a community designation basis at the lowest possible cost for the reasons outlined in the previous bullet
- registers its interest with relevant/priority community centres/assets such as local colleges to secure the future of as many as possible, whether that is by purchasing, sharing or otherwise engaging with or having a say on them.

Houghton Regis recognises the importance of this area of work to deliver various aspects of its corporate plan. It also recognises that Central Bedfordshire has a key role and circumstances in this, for example as the current owner of various community centres/assets in the area. **The council must therefore progress this agenda with Central Bedfordshire as much and as soon as it can, to make the most of currently existing opportunities**, especially relating to the latter's ownership of existing community centres/assets.

Recommendation 9 - create an implementation group to ensure you deliver your neighbourhood plan, and set a renewal date to review and rewrite it

As mentioned under Recommendation 3, the council at its meeting this month will consider establishing a new neighbourhood plan implementation sub-committee. This follows the council's neighbourhood plan referendum in 2024, whereby 86 per cent of approximately 2000 respondents (about 10 per cent of its population) voted in favour of the plan. It also follows the council's subsequent consideration and work through its planning committee in response to this CPC recommendation.

Houghton Regis is also considering extending its planning committee's remit to drive delivery of the plan. **The council will need to ensure any such extended planning committee remit complements and aligns with that of any new neighbourhood plan implementation sub-committee and futures committee.** This will avoid potential duplication, overlap and confusion between these committees.

Once all of these potential new committees have been established as agreed, **they will together need to agree a renewal date to review and rewrite the neighbourhood plan.** This will ensure the plan takes on board any key new

emerging issues and continually responds to its neighbourhoods' latest needs.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Houghton Regis for undertaking this Progress Review.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions to determine how the council wishes to progress.

In the meantime, the council can discuss other support it requires with NALC by emailing Anders Hanson at anders.hanson@nalc.gov.uk, or by contacting the Bedfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils. Alternatively Rachel Litherland, the LGA's Principal Adviser for the East of England at rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk may also be able to discuss further support.