

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Houghton Regis Town Council

Tuesday 26 to Thursday 28 March 2024

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge



Contents

- 1. Introduction 3
- 2. Executive summary..... 4
- 3. Recommendations 5
- 4. Summary of peer challenge approach 7
- 5. Feedback 9
- 6. Next steps 23

1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance, governance and other information, then spending in this case three days at Houghton Regis Town Council (HRTC) to provide robust, strategic and credible challenge, and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of sector-led improvement (SLI) put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are: responsible for their own performance, accountable locally not nationally, and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

In 2019/20, the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), in collaboration with the LGA, piloted two CPCs with Falmouth and Chippenham town councils (TCs). The concept, design and delivery of these CPCs reflected the long established and successful CPC model outlined above.

The two pilots were successful, and feedback was positive, helping to shape, inform and support the two TCs' improvement ambitions. The learning from these two CPCs has helped shape and inform this CPC offer for local councils.

NALC and the LGA have since delivered three further local council CPCs, including HRTC's. This CPC offer for parish and town councils, focussed primarily on 'super' town councils, is utilising the ever growing strengths and experience of NALC, including its engagement and support, the LGA and its peer challenge expertise, and peers from the town and parish sector.

Peers remain at the heart of the peer challenge process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

This report outlines the key findings of the peer team and the recommendations that HRTC are required to action.

2. Executive summary

Houghton Regis is a modern community, centred around a historical core. Two new areas of major housing and other development on its northern and eastern edge - Bidwell West and Linmere - bring tremendous opportunities and challenges. HRTC is therefore on the verge of a very exciting journey as one of the fastest-growing towns in the United Kingdom, which will take the council out of its comfort zone as it becomes a larger local or 'super council' as defined by NALC. This is primarily due to HRTC's ambitious corporate and neighbourhood plans, as well as the two rapidly growing developments.

The council has achieved much already, which will serve it well on its journey, including its recently completed artificial football pitch, management of open spaces, activity programmes for its younger and older communities, and other examples throughout this report. The peer team was impressed with these achievements and HRTC's commitment to build on these.

This journey also includes a community governance review due in 2025, which will predominantly consider the area's ward boundaries and number of councillors. HRTC must take an early and proactive part in this review, for example by preparing and promoting a robust case, and develop it further by fully engaging with all its residents throughout Houghton Regis. This will ensure the council and all its local communities play their maximum role from the outset in informing and shaping this review in light of what Houghton Regis needs.

What greatly helps HRTC address these key opportunities and challenges are its councillors and staff who are all highly committed to delivering the best services to all Houghton Regis residents. They also recognise the need to increase the council's staffing levels to deliver their corporate plan objectives. Additionally, the peer team repeatedly heard throughout its visit that HRTC's staff has many operational talents generally that are currently underused.

HRTC's committees could also delegate their current operational oversight to staff. This will help these committees best focus on HRTC's strategic agenda. The council is not yet doing this fully but needs to, to best support delivery of its objectives. HRTC also needs to become more strategic. This is because as the Bidwell West and Linmere developments and populations grow, so does the agenda of the council, far

beyond the successful delivery of its existing services. As a result of these developments, HRTC has grown from a small to a medium-sized business; it is a 'super council' as defined by NALC and as per the view of various HRTC neighbouring local councils. It therefore now needs to step up to this new, bigger and more strategic agenda.

What does not help the council on this journey is its political infighting, especially in the public domain, amongst HRTC's political groups. This is turning the public off local politics and developments, impeding effective decision-making and potentially damaging the council's reputation. The latter would be particularly detrimental given the council's many successes outlined throughout this report, especially when there is so much to gain by progressing this work positively together.

3. 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:

- 3.1 Set formal annual committee and staff objectives to progress your corporate plan, including the setting of measurable, annual targets** – you have helpfully delegated components of the corporate plan to specific committees but there are no performance management processes at committee/delivery level, and only some links between staff objectives and the corporate plan. You therefore do not know how you are progressing against your corporate objectives. Aligning committee and staff objectives with the plan consistently across the council will help you monitor, address and evidence this progress.

- 3.2 Delegate committee and SMT operational decision-making and activities to your staff so your senior politicians and management team can focus on strategic issues** – your focus is rightly becoming more strategic but your senior politicians and managers are spending much time on operational instead of strategic matters. This does not make the most of their strategic, nor the wider staff's operational skills. It is also slowing your strategic progress. Delegating in these recommended ways will give your senior politicians and staff maximum time to progress your strategic work.

- 3.3 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** – your council meetings need to be more effective and strategic to help achieve your ambitious corporate plan. Too much time for example is spent on low-priority, operational items. Weighting strategic agenda items is just one of several ways suggested in this report to help you enhance your meetings’ effectiveness.
- 3.4 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** – your current financial planning makes it difficult for you to securely forecast and plan your expenditure beyond the current financial year. Develop your long-term financial planning for your own financial stability and knowledge and as a requirement of all local councils.
- 3.5 Reset your relationship with Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC) 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** – your strategic relationship with CBC is not effective and you must strengthen it to support delivery of your objectives. Use opportunities through this CPC, including meeting CBC’s Chief Executive, to explore and reset new ways to address and progress these issues including objective setting to deliver positive outcomes.
- 3.6 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** – your reception area appears very ‘closed’ and does not encourage visitors to engage with you. You also have ambitious plans for Houghton Regis that will require the council’s expansion and more engagement with your residents and others. You should therefore develop a plan that enables your offices to best contribute to your corporate plan objectives.

- 3.7 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** – the lack of information about everything available locally means many residents are missing out on opportunities. So improve your communications strategy with your local partners to enable local people to make the most of what is available and to enhance people’s positive perception of the area.
- 3.8 Develop a plan to create your community centres – in the town centre and in all your estates** – these centres are vital to delivering your corporate and neighbourhood plans but many have been lost, with no plans to replace them. You therefore need to develop a plan urgently with CBC and other local partners to address this to help meet your corporate objectives.
- 3.9 Create an implementation group to ensure you deliver your neighbourhood plan, and set a renewal date to review and rewrite it** – you have developed a good neighbourhood plan. You now need to deliver it. So make the most of your momentum so far to plan the implementation required. Start by creating an implementation group to agree and ensure the plan’s delivery and its renewal date, so the plan becomes a reality and has a live, on-going plan to achieve it.

4. Summary of peer challenge approach

4.1 The peer team

CPCs are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the CPC and peers were selected by the LGA on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- 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 TC
- NALC Peer – Jane Moore, Senior Solicitor and Legal Manager, NALC
- Shadow Peer – Bhoomika Krishna, IT and Business Management

Assistant, LGA

- LGA Peer Challenge Manager – Vicki Goddard
- LGA Project Support Officer – Suraiya Khatun.

4.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes that form the core components of all CPCs. 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 and achieving improved outcomes for all its communities?
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 clear 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?

As part of the five core elements outlined above, every council includes a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance, and assurance.

HRTC also asked the peer team to feedback on the theme of Regeneration Growth and whether the council is sufficiently resourced and prepared for this, especially in terms of its staffing, budgets and governance, to accommodate the significant housing, community, infrastructure and other growth planned for Houghton Regis.

4.3 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 they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information to familiarise themselves with the council and its challenges. This included a position statement prepared by HRTC in advance of the peer team's visit, which provided a clear steer on the council's local context and what the peer team should focus on.

The peer team then spent three days onsite at the council, during which they:

- gathered evidence, information and views from more than 25 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
- spoke to approximately 47 people, including a range of council staff and councillors, 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 elected members.

5. Feedback

5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

HRTC adopted its ambitious corporate plan in January 2024 to deliver it from April 2024. The peer team was impressed with the plan because of its detailed nature, wide focus and understanding of the specific issues and key problems for Houghton Regis. The peer team therefore commends the council for this pioneering plan, which incorporated feedback from various mechanisms. These included from its own councillors, staff and public consultation, which HRTC distributed digitally and via its Town Crier council magazine.

The council has similarly involved its communities, on a clear, widespread basis, in preparing its neighbourhood plan, which is going to a local referendum in May 2024.

Differences and lack of clarity/alignment between HRTC's neighbourhood and corporate plan priorities and purpose are however causing confusion for stakeholders. This may be due to the council launching these plans at a similar time. In any case, this confusion could affect the plans' implementation if differences and

alignments between them are not clarified. Opportunities could be lost for example to make the most of partners' collective resources, to achieve both these and other plans' objectives, and related work could be duplicated or missed out. The council must therefore ensure its stakeholders, including its residents, understand the rationale, objectives and purpose of its neighbourhood and corporate plans respectively to address this confusion.

Neighbourhood Plans can quickly become 'stale'/static and may be ignored by the planning authority. So HRTC should make the most of its Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group's position within its planning committee to ensure the plan remains a live issue.

Via its community engagement work, HRTC supports and engages well with its impressive youth council, which organises local events and campaigns for young people, their wider families and communities. The council also works well with its older residents through the HRTC Later Living Group, which organises various regular activities. The council grants both groups autonomy to shape and deliver their programmes as per the needs of older and younger residents.

HRTC already delivers and manages many high-quality services and assets in the town centre and wider Houghton Regis area. These enhance outcomes for local people and include the: village green and its pavilion, permanent Christmas tree and floral displays, Houghton Hall Park, the Tithe Farm skateboard park and recently completed pavilion and artificial football pitch, which the council is leasing to the Bedfordshire Football Association, and a whole events programme. HRTC is organising other such delivery through its corporate and neighbourhood plans.

The council engages well with its communities in many ways but its office reception area needs to be more welcoming to its visitors. The peer team heard in several meetings, and experienced for itself, how this area appears very 'closed', quiet and unwelcoming due to the glass screen, the further material screen behind it and the 'please ring for assistance' doorbell. This is in stark contrast to the friendly, helpful staff who work behind these barriers. With its ambitious, expanding plans for Houghton Regis, HRTC should develop a plan to make its offices more fit for purpose, including making its existing reception area more welcoming and informative, and potentially moving to bigger and/or enhanced premises. This work

will not only improve relationships with local people when they need to visit the council but could also provide opportunities for local people to engage more, for example via meeting rooms and community spaces. This could lead to further enhanced local outcomes through HRTC's corporate plan.

5.1.1 Performance

HRTC has allocated initial, high-level aims from its corporate plan to its individual committees. The council is planning further work on this, especially where objectives come under the responsibility of more than one committee. This will clarify which committee will be responsible for delivering what part of these objectives.

Individual staff appraisal and performance management is in place and seems to be working well generally. The peer team could not explore this in great detail but there is clearly a policy in place with at least some evidence of positive, supportive and regular meetings between line managers and their staff. There are also some links between individual staff and corporate plan objectives. HRTC needs to build on this work so all staff have measurable individual objectives linked to the corporate plan.

At committee/delivery level, there are no annual SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, timebound) targets. There are also no formal, consistent performance management processes across the council for committees and staff to measure and show progress towards and delivery of HRTC's corporate plan objectives. The council therefore needs to introduce such targets and processes, which will also help identify and address any emerging issues.

The council also needs to engage more widely with its communities beyond its work with younger and older people. This will help ensure HRTC plans and delivers its services and assets for all its residents and visitors. To assist this, HRTC needs to collect, measure and use data on other demographic groups. HRTC already has a range of local demographic data including that from the national census and joint Local Insight and Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion reports. The latter however does not include data on key protected characteristics, for example those: with disabilities, from ethnic minorities, of different beliefs and from the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual and many other terms) community. If the council does not understand the full make-up of its community, it cannot best respond to its needs, and the peer team saw no evidence

of HRTC using its existing data to inform and progress service delivery and strategic plans. As its population grows, especially in the new housing developments, it will be ever more crucial for HRTC to collect, monitor and use such data to ensure it best serves its increasingly diverse population.

5.2 Organisational and place leadership

The council's committee chairs and political group leaders fully support the corporate plan and work well with staff to help deliver it. The peer team heard evidence of this throughout its visit from various HRTC councillors and staff. These good relationships between its political leaders and staff aid general good work throughout HRTC.

The council's senior management team (SMT) works well together; the peer team saw this firsthand and repeatedly heard this from others during its visit. SMT's work with its service managers is just as positive. They all understand their roles and contribute well to the delivery of HRTC's corporate plan.

SMT is not however fully engaged in and leading on strategic, corporate management. This is chiefly because they and their committees are primarily focused on operational matters. This means their evident, existing strategic skills are not being used fully. As a result, HRTC is missing significant long-term opportunities to plan and make the most of its and others' relationships, resources and ambitions to best serve its residents, businesses and visitors. HRTC's committees and SMT therefore need to delegate operational decision-making and activities to HRTC staff. Examples of this are where payments under £1000 could be delegated from the Town Clerk to a separate Responsible Financial Officer to monitor, and where officers could take low level planning decisions, under specified criteria. This will give committees and SMT maximum time to focus on the council's strategic agenda. Line managers and their staff will need to monitor workloads though, through existing staff appraisal and day to day managerial processes, to ensure staff are not overloaded as a result.

HRTC has various good officer relationships with CBC at service delivery level, for example regarding corporate, neighbourhood and town centre plans, and community assets, with notably a CBC representative describing the council as a "partner of choice" operationally. HRTC also has good relationships with local partners and community groups, as evidenced by those the peer team spoke to during its visit.

This includes how the council easily called on at least four local partners to support this CPC's logistics. The peer team also met recipients of grants who spoke highly of HRTC's easy processes and good controls that work well for them. Such positive, productive relationships enable a range of delivery work to progress well within Houghton Regis and should further develop to maximise opportunities.

The council's relationship with CBC at strategic level is not effective so needs to be strengthened as a matter of priority, especially through the Houghton Regis Town Partnership Committee, which is not working. The peer team particularly heard from HRTC colleagues of various examples relating to time taken by CBC colleagues to respond to issues raised with them. This CPC has though opened opportunities for the HRTC's Town Clerk to meet CBC's Chief Executive to specifically explore new and reset ways of joint working to address these issues. Solutions could include different types of meetings, attendees and agenda, with a more strategic focus. Further opportunities include the council's Town Clerk working with and learning from other town councils in the area and with this CPC's peer team. Indeed, HRTC's Town Clerk has already taken up the peer team's Member Peer mentoring offer as part of these opportunities. These enhanced relationships would then enable HRTC and CBC to agree and prioritise shared objectives including those on the Houghton Regis town centre action plan and the devolvement of community assets. HRTC does not yet have a strategy for the latter but has had some initial discussions on it. The council now needs to use these discussions to develop such a strategy to achieve its related corporate objectives.

This journey also includes a community governance review due in 2025, which will predominantly consider the area's ward boundaries and number of councillors. HRTC must take an early and proactive part in this review from the outset by preparing and promoting a robust case and develop it further by fully engaging with all its residents throughout Houghton Regis. Within this robust case, the council should include its own views and proposals, based on all available information, data, forecasts, different scenarios and local views through community engagement throughout Houghton Regis. This includes specifically focussing on electoral numbers as a key element. This will ensure the council and all its local communities play their maximum role in informing and shaping this review in light of what Houghton Regis needs.

Key new opportunities exist for HRTC to not only promote the community

governance review and much wider work that it delivers for the area but to also better engage with its residents. These opportunities involve the council getting out much more into the new Bidwell West and Linmere housing developments, as well as its older estates, beyond its current community events. New community engagement activities could comprise rotating regular council meetings, holding specific ones, and introducing regular HRTC councillor surgeries. Increased engagement via such new activities could help communities feel they own the community governance review and other work, encouraging them to support it through any required vote or any other decision-making.

5.3 Governance and culture

There is a friendly, positive, supportive and productive culture at HRTC. This includes working relationships between councillors, managers and staff, as evidenced by all those the peer team met throughout its visit. Councillors trust their staff to deliver sound advice to them whilst not relying on and taking that advice at face value. Councillors discuss and question such advice and issues as needed in challenging yet constructive ways. All staff and councillors are committed to the area and want to deliver the best services to its residents, visitors and businesses. This positive atmosphere helps all to progress their work.

From a staff perspective, this culture makes HRTC an employer of choice, resulting in high staff retention and satisfaction. Many staff are Houghton Regis residents.

From a political perspective however, there is too much friction between HRTC's political groups including criticism of other's work, situations and views. A certain amount of friction is inevitable and understandable between local political groups. The peer team however saw and heard about many public examples of this on social media, including HRTC councillors making crass remarks about various issues. Local community organisations mentioned, unprompted, that infighting amongst councillors is deterring volunteers and inhibiting work. This is a real shame, when these organisations are committed to their projects and interests, and work well in partnership with HRTC staff to secure their delivery. Political infighting is also delaying the search for new burial grounds in the area. Key impacts of this friction are that it is: impeding effective decision making, turning the public off local politics and developments, and potentially damaging HRTC's reputation. The latter would be

particularly detrimental given the council's many successes as outlined throughout this report, especially when there is so much to gain by progressing this work positively together. Inward investment, further grant funding and work with existing and potentially new partners are just some examples of how more positive political debate could attract additional opportunities to Houghton Regis. The council therefore needs to find ways to address this as soon as possible.

HRTC councillors and staff have concerns about the effectiveness of council meetings. From a political perspective, the peer team heard several times that if all committee chairs were chosen on the basis of their skills, experience and leadership qualities rather than political affiliation, this could address the friction previously mentioned.

The effectiveness of council meetings relates more to the administrative organisation and running of them. Too much agenda time for example is spent on low-priority, operational items and reports that could often be better received or noted rather than discussed. Conversely, more agenda time should be spent on more strategic matters. By way of example, a set of recent HRTC planning committee minutes includes individual applications, including minor domestic proposals, which are reported individually with recommendations, whereby the council is a consultee with no decision making powers. The item in the same minutes dealing with strategic development sites including Linmere and Bidwell West however contains the single line "No substantive update to report". Given HRTC needs to focus more on strategic issues, the peer team was surprised there was nothing more to report on those development sites and other more strategic agenda items.

Committees could delegate operational items to staff, enabling committees to focus on more strategic matters, as outlined elsewhere in this report. Agendas and agenda items currently prepared by more junior staff could be strengthened by further insight from more senior staff. Adding timings and weighting to strategic items, and reviewing the need for regular standing items are just other examples that may enable better focus and prioritisation, assist discussion and decision-making, and make best use of time generally.

Local discussions regarding the devolvement of community assets from CBC to HRTC are in their infancy. HRTC needs to address its strategic relationship with CBC

as outlined above so CBC provides requested information in a timely way, enabling HRTC to progress this work. Delays in receiving this information are preventing HRTC from addressing these issues within its corporate plan's timescales.

The council has appetite to take on new grounds/land but the peer team heard less appetite to own and manage at least some buildings, although HRTC recently approached CBC to take on both land and buildings and is taking on a new building in Bidwell West. Such less appetite may make it difficult for HRTC to achieve its many related corporate plan objectives if there are not sufficient community centres to support them. The council should therefore explore new ways as a matter of urgency, for example through further discussion, to enhance, agree and clarify and strengthen its position on owning and managing such buildings. This enhanced position can then inform and progress the council's wide plans for its community centres. The more community buildings HRTC owns, the more it can influence how they are used to meet the council's community corporate plan objectives.

HRTC should also work more with CBC to make such buildings and community centres that the latter owns in Houghton Regis more fit for purpose. Houghton Regis' communities are becoming more diverse, not least via the Bidwell West and Linmere areas. So community buildings need to be best fit for purpose so all communities can meet, hold events and use the facilities as required, for example through accessible toilets and multi-faith rooms. More is said about this in Section 5.6.

5.4 Financial planning and management

HRTC staff have been highly successful in acquiring grant and Section 106 funding, and the peer team commend them for this. Staff's bidding skills and tenacity to acquire such funding on council committees' behalf have enabled HRTC to significantly improve the lives of Houghton Regis' residents, from the new Tithe Farm artificial football pitch and pavilion, to hygiene/cleaning packs for individual residents.

The council has healthy financial reserves; its general reserve balance at the time of writing this report was predicted at 31 March 2024 to be £500,802. It holds three months of general reserve but should hold four months of expenditure as a general reserve, given the council's large assets and increasing risk levels. HRTC needs to align its earmarked reserves to its lifecycle plan of assets maintenance and their refurbishment, once the council has developed that plan. This will provide HRTC with

the evidence and clarity of exactly when it will be using these reserves. It will also enable the council to plan to build up funds for the longer term refurbishment of its assets, such as refurbishing all its pavilions every 15 years, topsoiling, scarifying, weed controlling and the goal rotation of sports grounds every five years. HRTC has however been using these reserves for several years to pay for revenue costs - not capital projects. Using this approach to fund revenue costs is not sustainable. HRTC must therefore address this issue as a priority to ensure sufficient reserves for any future capital programme or emergency situation that may require such funding.

Alongside the current unsustainability of its long-term reserves is the council's absence of long-term financial planning. The peer team only saw evidence of annual financial planning. This makes it very difficult for HRTC to robustly forecast and plan any expenditure beyond the current financial year. The council must therefore develop at least a three-year financial budget - as required by the Corporate Governance and Accountability Practitioners Guide, a lifecycle plan of assets maintenance and their refurbishment, and a reserves strategy that allocates funding to long-term projects, maintenance and refurbishment including funds directly linked to the lifecycle plan mentioned above. This is not only for HRTC's own financial stability but a requirement of all local councils.

HRTC otherwise has satisfactory accounting practices and continues to build on those. It has been introducing a new purchase order system, which is critical in managing finances in a growing organisation such as this council, and has refreshed its key budget holder responsibilities, adding specific responsibility for managing its budgets. The council additionally has a solid and improved investment policy, further to recent changes that it has made, including those to treasury management. These changes include transferring some of its long term Churches, Charities and Local Authorities property investment funding into a more accessible, lower risk product.

HRTC is also considering separating its Responsible Financial Officer and Town Clerk roles. The peer team encourages the council to agree to and implement this change within the next six months. This would not only avoid conflicts of interest through one person holding both roles but would also make the most of existing skills and experience within the council. It would additionally free up some of the Town Clerk's time to focus more on strategic issues as suggested elsewhere in this report. The council should particularly review the Town Clerk's delegation levels in respect

of financial decisions. A good marker for this could be that payments under £1000 should be delegated to a new, separate Responsible Financial Officer.

The peer team heard that HRTC is in the process of agreeing the lease of its recently completed artificial football pitch with the Bedfordshire Football Association. The peer team strongly recommends that in doing this, HRTC agrees with the Bedfordshire Football Association, and confirms with them in writing, for example through any key contract, the detailed specifics of the lease, particularly with respect to timing of the Football Association's obligations to refurbish pitches and a 10-year replacement of the surfacing of the artificial football pitch. This includes absolute clarity of all the related finances and responsibilities of both partners, and potentially increasing the length of the lease. The peer team did not see enough of these details. This raised concerns that whilst this lease will have many benefits, it may have financial weaknesses and otherwise may not be used to its full potential. Further consideration, agreement and written confirmation of such matters from both partners would therefore mitigate and may even avoid potential issues.

There is belief in and outside of HRTC that it has excessive reserves, although this was not a view shared by the peer team. A significant factor contributing to this is that a lifecycle plan does not exist to explain how funding would be used on new projects and long-term maintenance and refurbishment of all HRTC's assets. The council needs to devise this lifecycle plans as soon as possible to not only inform local opinion but to plan for that expenditure both short and long-term.

Not all HRTC councillors understand or have sufficient oversight of the council's finances and other key strategic issues. The council therefore needs to further develop its councillor training, development and support programme regarding HRTC's finances and strategy, which NALC and the Bedfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils may be able to assist with. Even short presentations at the beginning of relevant meetings by HRTC colleagues would give councillors key points to consider regarding the topic in hand.

Full council formally reviews, and SMT oversees and leads, the work on the council's corporate risk management strategy and schedule. Amongst other things, this work identifies and categorises various specific risks to HRTC and how to mitigate them but does not include broader and arguably more likely risks. These include the loss of

key staff – succession planning is mentioned in the next section - acts of god, which are not insurable with therefore more unwillingness from insurance companies to take on town/parish risk, and that the expected uplift in precept from new developments may happen much more slowly or not at all. The council should therefore incorporate and address these and other considered broader risks as part of its strategy and financial planning. HRTC should also clarify what risk it is willing to accept, so it is best prepared for such circumstances if they become a reality.

5.5 Capacity for improvement

As part of the positive, supportive culture outlined previously in this report, it was clear to the peer team that line managers across the council support their staff in various ways to help them give their best at and outside of work. These flexibilities help staff manage caring, parenting and other factors in their personal lives, and deliver their best for HRTC and its communities.

Staff across the council have been supported by their managers to gain professional sector qualifications including the Certificate in Local Council Administration. Whilst this is positive staff development, HRTC should consider whether this qualification is the most relevant for all staff, and how to make the most of those qualified staff. Financial Introduction to Local Council Administration or specific National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health, and risk assessment training for example may be more relevant. Staff are further supported more generally by the council's human resource and governance policies, which are due to be incorporated into a HRTC staff handbook.

There is shared understanding across the council that more staff and the funding thereof are needed to meet its ambitions and expansion plans, such as staff to maintain newly acquired grounds. Now is therefore a good time for HRTC to review its latest staff and committee structures against its corporate plan objectives and financial plans. This will help HRTC plan and fund these future staff.

HRTC also knows that some staff are harder to recruit than others, including grounds maintenance workers, whereby there is national shortage of skills. This is a key issue for the council, which is looking to recruit more such posts as a result of acquiring more grounds that need regular upkeep. HRTC already has ideas to address this, including additional/increased payments and apprenticeships. The latter would not

only fill those posts but could help secure these skills and capacity for the future. The council now needs to turn these ideas into plans to address these issues.

HRTC's existing staff have a lot of expertise that is not yet being fully utilised. This was evidenced by staff across the council telling the peer team about their skills and experience that they are not currently using because SMT is undertaking a lot of operational work that staff could be doing. The recommended operational delegations to staff mentioned elsewhere in this report will help this but further opportunities may exist to make the most of these talents. HRTC should therefore explore and make the most of these, for example starting with a skills audit.

The peer team heard much evidence that many HRTC councillors and staff rely on the Town Clerk. This is particularly due to the amount and quality of operational work that she and her wider SMT deliver, which they could delegate to other council staff, who have the skills to do that work. There is no current succession planning at HRTC, which is a key risk for this and other posts within a current staff headcount of 24. Work gaps resulting from anyone leaving for any amount of time for any reason could be damaging to the work of the council. This is why the peer team highlights in the previous section the loss of key staff as a significant risk that the council should mitigate for, and why in this section the peer team recommends HRTC develops a succession plan.

5.6 Regeneration Growth

As outlined in section 5.1, HRTC has delivered and maintains many successful projects throughout Houghton Regis, and intends to deliver more via its corporate and neighbourhood plans. This should all help respond to the needs of the expanding Bidwell West and Linmere housing developments.

The peer team heard that many HRTC councillors initially opposed the new housing developments but now just tolerate them. Whatever their views, these developments are here to stay and will further expand. To enable the council to best deliver its corporate and neighbourhood plans for the whole of Houghton Regis, all councillors must therefore fully embrace these new developments so their decision-making on behalf of the whole Houghton Regis area is as strong, strategic and beneficial as possible. This is key, given the new developments' local significance in terms of population, diversity, infrastructure and the need to integrate Bidwell West and

Linmere into the existing Houghton Regis area.

To make best use of HRTC's neighbourhood plan's momentum, the council needs to turn its attention to the plan's implementation. In the first instance, HRTC needs to create an implementation group to agree and ensure the plan's delivery through related activities, and the plan's renewal date.

The Neighbourhood Plan is not relevant to all committees, mainly the planning committee, which includes the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group and its work. The planning committee needs broader terms of reference to address the plan's implementation and renewal issues. The council should also review the skills and experience staff need to deliver the plan's objectives.

Via its corporate, neighbourhood and other plans, HRTC knows the benefits and opportunities its new housing developments are bringing. It also acknowledges, and does not underestimate, the problems and scale of this urban expansion. HRTC now needs to act on these acknowledgements to mitigate any possible detrimental results, for example a smaller town council area with a smaller budget, and/or economic growth moving from the town centre to the new developments.

Community centres play a pivotal role in delivering HRTC corporate and neighbourhood plan objectives. The peer team heard that many of these centres have been lost of late, with no provision to replace them. HRTC needs to work urgently with CBC in particular, through the points and recommendations earlier in this report about refreshed, joint relationship building and appetite for owning and managing more buildings, and with other local partners to develop a plan to formally identify its remaining centres and create new ones as required, across all its estates including the town centre. This may involve for example acquiring and renovating existing premises or developing new ones. It can take substantial time to negotiate, fund, build/acquire and refurbish such facilities. The sooner therefore this work can start, the sooner these centres can be replaced, however it is done, and help deliver HRTC's as well as CBC's objectives. HRTC ownership of such community facilities will also prevent them being disproportionately used in the long term by favoured principal authority projects.

HRTC commissioned a town centre action plan in 2022 through CBC administration of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' Welcome Back fund

but neither HRTC nor CBC are effectively using it. HRTC should update and progress this plan with CBC, again through joint, refreshed relationships, and align it with HRTC's corporate, and neighbourhood plans, and CBC's related plans. This will enable maximum use of and outcomes from the plan, not least for Houghton Regis' residents.

The peer team heard throughout its visit that Houghton Regis and particularly its town centre has some reputational issues. Despite its high business occupancy rates, the town centre seems underused, if not disused. The peer team also heard, particularly through town centre stakeholders, how local perceptions of the centre being a high crime area, as evidenced by market town surveys undertaken, may also be contributing to lower footfall.

The peer team heard how HRTC is working with police and other stakeholders to tackle perceived town crime via initiatives including enhanced closed circuit television. The peer team also heard that the public do not know about this work and needs to, to help improve local perceptions of the area, footfall and other activities.

HRTC's committees also need to set specific objectives to improve and promote the town centre. This could include planting flowers and shrubs, promoting and running historic walks with local heritage and countryside organisations, developing an app to explore and make best use of the town and its surroundings, and creating town retail maps and 'what's on and what to do in Houghton Regis' guides.

Currently there is no wide dissemination of information that promotes Houghton Regis' total offer, from the town centre to the new developments and its older areas. This means many residents, businesses and visitors are missing out on the variety of services, retail, leisure, heritage, parks and wider countryside opportunities available. There are related opportunities to promote the area through merchandise. HRTC and its youth council already use Houghton Regis branded hoodies, wristbands and other items as part of its work, which the wider council could build on. These items act as a symbol of pride and recognition of the good community work and results in the area.

HRTC should therefore improve its communications strategy with its partners - from its community groups to CBC - to further promote Houghton Regis and its many assets and services beyond those of HRTC. This promotion could take place through various digital, physical and face to face ways including the council's Crier magazine,

website, leaflets, telephone options and events. This would not only help enhance people's perception of the area but increase their use of everything it has to offer.

6. Next steps

It is recognised that the senior political and managerial leadership of the council will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. NALC and the Bedfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils may be able to provide on-going support to the council. As part of the CPC, the council is required to have a progress review and publish the findings from this within twelve months of the CPC. The LGA will also publish the progress review report on its website.

The progress review will provide space for the council's senior leadership to report to peers on the progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations, discuss early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC action plan. The progress review will usually be delivered on-site over one day, the date of which is to be confirmed.

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.