

Peer Challenge review - Cabinet May 2025

Recommendations and action plans

6 Key recommendations for Harborough District Council

Recommendations	Service area	Comment	Action	Timeline
Recommendation 1: Determine and communicate the strategic priorities of the council and develop a corporate plan owned by the Cabinet. Align the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the council's transformational strategy to these corporate priorities	Transformation Team Liz Elliott and CMT	<p>There is an urgent need to identify strategic priorities for the council, and to revise the corporate plan so that resources can be allocated appropriately and both staff and the public have clarity about what the council is committed to delivering – which in turn will assist in demonstrating accountability and assurance.</p> <p>The peers suggest a development programme for Cabinet and CMT, working together with external facilitation to enable production of a corporate strategy and action plan.</p>	<p>Agreement and approval of the refreshed Corporate Plan for 2024-2031.</p> <p>Cabinet Away Day</p> <p>Refresh annual Delivery plan 2025/26 - Incls - - Transformation framework - Climate and emergency plan</p> <p>Cabinet Away day</p> <p>Annual delivery Plan 2026-2028</p>	<p>Cabinet approval Jan 2025.</p> <p>Council Approval Feb 2025</p> <p>March 2025</p> <p>Cabinet May 2025</p> <p>June 2025</p> <p>Summer 2025</p>
Recommendation 2: Resolve IT system issues	Finance	Problems identified include being unable to invoice customers, along with a	Recruitment of new Head of Service for Finance.	March 2025

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		<p>number of internal monitoring and management of data gaps. This is a matter of urgency as the council is at risk of losing income and the good will of partners and tenants.</p> <p>The peer team recommend providing regular learning opportunities and IT surgeries to increase IT confidence and competence for councillors and staff.</p>	<p>Embed the new Finance system.</p> <p>Aim for 90% of invoices paid within 30 days.</p> <p>Additional training for staff on finance system.</p> <p>Develop a resource for ongoing staff training for IT confidence and competence.</p>	<p>Jan - March 2025</p> <p>Target hit in Q3.</p>
Recommendation 3: Continue to develop the scrutiny function of the council	Democratic Services Nancy Barnard	<p>Councillors would benefit from support to recognise the value and importance of the scrutiny function and the positive role of the opposition.</p> <p>There is an opportunity to maximise councillor engagement through different scrutiny mechanisms such as deep dives into specific key issues, task and finish groups to deliver time-limited</p>	<p>CfGS are to be deliver further scrutiny training for members</p> <p>A more focused work plan will be agreed with the chairs of each panel, to include the use of other mechanisms for scrutiny</p>	<p>May 2025</p> <p>June 2025</p>

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		<p>investigations into priority issues, eg affordable housing.</p> <p>The peer team suggest working again with CfGS or the LGA to improve the effectiveness of the scrutiny function.</p>		
<p>Recommendation 4: Ensure statutory roles are clearly understood by all councillors, officers and staff</p> <p>.</p>	CMT	<p>The peer team recommend councillor briefings or workshops on the updated roles outlined in The Code of Practice on Good Governance.</p> <p>(Code of Practice on Good Governance for Local Authority Statutory Officers - Solace). It would be useful to remind staff as well, perhaps through the regular briefings.</p> <p>CMT should consider adding the Monitoring Officer to the leadership team</p>	<p>Training for councillors on roles.</p> <p>Staff briefing on statutory officers.</p> <p>CMT invite Monitoring officer to attend meetings</p>	<p>Away Day March 2025 All member briefing May 2025</p> <p>December 2024</p>
<p>Recommendation 5: Consider how to change structures and processes to accommodate</p>	CMT	<p>Changes may be necessary, for example, timing, length and format (eg in person, hybrid) of meetings, and increased use of deputising roles for some</p>	<p>Efficient and effective communications for portfolio holders to be reviewed</p>	<p>Summer 2025</p>

Recommendations	Service area	Comment	Action	Timeline
councillors, particularly those in the Cabinet, who have considerable time constraints.		<p>key posts. Support should be given to councillors to fulfil their role.</p> <p>The peer team recommend that Cabinet and senior leadership team work together to improve support to enable councillors to fulfil their roles to the best of their ability.</p>	<p>Media protocols to be reviewed</p> <p>Away day team building exercise</p>	<p>June 2025</p> <p>June 2025</p>
Recommendation 6: Seize investment opportunities and consider market interventions.	CMT	<p>The peer team recommend exploring options with developers (as soon as possible) that have expressed interest, for example in St Mary's Place.</p> <p>Alongside this it is essential that HDC invests time to ensure that they assess options for delivery models and complementary governance arrangements sourcing relevant technical and legal advice to inform this analysis.</p> <p>Before deciding which path to take the council needs to</p>	<p>Develop a risk appetite policy</p> <p>Investment strategy</p> <p>Develop Affordable Housing Strategies</p>	

Recommendations	Service area	Comment	Action	Timeline
		<p>recognise the expertise, long term financial commitments and risks associated with this significant new area of activity for the organisation.</p> <p>HDC should consider whether to intervene to enable increased supply of affordable housing including engaging with Homes England as a grant funding partner.</p> <p>As HDC is not currently a housing stock holding authority careful consideration would also need to be given to the business model, scale of housing delivery contemplated (including the potential need to introduce an HRA) and securing the expertise needed to both deliver and subsequently manage this housing stock.</p> <p>This will require expertise to complement that in the current housing team if HDC is</p>	<p>Budget to been secured for the purchase of temporary accommodation units in 25/26 period.</p>	<p>Cabinet report March 2025</p>

Recommendations	Service area	Comment	Action	Timeline
		to consider being a provider rather than an enabler for affordable housing.		

Whilst there were formally 6 recommendations for HDC within the report there are a few other recommendations or comments on best practice. These recommendations and comments are listed below and will be addressed alongside the main action plan .

Part 2 - Other recommendations/comments captured from the report that links to the key recommendations to be considered for delivery in the action plan,

Recommendation one - Determine and communicate the strategic priorities of the council and develop a corporate plan owned by the Cabinet. Align the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the council's transformational strategy to these corporate priorities

Improvement activity	Service area	Comments	Action/ Other
Corporate strategy and corporate plan development -			
Cabinet has yet to establish and galvanise a clear distinct vision for what it wants to achieve. A refreshed strategic corporate plan and objectives, owned by councillors and officers, is recommended to provide direction and structure to the council's work.	Members	<p>Progress needs to be made on the corporate strategy and a corporate plan as a matter of urgency.</p> <p>Senior officers and the Cabinet need to work together on the strategic direction for the council. The peers recommend that they carve out the time and space to create the conditions where they can work together and decide their own strategic priorities and invest</p>	<p>The peer team recommend a series of workshops with an external facilitator to bring together the Cabinet's collective role, the council's strategic priorities and a corporate plan that the officers can deliver. The peers recommend a series of workshops covering:</p> <p>Action this is picked up in achieving recommendation 1 .</p>

		sufficient time to provide political leadership for the council.	Next steps
Political leadership needs to be more outward looking and embrace the total place approach.	Members		2025/26 strategy has a Key Activity to develop a Growth framework for Harborough The new local plan sets out some strategic objectives for place shaping.
CMT will need to support the Cabinet move into a more strategic space; consideration should be given on how to work through this together. - The Cabinet is overly focused on operational matters and needs to become more strategic in its approach.	CMT	There is a tendency for councillors currently to focus on operational issues (for example, a recent car parking strategy review generated more interest in the machine choice than the details of the strategy). Councillors need to focus on the big picture across the district and illustrate and supplement this with local detail, and senior officers need to be seen to more clearly enforce the boundaries between officer and members roles and responsibilities.	Input from the LGA to member development and away days in 2025/26.
The Annual Governance Statement (AGS) can be a useful reflective tool for the council. It is not primarily a financial document but a	Finance Services	None	To be taken in to consideration in the development of the Next AGS.

document that reflects the council at a snapshot in time. The council's AGS needs to demonstrate a comprehensive self-assessment and enumerate specific areas for improvement with subsequent reporting on progress against the actions identified. It would also benefit from greater consideration of the risks and challenges facing the council , increased focus on how control is exercised by statutory officers, and emerging risks in terms of litigation, expenditure, standards issues and the overall functioning of the council and constitution.			
Some of the council's aspirations will need to be delivered by others. This calls for closer	All service areas	There is limited evidence of comprehensive structured partner engagement and systematically looking externally to do some horizon	Identify council aspirations - Develop partnerships with community, VCS and partners to

working with partners to identify and achieve outcomes together.		scanning. HDC may want to consider the opportunity to establish a partnership forum for the HDC geography perhaps along the lines of an Anchor Institutions Network which could bring the work of key local institutions together around common issues and enhance its community leadership impact.	deliver better outcomes for the Authority. - Strategy and Policy to support this - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Health and wellbeing plan - Voluntary sector Policy - Lightbulb - Community Safety Partnership
Data Collection and evidence led			
The performance management framework doesn't appear to be at the forefront of decision-making. Benchmarking and a focus on productivity needs to be better embedded throughout the organisation	Transformation (Performance) Rob Chew Kay Aitken -	HDC has improved its approach to collecting, analysing and using data relating to service delivery making good use of the Pentana system functionality including collating and reporting data clearly. Officers recognise that the next step is to use the intelligence generated more extensively to inform strategic planning and forecasting. This will form part of the transformation framework	
Developing Priorities for the corporate plan			
Developing Priorities	Transformation Team /CMT /Cabinet	There is a high-level commitment to put "communities" at the heart of HDC's work. However, there is not sufficient definition of what this means, what success looks like, and the role of others in delivering against this (such as parish councils,	Away days are scheduled for work on setting priorities for the corporate plan in March and June 2025.

		local businesses, voluntary sector and community groups). Defining the objectives, methodology and outcomes for major initiative and financial investment is key for building the corporate strategy. The peer team recommend that the coalition translates its conversations about 'common purpose' formally into strategic corporate objectives, being clear and confident about what it wants to achieve. This includes addressing, and adapting to, climate change.	
HDC is largely internally focussed at the moment, but the council needs to move into its place leadership and place shaping role to deliver strategic ambitions for the borough.	Director of Communities Cat Hartley	None	Community development and engagement strategies to be developed which sets out how we work with and for communities and how we have a meaningful two way conversation with them.
Approach to Community Development	Community Partnership Rachal felts	HDC is keen for better community engagement and has identified very significant financial resources for staff to conduct community engagement and to be distributed as community grants, but there is	Development of Community Engagement Approach in 2025.

		<p>limited clarity on the purpose of this initiative or what success will look like. The objectives, methodology and outcomes need to be further developed so that it is clear what needs are being addressed, what is expected of the community development team in its community engagement role (is it to monitor how grants are being spent or to build on community assets and strengthen resilience) and what the council wants to see in terms of the difference its grants will make. The peer team suggest this is addressed urgently with consideration given to options including an Asset Based Community Development approach and the sentiment of creating a place where no one is left behind, everyone belongs, and communities are facilitated to do things for themselves.</p> <p>The public engagement response to budget consultation is limited (eight responses); consideration should be given to alternative methods of engagement for example, establishing a citizens panel (which could then be used for future</p>	<p>Communications and Consultation strategy refresh 2025</p>
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		community engagement), use of existing volunteers, targeted budget workshops (for example with the voluntary and community sectors), and a social media push.	
Local Government Review			
Local Government Review	CEO/CMT/Members	The peer team urges councillors, in responding to government's proposals in respect of LGR, to engage with both mechanisms at a strategic level for example, hosting discussions and workshops for councillors from other district councils to come to a collective view about the future shape of local government in Leicestershire.	Since the Peer Review a Government announcement has been made about the future of 2 tier authorities. As such the Leader and CEO have been working with other local District and Borough Councils in the area in an March Submitted an alternative proposition to the county council for Local Government restructure.
Transformation			
There is no clear transformation strategy with effectiveness, efficiency or savings targets aligned to it.	Transformation	<p>The recently published LGA Assurance framework provides a helpful tool for self-assessment and identifying areas of strength and improvement.</p> <p>There is no single transformation strategy. The transformation team has used LGA's transformation assessment tool, identifying a focus on change management activities, but it needs clear strategic priorities</p>	<p>Transformation framework will be presented to Cabinet on 6th May 2025,</p> <p>LGA assurance framework - self assessments in some areas are complete. Other LGA assessment tools to be utilised over the year.</p> <p>Introduction of the Performance and assurance board</p>

		to form a transformation roadmap. The peer team recommends that the next transformation phase involves the widespread introduction of continuous improvement tools and methodologies to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the council.	
There are several important strategies in place, however it is not always clear how they align with each other. It is important to ensure that all strategies align with each other along with associated action plans.	Transformation	None	<p>All strategies and action plans are listed in Pentana - and are organised by are of the corporate plan themes. The Corporate plan should be the catalysis of action plans which support the delivery of the corporate plan themes.</p> <p>This work has already been completed .</p>

Recommendation 3: Continue to develop the scrutiny function of the council

Recommendations	Service area	Comments	Action/ Other
Governance and assurance foundations need to be further strengthened, and actions to secure improvement need to be clearly identified and set out	Director of finance Clive Mason	There are several shared arrangements in place which are operated through delegated functions or joint committee arrangements. Assurance of these arrangements could be	Actions relating to Scrutiny to form part of the service plan for democratic services.

transparently, for example through the Annual Governance Statement.		<p>improved for example, seeking internal audit assurances from host organisations and annual reports to HDC's scrutiny function.</p> <p>The Audit Committee could further use its role to better support the governance, risk and internal control arrangements and provide appropriate levels of challenge, for example, exploring the reason for the number of outstanding audit recommendations.</p>	
Scrutiny needs to be strategic in its approach, focussing on outcomes for communities. The function does need appropriate resource and support to ensure development of councillor skills.	Democratic Services	<p>There are opportunities for the council to maximise overview and scrutiny functions by exploring specific policy areas at the request of Cabinet.</p> <p>Opportunities and benefits of a good scrutiny function and different scrutiny methodologies</p>	Part of Democratic Service Work Plan

Recommendation 4: Ensure statutory roles are clearly understood by all councillors, officers and staff

Recommendations	Service area	Supporting Comments	Action/ Other
<p>Roles and responsibilities of councillors, including expected behaviours (for all councillors, including opposition):</p> <p>Roles and responsibilities of the three statutory officers</p> <p>Role of a Portfolio Holder (for example, bringing reports to Cabinet, delegated decisions)</p> <p>Developing strategic objectives and a corporate plan that the Cabinet can own</p> <p>Ways of working – including preferred and agreed communication mechanisms</p>	<p>Democratic Services</p> <p>Nancy Barnard</p>	<p>HDC could benefit from support to clarify roles and responsibilities, particularly the separation between political and managerial leadership, and the roles of the administration and opposition</p> <p>The peer team suggest that councillor and officer development includes a clear understanding of the role and benefit of the monitoring officer.</p>	<p>Democratic Support Service plan</p>
<p>Role of Monitoring officer</p>	<p>Democratic Support</p>	<p>Section 27 of the Localism Act 2011 requires local authorities to “promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members of the authority.”.</p> <p>The peer team recommends that the monitoring officer</p>	<p>Both roles are part of CMT since the review.</p> <p>A programme of Member development is</p>

		<p>meets regularly with group leaders to ensure that each political group is meeting this requirement.</p> <p>It is good practice (Code of Practice on Good Governance for Local Authority Statutory Officers - Solace) for the chief finance officer and the monitoring officer to be full members of the senior management team of the council.</p> <p>The induction programme for councillors was extensive, and reported as 'intense', but it needed to focus more on the role of a ward councillor and being a community leader, and the different roles and responsibilities on a council. The peer team recommend that in future, the council provides greater information on the role of councillors to candidates so that there is greater understanding of the role, responsibility and</p>	
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		accountability of being a councillor before being elected.	
Development of Members	Democratic Services Nancy Barnard	Councillors would now benefit from more ongoing support in their roles through a mixed provision of development, briefings on local and national issues, mentoring, development and assistance with their roles in both the administration and opposition. These should be available both in person and online, including recordings where possible to maximise attendance and access. Councillors could be encouraged to use the LGA Councillor Hub which includes e-learning, workbooks and advice for new councillors; members of the cabinet and chairs of committees should be encouraged to enrol on the Leadership Academy or Leadership Essentials courses and benefit from the support councillors in other councils	

		are getting, networking opportunities and learning from councillors grappling with common issues across the country.	
Leadership development	Members	The Leader could consider appointing councillors to provide cabinet support posts and cross party champions from the non-executive councillors to support Cabinet members.	
Audit Committee -			
The Chair of Audit would benefit from further guidance and coaching. The peer team recommend attending the LGA Audit Committee: Leadership Essentials.	Democratic Services	None	To be added to review on member development
Having an Independent Member on the Audit committee should be re-considered, this could bring additional insight/expertise to the and would also provide a further level of challenge.	Democratic Services	None	To be added to review of scrutiny

Recommendation 6: Seize investment opportunities and consider market interventions.

Recommendations	Service area	Supporting Comments	Action/ Other
Cabinet need to decide on its affordable housing strategy and whether to intervene in the market to bridge the gap. HDC already has its own development company which could be used to build the housing that is needed.	Members	Affordable housing delivery appears to be at risk because of both viability issues and local opposition to housing growth. HDC has no strong analysis of how it could enable or intervene proactively to change the situation, including consideration of using their property/regeneration company to intervene where the market has failed e.g. on stalled sites. The peer team suggest that HDC invests in the skills and knowledge needed to be proactive in this area.	Housing summit being held in May 2025.
Clarify the council's risk appetite	CMT/Transformation team	The council has an embedded risk management process, but further work could be undertaken to develop the risk appetite and set the 'tone from the top', this would act as a guide to decision making and set some parameters for officers to operate within: is the overall approach cautious or perhaps opportunistic?	

		The council did recently consider a regeneration/economic development opportunity at St Mary's Place that was proposed by officers, but this was not approved. Setting a clear risk appetite approach and embracing opportunities, while ensuring solid governance, should create the right conditions to be bolder and make the best use of the resources they currently have available.	

Recommendations for service areas within the report but not key recommendations

Human Resources	Supporting comments	Action/ Other
The peer team feels that the workforce strategy needs refreshing as a priority recognising the ageing profile of the workforce (43% of all staff are over 50).		Refresh of Workforce strategy in HR service plan 2025/26
Staff reported inconsistencies in the delivery of supervision, appraisals, and development opportunities, as well as	To retain and motivate frontline staff, there should be a consistent approach towards supporting and	Review of Behaviour values and refresh of appraisal scheme in work plan for HR in 2025/26

manager attitudes towards flexible and hybrid working.	developing young talent and embracing flexible ways of working.	
The peer team recommend conducting exit interviews to determine if there are any actions that HDC can take to keep the rate of attrition low. Turnover is higher among front line staff than at team leader level. The increased use of fixed term contracts may be a risk to the stability and commitment of the workforce.	None	These are completed as a matter of course for all staff leaving the Authority.
Peers recommend that HDC works with others to consider where it wants to focus in terms of improving social value through its procurement and service delivery activities , such as use of local workforce, apprenticeships and addressing Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) issues through procurement.	None	

Recommendations	Supporting comments	Actions/other
Finance		
The council has undertaken the CIPFA Financial Management Assessment, but this was last	HDC should consider the CIPFA Financial Resilience Index, considering the metrics and providing relevant commentary. The	Added to Finance service plan for 2025/26

completed in 2022. Best practice is for an annual assessment. The peer team recommend introducing an annual assessment, with regular reports to the Audit Committee on progress.	council could complement this by also including the new OFLOG measures	
The council's MTFS and capital strategy covers up to the period 2028/29 and considers the medium-term challenges it faces (funding reforms, national policies). Capital investment is primarily focussed on the short term; best practice is that capital strategies cover a longer planning period.	<p>The current MTFS does not include any savings targets, with the budgets balanced by using the financial sustainability reserve. However, the reserves could be used in an alternative way. For example, exploring invest to save opportunities to deliver longer-term savings or new income streams; investigating more opportunities for economic development to generate future returns; linking housing targets to opportunities for council intervention to directly deliver.</p> <p>Given the council's current, solid financial position, there are opportunities to be bolder, and more ambitious and take some informed 'leaps of faith' to reap a return (social or financial) in the future. This would allow the council to use resources to best advantage now while it has the time.</p>	
The finance reports have recently been combined with performance		Redevelopment of this report in 2025/26.

reports, although the interlinkages between the two aspects have not yet been developed. This would provide further insight and act as a guide for deeper dives into VFM aspects.		
The revised CIPFA Treasury Management and Prudential Codes, published in 2021, requires from 2023/24 reporting to councillors on all forward facing Prudential Indicators quarterly. The peer team recommend that this method is adopted by HDC.		Finance Service plan 2025/26
There is currently some instability and reduced capacity in the finance team, due to previous efficiency savings as well as staff turnover. Additional resources have been invested in the team but recruitment of senior, technical finance roles is a challenge across the sector.		Appointment of new Head of Finance took place and post holder started in March 2025.

Recommendation	Owner	Supporting comments	Actions
Planning			
The Local Plan is now close to Regulation 19-stage consultation. However, political risks remain; consideration and	Strategic Planning Tess Nelson		Consultation and Comms plan developed and now in consultation phase. March - May 2025,

<p>tactical planning are now needed to address community reactions. The communications team could help to anticipate and prepare the council for the impact of these reactions. The council's focus needs to move away from reactive responses to anticipating, understanding and addressing causes.</p>			
<p>Performance in Development Management (DM) has been a particular concern; and needs continued focus and resources for sustained improvement. HDC should consider further work with the Planning Advisory Service and other support mechanisms, such as through East Midlands Councils and may also want to consider an application to the Digital Planning Improvement Fund which has been set up to support Local Planning Authorities to adopt modern planning practices by improving planning data, digital capabilities and development management software.</p>	<p>Development management Adrian Eastwood</p>		<p>Performance is showing an improvement in both DM 01 and DM 02.</p> <p>A review of resources and demand is ongoing.</p>

The council (DM) is encouraged to take a more creative and pragmatic approach to finding solutions to making development proposals acceptable rather than seeking to achieve perfection.	Development Management Adrian Eastwood		
Communications			
The communications team, though small, is effectively using data and analytics to identify appropriate channels of communication for different purposes and audiences. There has been a recent shift to information-giving communications (such as newsletters). The peer team concluded that the expertise of the communications team could be better deployed in supporting HDC understand the impact of different communication methods, delivering professional and tailored communications material, and improving two-way engagement with residents and businesses.	Communications Team Rebecca Oakley		Communications service plan 2025/26

Councillors would benefit from training on the appropriate use of social media as representatives of the council (whether in the administration or opposition).	Communications Rebecca Oakley		Part of the Members development workstream.
CEO/Leader			
The Chief Executive and Leader work well together, but it's important they can challenge each other both ways, this should be a constructive process and be clear on the boundaries between the roles.	CEO/Leaders		
Other			
Some of the council's key delivery staff on the flagship communities programme are fixed term, which sends mixed messages about the commitment to the whole initiative.	Community Partnership Racheal felts		Commitment has been given from the Budget setting process of their roles in future years.
The council could maximise community benefit through greater use of social value in its procurement exercises.	Legal & Procurement		Understanding social benefit is an action in service plan 2025/26,