
Somerset Corporate Peer Challenge Final Report

Executive Member: Cllr Bill Revans, Leader of the Council

Local Member(s) and Division(s) affected: N/A

Executive Director: Alyn Jones, Executive Director for Resources, Strategy and Transformation

Executive Summary

This paper sets out the final report and recommendations (*see Appendix A – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Somerset Council Feedback Report*) from the Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) that was conducted with Somerset between 12th and 15th November 2024.

The CPC is an improvement and assurance tool, offering councils an opportunity to engage independent, external support and challenge from sector leaders and peers. It offered us an opportunity to reflect on our performance and opportunities for improvement, whilst deepening engagement with residents, partners and stakeholders so that their voices are reflected in our improvement journey at what is a critical juncture for the Council.

Inviting this peer review demonstrates our commitment to accountability, transparency and delivering continuous and tangible improvements for the people of Somerset.

The Council will develop an Action Plan in response to the peer recommendations and bring this back to Executive for approval in April 2025.

Recommendations

The Executive is recommended to:

- Consider Somerset's final Corporate Peer Challenge Report and Recommendations following its publication on Monday 19th February 2025
- Recommend that Somerset's final Corporate Peer Challenge report is considered by Scrutiny Corporate & Resources in March 2025 to ensure they have the opportunity to influence and contribute to the development of the subsequent Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan

Reasons for Proposals

Corporate Peer Challenge 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.

Somerset Council is committed to delivering on its ambitious goals as an organisation. Enacting the CPC recommendations and drawing on ongoing Peer support will enable us to fully evaluate our performance and to progress areas identified for improvement in the most effective way.

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Background and purpose of report

Background

What is a Corporate Peer Challenge and why did we commission one for Somerset?

1. The Local Government Association's Peer Challenge programme is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that provides independent external support and challenge to councils, as well as assurance to local leaders and residents. It aims to support continuous improvement, providing insight, guidance and challenge, helping councils to evaluate their performance and identify areas for improvement.
2. Somerset's decision to commission a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) recognised the value that external, independent rigour and challenge brings and demonstrates our commitment to accountability, transparency and delivering tangible improvements for the people of Somerset.
3. We have continued to navigate and capitalise on the significant opportunities bought by Local Government Reorganisation, to unite the skills and expertise of the former councils and harness these strengths to create a stronger, more cohesive organisation. Progressing this in the midst of ongoing economic challenges and the complexity of integrating multiple systems, cultures and ways of working, has brought both challenges and learning opportunities.
4. The chance to draw on fresh insights and best practice from experienced peers therefore enabled us to take stock of our performance to date, understand our strengths, and to identify any gaps or blind spots that may be hindering our progress at what is a critical juncture for the Council. It offered us the opportunity to ensure we can further develop our plans, resilience and agility to deliver on our ambitious goals as an organisation.

Somerset's Corporate Peer Challenge

5. A team of experienced peers visited Somerset from Tuesday 12th November 2024 to Friday 15th November 2024, meeting with council members, officers, partners and community representatives, including holding face to face interviews and focus groups. Details of the Peer team are included in appendix B.
6. The scope of the peer challenge focused across the five key building blocks of what makes a good council, namely:
 - Local priorities and outcomes
 - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context?
 - Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?

- Is there a robust organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with regular monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
- Governance and culture
 - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements?
 - Is there a culture of openness, transparency, challenge, and scrutiny?
- Organisational leadership and place leadership
 - Does the council provide effective local leadership?
 - Are there strong and effective relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
- Financial planning and management
 - Does the council have a clear understanding of its financial position?
 - Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
 - What is the relative financial resilience of the council like?
- Capacity for improvement
 - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities?
 - Does the council have the capacity to improve?

Somerset's Corporate Peer Challenge Report and Recommendations

7. Somerset's final Corporate Peer Challenge Report was published 19th February 2025 and outlines the key findings and recommendations from the peer team. It is appended to this report as *Appendix A – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Somerset Council Feedback Report*.
8. It is clear that peers recognise that the fundamental impact that the extremely challenging financial position facing many councils, was compounded in Somerset by it coming so soon after Local Government Reorganisation. Peers have commended the proactive and decisive action taken to provide short term stability but also recognise the significant impact this has had on establishing a new council, the impact on our workforce and delivering on our plans and ambitions.
9. Peers underline the importance of the Council re-setting and re-focusing to provide clarity throughout the organisation on our priorities, timelines and deliverables to build a sustainable authority in the medium term, whilst improving and delivering services effectively and taking advantage of the economic growth opportunities in Somerset. Despite the challenges that the council has faced, peers recognised that performance in services valued by residents has been maintained.
10. A number of recommendations are set out in the final report (see Appendix A, pages 7 and 8) that build on some of the foundations that have been put in place so far and/or reinforce improvement actions identified in recent Audits (Annual Audit Report 2023/24; Annual Governance Statement; CIPFA FM Code). Many of the CPC recommendations relate to work already underway and/or where there are existing future plans in place. These plans will be

reviewed as part of the action planning to ensure they are as effective as possible to deliver improvement.

Next Steps

11. We are required to develop and publish an action plan in response to the CPC recommendations before 12th April 2025. Engagement with the Corporate Leadership team is underway to support cohesive and effective ownership of improvement actions and activities. The action plan will be brought to Executive in April 2025.
12. Peers will aim to revisit Somerset around ten months after the original visit (due September 2025), to review progress against the recommendations and discuss early impact and learning. The LGA will then publish a progress review report no later than 12 months after their original visit.

Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan

13. There are no direct implications as a result of this report. Should any recommendations have cost consequences they will be addressed in separate reports.
14. Learning from the peer challenge will inform the future development of the Council's priorities and objectives.

Key considerations for the Council

Scrutiny comments / recommendations:

15. Scrutiny Corporate & Resources will consider the CPC Report in March 2025 to ensure they have the opportunity to feed into the subsequent Action Plan.

Consultation and feedback

16. Council members, officers, partners and community representatives have contributed to the findings within the Corporate Peer Challenge Report having met with peers via face to face interviews and focus groups.

Financial and Risk Implications

17. The Corporate Peer Challenge is a key element of the Council's approach to continuous improvement. Self-awareness and self-reflection aids us in reviewing our practices and identifying improvements that reduce the risk of ineffective service delivery. The overall CPC Action Plan will help us progress towards our overall aim of being an efficient and financially sustainable council.
18. There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report. If actions in response to recommendations have cost consequences these will be addressed in separate reports.

Legal and Procurement Implications

19. External validation and challenge is an important means to ensure that the council is focusing on its improvement priorities. The Corporate Peer Challenge plays a fundamental role in assisting us to meet our Best Value Duty as a Council, in fulfilling the requirements set out in the Local Government Act 1999 to show that we have arrangements in place to secure continuous improvement in the way we exercise our functions, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness and complying with the statutory guidance issued on 8 May 2024 in respect of Best Value Standards and Intervention.
20. The CPC recommendations include the need to strengthen procurement compliance, commissioning and contract management to achieve best value for money. Activity to address this will be detailed in the subsequent action plan that will be brought to Executive in April 2025.

HR / Workforce Implications

21. The peers recognised the impact that the period of challenges and change and the Workforce Reduction Programme has had on staff. They have suggested recommendations to help focus effort of rebuilding trust and engagement and to support skills development. The action plan that is being developed will set out how the council will address this, including delivery of a new People Strategy and organisational development programme.

Equalities Implications

22. The Council's commitment to equality will be integral to our approach to governance, service delivery and improvement when taking these recommendations forward. Whereby a recommendation requires a change in policy, practice or procedure, an equalities impact assessment will be completed.

Community Safety Implications

23. Community safety implications resulting from the action we will be taking to address the recommendations will be set out in the report to Executive in April 2025 as part of Somerset's Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan.

Climate Change and Sustainability Implications

24. Climate change implications resulting from the action we will be taking to address the recommendations will be set out in the report to Executive in April 2025 as part of Somerset's Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan.

Health and Safety Implications

25. Health and safety implications resulting from the action we will be taking to address the recommendations will be set out in the report to Executive in April 2025 as part of Somerset's Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan.

Health and Wellbeing Implications

26. Health and Wellbeing implications resulting from the action we will be taking to address the recommendations will be set out in the report to Executive in April 2025 as part of Somerset's Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan.

Social Value

27. Social value implications resulting from the action we will be taking to address the recommendations will be set out in the report to Executive in April 2025 as part of Somerset's Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan.

Background Papers

28. [Corporate Peer Challenge | Local Government Association](#) – LGA Guidance on the Corporate Peer Challenge
29. [Best value standards and intervention: a statutory guide for best value authorities - GOV.UK](#)

Appendices

- Appendix A – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Somerset Council Feedback Report
- Appendix B – Somerset's Peer Review Team

Report assurance

	Officer Name	Date Completed
Governance Implications	Scott Wooldridge	17/02/2025
Legal Implications	Jill Byron	14/02/2025
Finance & Procurement	Nicola Hix	18/02/2025
Workforce (*)	Dawn Bettridge	17/02/2025
Asset Management (*)	Simon Lewis	13/02/2025
Executive Director	Alyn Jones	13/02/2025
Executive Lead Member	Cllr Bill Revans	13/02/2025
Consulted:		
Local Division Members	List local members	n/a
Opposition Spokesperson(s)	Cllr Mandy Chilcott (circulated)	17/02/2025
Relevant Scrutiny Chair(s)	Cllr Steven Pugsley (circulated)	17/02/2025