

Public Document Pack



RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL SUPPLEMENT AGENDA

Date: Wednesday, 22 May 2024

Time: 10.00 am

Venue: Council Chamber, Moorlands House, Leek

Please find below an additional report which was unavailable when the agenda was published.

PART 1

8. Corporate Peer Challenge Update (**Pages 3 - 32**)

MARK TRILLO
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR & MONITORING OFFICER

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STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL

Resources Overview & Scrutiny Panel

22 May 2024

TITLE:	Corporate Peer Challenge Update
PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	Councillor Mike Gledhill (Leader)
CONTACT OFFICER:	Tanya Cooper, Head of Organisational Development & Transformation, Julie Nankivell Information Business Partner
WARDS INVOLVED:	Non-Specific

Appendices Attached

Appendix 1: Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report 2024

1. Reason for the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is for the Panel to consider the outcomes from the Corporate Peer Challenge which took place in February 2024.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Resources & Scrutiny Panel note the findings from the Corporate Peer Challenge.

3. Executive Summary

- 3.1 The Corporate Peer Challenge process, which is co-ordinated by the Local Government Association (LGA), forms a key aspect of sector-led improvement, and the process is designed to complement and add value to the Council's own performance and improvement thinking. The Council previously commissioned its first Corporate Peer Challenge in January 2022 in conjunction with its strategic alliance partner High Peak Borough Council (HPBC). Following its completion, the Alliance published the CPC report and action plan for addressing the recommendations made during that CPC
- 3.2 The Alliance commissioned the LGA to deliver another peer review in 2024, with a scope to review the CPC recommendations made in 2022. However, as the political context of both Councils had changed following the May 2023 local elections, it was also agreed to review the position against the core CPC components.

- 3.3 The peer team were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and consisted of elected member and officer peers. They used their experience and knowledge of local government to review the information presented to them.
- 3.4 The peer team’s report is attached at Appendix 1.
- 3.5 The peer team found that **the Alliance is impressive and continues to be effective**. The team reported that the key finding from the previous CPC in 2022 that **“Both councils can be seen to have been well managed organisations over many years. There is sound financial management and attention is paid to maintaining good governance and to managing risk. Both are performance-focused and can demonstrate the delivery of services that are high performing and low cost, with a value for money focus.”** remains true.
- 3.6 The peers found that the Alliance had made good progress against addressing most of the recommendations made in 2022 and highlighted a number of strengths.
- 3.7 The peer team’s made 8 key recommendations to the Council following this CPC which are detailed in section 8.6 of the report.
- 3.8 The next steps are for the political and managerial leadership at the Councils to consider, discuss, and reflect on the findings. It will then be necessary to produce an Action Plan to set out the response to the recommendations in the report. This will be presented to members in the next few weeks.
- 3.9 The CPC process includes a progress review within twelve months of the CPC, which provides space for the Council’s senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the recommendations from this report. This is currently been planned for later in 2024.

4. How this report links to Corporate Priorities

- 4.1 Recommendations in the report align to the Council’s key objectives.

5. Alternative Options

- 5.1 None.

6. Implications

6.1	<u>Community safety, including safeguarding and prevention of terrorism</u> None
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6.2	<u>Workforce</u> None
6.3	<u>Equality and Diversity/Equality Impact Assessment</u> Recommendations will be considered in line with the Council's Diversity and Equality Policies
6.4	<u>Financial Considerations</u> Recommendations will be considered in line with the Council's financial objectives
6.5	<u>Legal</u> None
6.6	<u>Climate Change and Sustainability</u> Recommendations will be considered in line with the Council's Climate Change and Sustainability objectives
6.7	<u>Conservation and Enhancement of Biodiversity</u> Recommendations will be considered in line with the Council's Conservation and Biodiversity objectives
6.8	<u>Consultation</u> The recommendations have been reviewed by the Alliance Executive / Cabinet, Select Committees / Overview & Scrutiny Panels and Leadership Team
6.9	<u>Risk Assessment</u> Any mitigating risks arising from the recommendations will be controlled by the Alliance Risk Management Procedure

ANDREW STOKES
Chief Executive

Background Papers

Corporate Peer Challenge data pack

Contact details

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7. Background and Introduction

- 7.1 The Corporate Peer Challenge process, which is co-ordinated by the Local Government Association (LGA), forms a key aspect of sector-led improvement, the process is designed to complement and add value to the Council's own performance and improvement thinking. The Peer team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.
- 7.2 The Council previously commissioned its first Corporate Peer Challenge in January 2022 in conjunction with its strategic alliance partner High Peak Borough Council (HPBC). Following its completion, the Alliance published the CPC report and action plan for addressing the recommendations made during that CPC
- 7.3 The Alliance commissioned the LGA to deliver another peer review in 2024, with a scope to review the CPC recommendations made in 2022. However, as the political context of both Councils had changed following the May 2023 local elections, it was also agreed to review the position against the core CPC components.
- Local priorities and outcomes - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
 - Organisational and place leadership - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
 - Governance and culture - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
 - Financial planning and management - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
 - Capacity for improvement - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?
- 7.4 This CPC was therefore structured to review the 10 recommendations made in 2022 and as a CPC 'health check' proportionate in its approach and reviewed alongside the 2022 report.
- 7.5 The peer team were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and consisted of elected Members and officer peers . They used their experience and knowledge of local government to review the information presented to them. The peer team consisted of:
- Rob Barlow - Joint Chief Executive of Boston BC, East Lindsey DC, and South Holland DC
 - Cllr Alan Rhodes – Labour peer, Cabinet Member for Corporate & Financial Services, Bassetlaw DC
 - Cllr Georgina Hill – Independent peer, Northumberland CC and LGA Regional Member peer for the North East and Yorkshire and Humber
 - Liz Elliott - Deputy Chief Executive, Harborough DC
 - Jamie Sutterby - Director of People and Communities, South Norfolk DC,

- and Broadland Council
- Siraj Choudhury - Head of Governance, People & Performance (Monitoring Officer), Crawley BC
- James Millington - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

8 Outcomes from the Corporate Peer Challenge

- 8.1 The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with each Council in the Alliance and the challenges they are facing. The team had a number of virtual meetings with the Alliance's stakeholders, including discussions with members of the 2022 CPC team, prior to spending three days onsite, during which they:
- Gathered information and views from more than 30 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
 - Spoke to more than 80 people including a range of the Alliance's staff, together with Members from HPBC & SMDC and external stakeholders.
- 8.2 The peer team's report is attached at Appendix 1.
- 8.3 The peer team found that **the Alliance is impressive and continues to be effective**. The team reported that the key finding from the previous CPC in 2022 that **"Both councils can be seen to have been well managed organisations over many years. There is sound financial management and attention is paid to maintaining good governance and to managing risk. Both are performance-focused and can demonstrate the delivery of services that are high performing and low cost, with a value for money focus."** remains true.
- 8.4 The peer team undertook a Progress Review of the recommendations made following the 2022 CPC. The peers found that the Alliance had made good progress against addressing most of the recommendations.
- 8.5 A number of strengths are highlighted in the report including:
- Councillors reported feeling well supported by officers and the Member/Officer and Member/Member relationships were seen to be very strong and productive.
 - The Council has continued to be an active player in the Staffordshire Leaders' Board. The Council is engaging well to bring about the best outcomes for its communities.
 - The Council understands its challenges well and some of the difficult decisions it must make particularly regarding growth, housing, and the balance with the natural environment.
 - There continue to be many very positive aspects of the Alliance's activity both internally and externally, including with partners, and this provides a firm foundation and opportunities for the Councils to move forward.
 - The Chief Executive is seen as driving forward the organisations in implementing the ambitions and priorities of the elected Members.

8.6 The peer team's key recommendations to the Council following this CPC are as follows:

Recommendation 1

The peer team consider that there is benefit in more clearly articulating a shared ambition for the future of the Alliance – through an overarching plan - to understand the risks and benefits of the partnership.

Recommendation 2

There is a necessity through the digitisation programme and modernising the working environment to now pick up pace, and this will support the delivery of the Council's ambitions.

Recommendation 3

The Alliance can continue developing the positive impact of Scrutiny. There may be further opportunities, particularly on some large topics, to pool the expertise across the Member base of the Alliance for undertaking joint scrutiny to expand the capacity and generate improved outcomes.

Recommendation 4

Council Controlled Companies:

- 1) The planned Leisure LATCo should not lose the opportunity for wider benefits beyond the financial and support the Alliance's ambitions around culture and its health and wellbeing agenda.
- 2) The Alliance should periodically review outside bodies to assure itself that these are operating effectively and delivering outcomes.

Recommendation 5

The peer team heard about the devolution changes which are happening locally now and into the future. It would be helpful for the Top Team to reflect and consider where the Alliance positions itself in response to devolution changes

Recommendation 6

Increase the pace of delivery with more robust project and programme governance: in the depots; in ICT; its office estate; in its assets; and in the climate change agenda so external funding bids and internal growth bids can be made by officers to understand more clearly the budgetary impacts. These projects will also support organisational culture change.

Recommendation 7

The Alliance should ensure that capacity, including around transformation, is focused in the right places, with ongoing support in place for the CEX to deliver the change programme and the ambitions at pace.

Recommendation 8

Planning:

- 1) There is a need to urgently reflect on the Local Plan delivery at SMDC. The Council has a commitment to building homes and the Local Plan should not be a barrier to it. This requires a degree of focus from Members and senior

officers.

2) Members of the SMDC Planning Committee would benefit from further training regarding the complexity of the role, the formal administrative process, and the need to consistently apply national and local policies, legislation, and case law.

9. Next Steps

- 9.1 It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership at the Councils will want to consider, discuss, and reflect on these findings. It will then be necessary to produce an Action Plan to set out the response to the recommendations in the report. This will be presented to members in the next few weeks.
- 9.2 Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a progress review within twelve months of the CPC, which provides space for the Council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the recommendations from this report. This is currently been planned for later in 2024.

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LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Staffordshire Moorlands DC

20th – 22nd February 2024

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council (SMDC) previously commissioned a CPC in January 2022 with High Peak Borough Council (HPBC) – referred to collectively as ‘The Alliance’. The Alliance published the CPC report and action plan for addressing the recommendations made during that CPC [online here](#). The Alliance commissioned the LGA to deliver another peer review in 2024, with a scope to review the CPC recommendations made in 2022. However, as the political context of both Councils had changed following the May 2023 local elections, we also agreed to review the position against the core CPC components. This CPC was therefore structured to review the 10 recommendations made in 2022 and as a CPC ‘health check’, proportionate in its approach and should be reviewed alongside the 2022 report.

The peer team found that The Alliance is impressive and continues to be effective. The key finding from the previous CPC in 2022 that *“Both councils can be seen to have been well managed organisations over many years. There is sound financial management and attention is paid to maintaining good governance and to managing risk. Both are performance-focused and can demonstrate the delivery of services that are high performing and low cost, with a value for money focus.”* remains true.

There has been a significant change in context at SMDC where at the elections in May 2023 the Council moved from a Conservative-led administration to a Labour minority. Both SMDC and HPBC are now Labour controlled councils with a new Leader and Cabinet at SMDC and the same Leader with a strengthened majority at HPBC. Following the elections in May the Alliance had a significant number of newly elected Members – with many now newly elected (45 out of 99 overall). This change in political context initiated the development of new corporate plans and refreshed priorities for each Council. Councillors reported feeling well supported by officers and the Member/officer and Member/Member relationships were seen to be very strong and productive.

Another key factor since 2022 for the Alliance and particularly for HPBC was the

agreement for the establishment of a Mayoral Combined County Authority (the East Midlands Combined County Authority, EMCCA), with a devolution deal agreed with Government in August 2022. A Shadow Authority has been established and HPBC's Leader (supported by the Alliance's CEO) has been selected as the district/borough representatives involved in the governance arrangements. For SMDC, Staffordshire did not seek to become a pathfinder for a County Deal, and the District has continued as an active player in the Staffordshire Leaders' Board. The Alliance is engaging well in these differing circumstances to bring about the best outcomes for its communities.

The Alliance is operating in a rural context, including within the Peak District National Park, which presents some clear opportunities but there are also challenges in relation to deprivation and service delivery for its communities. The Council understands its challenges well and some of the difficult decisions it must make, particularly regarding growth, housing, and the balance with the natural environment. At SMDC the process for the Local Plan is under consideration and the Council will need to ensure it has adequate focus and attention to now deliver this.

As referenced in the 2022 CPC the peer team found that there continue to be many very positive aspects of the Alliance's activity both internally and externally, including with partners, and this provides a firm foundation and opportunities for the Councils to move forward. The CEX is seen as driving forward the organisations in implementing the ambitions and priorities of the elected Members, and continuing to ensure that the plans for Council modernisation are delivered will be important. There was an overwhelming feeling from the peer team that there was very little which separated the Councils and the potential for an increased, collective ambition across SMDC and HPBC to produce an even greater dividend, in the context of wider devolution, would benefit from further discussion.

2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council following this CPC in 2024:

2.1 Recommendation 1

The peer team consider that there is benefit in more clearly articulating a shared ambition for the future of the Alliance – through an overarching plan - to understand the risks and benefits of the partnership.

2.2 Recommendation 2

There is a necessity through the digitisation programme and modernising the working environment to now pick up pace, and this will support the delivery of the Council's ambitions.

2.3 Recommendation 3

The Alliance can continue developing the positive impact of Scrutiny. There may be further opportunities, particularly on some large topics, to pool the expertise across the Member base of the Alliance for undertaking joint scrutiny to expand the capacity and generate improved outcomes.

2.4 Recommendation 4

Council Controlled Companies:

- 1) The planned Leisure LATCo should not lose the opportunity for wider benefits beyond the financial and support the Alliance's ambitions around culture and its health and wellbeing agenda.
- 2) The Alliance should periodically review outside bodies to assure itself that these are operating effectively and delivering outcomes.

2.5 Recommendation 5

The peer team heard about the devolution changes which are happening locally now and into the future. It would be helpful for the Top Team to reflect and consider where the Alliance positions itself in response to devolution changes

2.6 Recommendation 6

Increase the pace of delivery with more robust project and programme governance: in the depots; in ICT; its office estate; in its assets; and in the climate change agenda so external funding bids and internal growth bids can be made by officers to

understand more clearly the budgetary impacts. These projects will also support organisational culture change.

2.7 Recommendation 7

The Alliance should ensure that capacity, including around transformation, is focused in the right places, with ongoing support in place for the CEX to deliver the change programme and the ambitions at pace.

2.8 Recommendation 8

Planning:

- 1) There is a need to urgently reflect on the Local Plan delivery at SMDC. The Council has a commitment to building homes and the Local Plan should not be a barrier to it. This requires a degree of focus from Members and senior officers.
- 2) Members of the SMDC Planning Committee would benefit from further training regarding the complexity of the role, the formal administrative process, and the need to consistently apply national and local policies, legislation, and case law.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1 The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected Member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- **Rob Barlow** - Joint Chief Executive of Boston BC, East Lindsey DC, and South Holland DC
- **Cllr Alan Rhodes** – Labour peer, Cabinet Member for Corporate & Financial Services, Bassetlaw DC
- **Cllr Georgina Hill** – Independent peer, Northumberland CC and LGA Regional Member peer for the North East and Yorkshire and Humber

- **Liz Elliott** - Deputy Chief Executive, Harborough DC
- **Jamie Sutterby** - Director of People and Communities, South Norfolk DC, and Broadland Council
- **Siraj Choudhury** - Head of Governance, People & Performance (Monitoring Officer), Crawley BC
- **James Millington** - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

3.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the progress made by the Alliance against the 10 recommendations made during the 2022 CPC as well as proportionally reviewing the five themes which form the core components of all CPCs - these build on the findings from the previous CPC to avoid duplication. The five areas critical to councils' performance and improvement are:

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a 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?

3.3 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 that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with each Council in the Alliance and the challenges they are facing. The team had a number of virtual meetings with the Alliance's stakeholders, including discussions with members of the 2022 CPC team, prior to spending three days onsite, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 30 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
- Spoke to more than 80 people including a range of the Alliance's staff, together with Members from HPBC & SMDC 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 Members.

4. Feedback

The peer team undertook a Progress Review of the recommendations made following the 2022 CPC. The peers found that the Alliance had made good progress against addressing most of the recommendations and the findings are outlined below against each of the 10 recommendations:

1. There is partnership development of aspirational visions for each place – generating a clearer focus on outcomes

Following the elections in May 2023 the Councils now have new corporate plans in place – with the High Peak Borough Plan (2023-27) and the Staffordshire Moorlands Corporate Plan (2023-27) agreed in October 2023. These Plans were developed widely through reviewing the previous Plans, utilising data and intelligence and engaging with stakeholders. These new Plans are communicated and well known



within each respective Council.


The corporate plans outline consistent aims and messages about what is important to each organisation, and both sets of elected Members were clear on their priorities. These plans demonstrate the ambitions for each of the Councils with a clear understanding of the challenges facing its communities around: service delivery; the economy; health and wellbeing; skills and employment; housing; and community safety.

The peer team consider that in building on this there is still benefit in more clearly articulating a shared ambition for the future of the Alliance – through an overarching plan - to understand the risks and benefits of the partnership. In place since 2008, the Alliance is longstanding and this should be celebrated as it is recognised that it remains important to both HPBC and SMBC, and there is an appetite and opportunity to identify where there can be further shared ambitions. The Councils recognise the similarities between the two new corporate plans and there may be opportunities to further build on the successes of the Alliance through the development of an overarching plan.

2. Undertaking regular residents' and staff surveys

The 2022 peer review underlined the importance for the Alliance in understanding the views of staff and residents and how this may influence the activities of each Council. The peer team saw how staff and resident surveys are now being undertaken – the latest in September / October 2023 - and the process has been improved with software being used to engage and the developed usage of social media channels with communities. The peer team's discussions with officers and Members found that through the new Consultation and Engagement policies and the work the Alliance now does there was clear evidence that engaging with communities is *“now forming part of the Councils' DNA.”*

Building on the successful implementation of these surveys there is now a good




opportunity for the Councils to demonstrate how this feedback from staff and communities is now consistently reflected in changes and decisions made by each Council. There is also an opportunity to consider rolling out this good practice with local businesses to gather routine and regular feedback in the same way. This would complement the work the Alliance already does engaging with businesses including distributing a monthly Business Newsletter to more than 2,000 recipients.

3. Undertaking ‘top team’ development across the political and managerial leadership in different formats

Following the elections in May 2023 and an initial programme of Member development the peer team heard very positive feedback on Member training and development opportunities from councillors. There was a variety of sessions which included external providers and Members are also engaging in the LGA’s Leadership offers. An ongoing support and development programme for councillors which utilised the Member Development Groups at each Council, led by the Member Development Champion, could lead this.

The peer team saw how the Alliance’s management structure appeared to be efficient and how there was a strong focus on Lean management. Where there are vacancies in the Alliance Management Team (AMT) there is now an opportunity to consider what the organisations may now need in the current context and recruit to the skill set which supports the delivery of the Councils’ ambitions. For instance, this may be an outward focus on the place, internal modernisation or on maximising the future potential of the Alliance partnership.

In discussion with staff, the Alliance’s staffing structure was described to the peer team as ‘flat’ and as a potential barrier for both succession planning and strategic leadership. The Alliance recognises this and has committed to continue to develop its workforce and create a talent pipeline within the Alliance, through the Organisational Development Strategy. This has included the development of a new appraisal framework, publication of the overall staff benefits package and participation in the



LGA's National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP) from September 2023. The Alliance recognises that it needs to continue to consider how its staff can develop and progress in their careers across the Councils.


4. Taking forward the findings from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny reports

The peer team heard feedback that Scrutiny is now working well across the Alliance. It was viewed as making a positive difference and making a significant contribution to effective Council operation. Engagement from everyone in Scrutiny is important and there is a commitment for ongoing learning and improvement from those the peer team spoke to, with the Member training on scrutiny cited as being particularly valuable. To continue developing the positive impact of Scrutiny there may be further opportunities, particularly on some large topics, to pool the expertise across the Member base of the Alliance for undertaking joint scrutiny to expand the capacity and generate improved outcomes.

5. Ensuring climate change ambitions and delivery is owned right through both organisations

It is clear that the ambitions around addressing climate change are important for the Councils. This is widely acknowledged as a political priority and is included as Aim 4 of the SMDC Council Plan to '*Protect and improve the environment*' and Aim 4 of the HPBC Council Plan to '*Protect and improve the environment including responding to the climate emergency*'. Following the elections in May 2023 the administrations have identified areas for closer working between the Alliance and this includes Climate Change Action Plans. The service review programme has prioritised a review of the Communities & Climate Change Service and the Alliance's commitment to "*lead the way locally in the approach to responding to the climate change and nature emergencies.*"

The peer team did hear some confusion from both officers and Members around the resourcing available and the programme of work for these ambitions, and the



accountability appears to be unclear. Without this being fully understood it will limit the deliverability of the ambitions at the pace desired. The Alliance may find value in considering revisiting this ambition, relaunching, and communicating the plans and programme so there is collective clarity on this work.

6. Effectively addressing the pay progression issue

The 2022 CPC highlighted a longstanding issue across SMDC and HPBC concerning pay progression, and the ability of employees to progress beyond the bar within the pay grade. As part of this CPC the peer team can see that this has now been addressed by the Alliance and there do not appear to be any ongoing issues.

7. Jointly determining a clear set of key priorities to make things more manageable – and developing a ‘road map’ to deliver them

SMBC and HPBC have had a partnership in place since 2008 and people the peer team met with see the Councils as working effectively together and are “*intertwined*”. There is an opportunity of building on this positive working between the HPBC Executive and SMDC Cabinet to revisit the priorities of the Councils and where there are synergies to work even more closely. Staff told the peer team that this will avoid duplication of effort and by also aligning timescales in delivery, potentially generate additional capacity for officers.

8. Bringing forward the communications and engagement strategy (covering both internal and external)

The Alliance has made progress on this, with the Consultation and Engagement Strategy now in place. There is a strengthened approach to internal and external communications and the Communications Strategy is to be finalised.

The peer team heard from some Members that there are examples of where councillors have not received responses in a timely way. A case management system is being introduced across the Alliance and this may help to better manage


this and respond more consistently.

Managing external communications and engagement with partners can be challenging for any council. Ensuring that other public sector, voluntary and business sector partners are aware of what each of the Councils are doing and how they can work together towards the achievement of shared ambitions is complex. The peer team heard from partners that there is an opportunity for further improving this. There are already impressive examples of where this has happened previously e.g. the development of the HPBC and SMDC Move More Strategy and the learning from this positive experience can be built upon.

9. The Councils reassuring themselves that the work that has taken place to map needs around capacity will address the issues – following this by translating them into a clear delivery plan

To build upon the approach taken to developing the corporate plans and service plans the peer team would encourage the Councils to consider producing annual delivery plans for their respective corporate plans. These can be developed in line with the annual budget agreement process to assign resources to these plans. This provides a clear signal to staff what is expected by the Members, communicates to communities what the Council will deliver and supports the Council to be clear on how they will manage capacity and resources. These annual delivery plans would be an added useful layer to the Councils' existing performance management framework, with delivery plans providing a framework for monitoring outcomes.

The peer team found that the Alliance has a willing and committed workforce and staff the peer team met with enjoy working for the Councils. They provided very positive feedback on the CEX and the Management Team and could demonstrate their understanding how their work contributes to the priorities of each of the Councils. The peer team did not register any particular capacity issues, but the Councils will need to ensure that this is kept under consideration and opportunities are capitalised upon. For instance, the programme of digitisation and modernising



the working environment may identify that resources could be used differently to be more impactful. There is an opportunity for this to pick up pace and staff have told the peer team that they could be more productive if they had the next generation of ICT – described as “*the woosh factor.*”

10. Reflecting the financial pressures from emerging plans into the MTFP


Further to the 2022 CPC, the Councils remain in a good financial position and the MTFP is robust – this should be acknowledged as a key strength. The peer team consider that this is a sound platform from which the Councils can continue to be ambitious in their aims for their communities.

Members and officers do recognise that service areas and assets require investment, and the peer team were not clear whether the current MTFP will support the level of investment needed to drive improvements. For example, the Council buildings are very tired, the waste depot needs investment, and the ICT and digitisation requires improvement. This is recognised by the Councils but is not factored into the MTFP - so there is benefit in now setting this out more clearly. The peer team saw that staff are keen to modernise and transform the organisations and reciprocal investment in the infrastructure they need on a day-by-day basis would support this.

The peer team also reviewed the 5 core areas related to every CPC as an update and building on the findings from the 2022 CPC:

4.1 Local priorities and outcomes

In the 2022 CPC this core area was overall an area of strength for both Councils and these findings have remained during the 2024 review. The peer team were consistently told that there is a culture of delivering quality across the Alliance and “*when it does something, it does it well.*”




As noted in the review of the recommendations, the new corporate plans have been agreed, based on a data led approach. The peer team saw that there is an evidence-based understanding from Executive (HPBC) and Cabinet Members (SMDC), senior officers and Members of Scrutiny on the direction of travel for the organisations. Both Councils remain performance-focused organisations, with good arrangements in place for regular reporting and monitoring. The Councils can demonstrate the delivery of services that are high performing and low cost, with a value for money focus, and services still remain competitive when benchmarking.

Partners the peer team met with confirmed that there were positive working relationships in place with the Councils and this includes regional representation in Derbyshire with HPBC and for SMDC in Staffordshire. The Leadership of the Councils are seen as engaging well and are active in the issues and challenges locally and regionally.

The status of the Local Plan does vary from each Council. There is a need to urgently reflect on the Local Plan delivery at SMDC - not from a planning perspective but that the housing delivery which communities need is dependent on this working effectively. Housing delivery numbers are a cause for concern at SMDC. Housing is key to the ambitions around regeneration and if numbers are increased there are wider community benefits. The Council has a commitment to building homes and the Local Plan should not be a barrier to it. This requires a degree of focus from Members and senior officers to urgently address.

Members of the SMDC Planning Committee would benefit from further training regarding the complexity of the role, the formal administrative process, and the need to consistently apply national and local policies, legislation, and case law, and review the governance. The awareness around the risk of appeal costs and reputational damage needs to be improved. As Members are relatively new following the elections in May 2023 this does require immediate action as there is a risk to the Council.




The peer team considered the development of the Leisure LATCo as a great opportunity to deliver social and financial objectives and demonstrate local leadership. This is a significant decision for the Alliance and from the peer team's discussions, there is an opportunity to ensure this is more widely understood across the Councils. This should not be solely planned and delivered on financial objectives but used to support the Alliance's ambitions around culture and its health and wellbeing agenda - so that the LATCo can be impactful as a delivery partner for these service areas.

Additionally, further informal joint working by Members building on the leisure collaboration and climate change, could be a real advantage. These are good examples of where this is working well across the Councils and the peer team would encourage the Alliance to consider how to expand this to other areas.

4.2 Organisational and place leadership

Following the elections in May 2023 there has been a change in the political context at the Alliance with SMDC moving from a Conservative administration to minority Labour-led and HPBC moving from minority to majority Labour-led. There has also been a churn in councillors with new Members joining both Councils - 22 out of 43 at HPBC and 23 out of 56 at SMBC. Members the peer team met felt well supported by the Councils in their role and described the Cabinet (SMDC)/ Executive (HPBC) and effective Scrutiny, with an established AMT which is seen to serve the Councils well.

The peer team saw that relationships are very strong and productive with all Members of the Councils and across the Alliance, and there are positive working relationships with upper tier councils and town & parish councils. The peer team saw mature relationships with opposition councillors who are united in delivering positive outcomes for their communities. There were positive comments about the Leaders and CEX from all Members, in how they are driving the Councils forward.



The voluntary, health and business sector remain important for the Alliance in delivering its social and business and growth ambitions and the peer team think there are opportunities to also build more structured relationships around shared outcomes with partners e.g. public sector partners or businesses for economic growth.


Everyone the peer team spoke to was positive about the Alliance, and the way in which it works – and there is a desire to hear about the next ‘step change.’ Staff are interested to know what is next and what the shared ambitions may be. The peer team heard about the devolution changes which are happening locally now and those which may follow in future years. It would be helpful for the Top Team to reflect and consider where the Alliance sits within this change process and how it positions itself in response to devolution changes requires consideration.

4.3 Governance and culture

Feedback from staff in the 2023 Staff Survey is generally positive. Staff the peer team met with underlined the key findings: feel trusted to do their job; understand how their work contributes to the priorities of the Councils; know what their work responsibilities are; and feel that their team makes a difference to the residents of High Peak and Staffordshire Moorlands. Staff see the Alliance’s leadership as highly approachable and visible.

There was a good recognition of how the more corporate ‘one team’ approach across the Alliance has continued to develop positively. Heads of service reflected on the lack of silos in the workforce and of the opportunities to work across the Alliance’s teams and were keen to ensure that this approach is maintained.

The 2022 CPC commented positively on the governance arrangements in place at both Councils. This remains the case and the processes and structures remain sound and “*attention is paid to maintaining good governance and risk management*”




across the organisations.” The peer team found there were robust arrangements in place, and this was demonstrated in the Annual Governance Statement. The peer team also identified a robust, relevant, and well embedded internal audit programme. There is a good awareness and practice around risk management and the Councils will want to keep its risk appetite under review in order to take advantage of future opportunities.

The peer team consider that a periodic governance review of the Alliance to understand the sharing arrangements, secure the partnership, to ensure its continued success and to mitigate risk would be helpful to complement its overall robust approach to governance. This review of the sharing arrangements regarding costs, how decisions are taken and how the value of the Alliance is fully understood by each of the two Councils is no different to any other significant contract or partnership and would help ensure that the partnership continues to deliver for both HPBC and SMDC.

The Councils are on a journey of modernisation, and a timetabled modernisation agenda would now support the development of organisational culture and productivity. There is a lot of work required in the Workforce Strategy and Digitisation Strategy and the peer team see an opportunity to increase the pace on this by identifying further capacity to deliver it. The Alliance is actively looking at this but there is a need to focus on delivering this otherwise it may be a barrier for the workforce to continue to deliver on the ambitions of the Councils. A modern environment with effective ICT will provide staff with the tools they need to work effectively.

The peer team heard about the positive impact of the Council Controlled Companies - Alliance Environmental Services (waste, street cleaning, grounds maintenance and fleet management) and Alliance Norse (facilities management and housing). This has a positive impact on the delivery of services but has also generated additional capacity and efficiencies. The peer team feel there is value in considering Member engagement in the Alliance’s controlled companies, and there is external guidance




and toolkits available in how to approach this for example through CIPFA and Local Partnerships. With these two existing companies and with the potential leisure company the Alliance should periodically review these to provide itself with the comfort that these are operating effectively and as anticipated.

4.4 Financial planning and management

The 2022 CPC highlighted the sound financial position of the Councils. Both Councils still have a strong financial base to tackle future challenges – this was referenced in 2022 and remains true. Balanced budgets and the MTFPs were to be presented to both Councils in February 2024 alongside the 4-year efficiency requirements – SMDC (£1.1M) and HPBC (£0.8M). The Efficiency Programme is in development with a focus on: Asset Management; Income Generation; Council Controlled Companies; Recruitment and Retention; and Project Management.

The Councils have a MTFP in place and this should be commended but if the Councils are to invest: in the depots; in ICT; in its assets and estates; and in the climate change agenda then currently these lines are acknowledged in its plans but do not feature in them in any detail. The peer team recommend that this list of projects and business cases is developed so that this can be fully understood, and funding bids can be made by officers, to understand more clearly the budgetary impacts.

The Alliance may also want to consider the principles of providing ‘value for money’ or ‘low cost’ and what this means for the delivery of its ambitions. For instance, where this relates to staffing numbers the Alliance may want to consider how it invests its resources in its ambitions to deliver the outcomes it wants. Being seen as value for money is rightly important to the Alliance, and it will want to maintain this, but it does not mean that it should avoid committing resources which may otherwise limit its ability to deliver on its ambitions in the way that it would like.




Since 2008 the Alliance has produced significant savings of over £16M across the Councils and this should be congratulated, and it has established mechanisms for sharing costs across HPBC and SMDC. However, there is a perception within the Councils that costs, and savings are now split on trust rather than actual costs. There is an opportunity to now clarify this and for the Councils to better understand their costs, income, and performance across the Alliance. With an increased understanding at political and officer level this may be helpful information to complement the approach taken in regard to measuring performance at the Alliance.

4.5 Capacity for improvement

The Capacity for Improvement section of the previous CPC report outlined areas which went on to form the majority of the recommendations made in 2022. As described previously, the Alliance has committed a great focus and demonstrated progress on addressing these recommendations. The peer team believe that capacity for improvement is an area where the Alliance can excel given its ambitions for the future, and its previous record.

In common with the previous CPC the peer team heard examples of where the organisations know when they need to bring in external expertise and support to deliver quality outcomes. Recognising this and continuing this approach is important and this could take the form of external training and support or advice on continuing to make improvements, such as was the case with the CfGS work on Scrutiny.

Positively, the peer team met with a range of Members, managers and staff who confirmed they are positive and open to change to drive improvement - and are actively looking forward to the next step change for the Councils. For instance, digitalisation is welcomed by councillors as a culture of becoming more businesslike – with the digital programme partnered with SOCITM being the next important




change in efficiency and customer focus. This is key and will require the commitment of funding and a continued focus over a longer period. This may well be a 10-year programme so will necessitate an ongoing focus and a commitment to embracing change.

The peers question whether there is the capacity in place currently for the Alliance to achieve everything which it is setting out to do. This is likely true for all councils and is not just about numbers of people but is about the culture and ways of working. The Alliance should consider the transformation capacity and ensure that capacity is focused in the right places to deliver and support the CEX to deliver the change programme. Member expectations should rightfully be high for their communities and the Councils should be shaped and resourced to deliver this.

As described previously in reviewing recommendation 3 from the previous CPC, the peer team suggest considering whether the current structure and culture facilitates the pace of delivery needed and whether this supports the Council's ambitions. There are currently some gaps in the structure, and this can be used to the benefit of The Alliance to bring the skills needs to continually challenge and move the organisations forward.

The peer team found that detailed delivery dates for projects were not consistently set out and when they are, are often acknowledged to slip. As part of its efficiency programme the Alliance may wish to review if there is adequate grip on projects and accountability. To support the performance culture, it will be important to have an enhanced focus on ensuring that this is delivered but also to ensure everyone is sighted on progress and if there are challenges to deliverability this is clear, and updates are provided to understand the position and mitigate as appropriate.

The Alliance has been very successful in securing an impressive amount of external funding grant funding which for SMDC has included the Leek Levelling Up funding (£17.1M) and for HPBC has included the Buxton Future High Streets Fund (£6.6M),



and Buxton Housing Infrastructure Fund (£3.9M) to deliver its ambitions. This is a success to build upon and the Councils should consider how they can ensure that projects can continue to be developed quickly to take advantage of additional future funding opportunities.

5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss, and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a progress review within twelve months of the CPC, which provides space for the Council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the recommendations from this report.

In the meantime, Helen Murray, Principal Adviser for the West Midlands, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Helen is available to discuss any further support the Council requires helen.murray@local.gov.uk.