

Newark and Sherwood District Council

CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE ACTION PLAN 2025



SERVING PEOPLE, IMPROVING LIVES

Introduction

At Newark and Sherwood District Council, our goal is to continuously improve and serve our residents by providing a service that helps ensure Newark and Sherwood is an excellent place to live and work. To further this aim, we invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to conduct a Corporate Peer Challenge in October 2024.

The visit consisted of a team of senior local government councillors and officers who performed an extensive review of key financial, performance, and governance information before they then spent three days at Castle House providing rigorous, strategic, and credible evaluations. Utilising their onsite presence and access to the council's key strategies and documents, the Peer team provided feedback on the Council's performance, which is detailed in their report.

Overall, the review determined that NSDC is a high-performing council with a positive organisational culture and a solid track record of successful delivery across essential service areas. The council was recognised for effectively providing core services to its communities and contributing to meaningful improvements in residents' lives. While performing well in most areas, there remains room for improvement; consequently, we have used the team's feedback and recommendations to formulate 12 actions, which are outlined in this document.

We take pride in the positive feedback received during this review process and are fully committed to pursuing further improvement through this action plan and are encouraging collaboration among all colleagues to implement the recommendations. We are confident that the LGA's feedback will foster our growth as an organisation, and we look forward to welcoming the team back to NSDC for a progress review before the end of 2025.



Delivery of the Plan

The timeframes for the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) actions are as follows:

Short Term (within 3 months, ongoing work)

Medium Term (within 6 months)

Long Term (A year or over)

In February 2025 the Cabinet approved the formation of a cross-party working group that were tasked with developing this action plan. The working group reviewed in full the peer team's recommendations and through several meetings worked with officers to produce the plan below.

Throughout this process, opportunities to implement the changes recommended in the report were taken so we are well underway in delivering change, an example of this can be seen in the review of the Community Plan which is complete with the results of which being presented to full Council in May 2025. The delivery of this action plan is a collective responsibility of all council officers and preparing it collaboratively with members has enhanced efforts to align existing programmes and initiatives. Lead officers have been assigned accordingly, and progress will be driven and monitored through established governance structures. These officers are tasked with ensuring the advancement of actions, facilitating wider staff involvement, and reporting on milestone achievements through established corporate performance monitoring frameworks. Regular updates on the action plan will be received by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) with a full progress update expected in September 2025. In the longer term, the LGA will return to NSDC for their progress review, offering council officers and elected members the opportunity to share successes and challenges with peers and to thoroughly evaluate progress against the CPC recommendations.

2025 Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan

Key recommendations by Peer Challenge Team	NSDC Actions
<p>Recommendation 1: Review and prioritise the 2023-2027 Community Plan</p> <p>Work on this has already begun with the Cabinet. This may involve reducing the number of priorities and setting timescales for delivery. The process should be inclusive, for example holding a workshop between Cabinet and SLT to agree priorities and timescales. This should include examining areas that are beyond NSDC’s remit and refocus on what a district council can and needs to deliver, before looking at wider areas of work.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete a full review of the community Plan noting all actions that have been completed • Host workshop sessions with key stakeholders (elected Members and Senior Leadership Team) • Implement changes to the Community Plan ensuring to update the associated Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and the Council’s performance framework • Present the updated report and performance framework to the Policy, Performance Improvement Committee (PPIC) in March 2025 for further scrutiny and assurance • Present the report to Cabinet in April 2025 for endorsement • Present the final version of the Community Plan to full council on 20 May 2025 for approval. <p>PPIC Meeting 10 March 2025 Cabinet meeting 01 April 2025</p> <p>Lead Officer(s): Director of Customer Services & Organisational Development Transformation & Service Improvement Manager</p> <p>Timeframe: Short Term</p>
<p>Recommendation 2: Review Audit, Governance, Overview and Scrutiny functions of the council to maximise councillor engagement and council productivity</p> <p>Review terms of reference for Policy and Performance Improvement Committee (PPIC) and Audit and Governance Committee (AGC) to ensure the adequacy and robustness of the council’s governance, risk and control</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit & Governance (A&G) committee to form a working party to undertake a full review of the Terms of Reference (ToRs) for both the A&G committee and PPIC • Review the number of committee members on A&G • Review the number of meetings held per annum • *Present a report to A&G outlining the working party’s findings in May 2025

<p>arrangements. Using a wide range of scrutiny tools available, could encourage more councillors to be better engaged in scrutiny and overview activity. This could include identifying long term challenges, and conducting deep dive commissions, or task and finish groups for shorter investigations. Deep dives could be into subject areas that councillors need more information on before deciding whether to invest staff time and resources in a particular area of work. Consider use of scoring matrix to inform this programme. Ensure the roles of PPIC and AGC are clear and consider how the forward plan for each committee covers the full range of scrutiny, governance, risk management and performance responsibilities. Consider whether opposition councillors could be chairs or vice-chairs of committees.</p>	<p>A&G meeting 07 May 2025</p> <p>Lead Officer(s): Monitoring Officer</p> <p>Timeframe: Short Term</p>
<p>Recommendation 3: Ensure councillors understand the longer-term budget pressures Ensure regular financial reports include long-term forecasts to all councillors are understood.</p> <p>The regular reports to PPIC and Cabinet include forward forecasts, and NSDC revises the MTFP annually and identify the financial gap that will need addressing at the end of the three-year term of the plan. However, it became clear during discussions with councillors that not all appreciated the real financial pressures and risks the council is under, nor the balances that need to be made. The Autumn budget provides an ideal opportunity to update councillors on NSDC’s financial pressures. This will help councillors when revising the Community Plan (recommendation 1). Consider holding an audit on the robustness and sustainability of the Arkwood and Active4Today business plans, introducing an annual report to scrutinise those accounts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once Councillors development group is established (R4 below) ensure finance training is added onto the group’s work programme • BM Financial Services to engage with committees to review how reports are received <p>Lead Officer(s): Monitoring Officer Business Manager Financial Services</p> <p>Timeframe: Short Term/Long Term</p>
<p>Recommendation 4: Establish an ongoing councillor development programme</p> <p>This would ensure that long-standing, as well as new councillors are kept up to date with the many changes that are happening in local government. Consider setting up a councillor development steering group to feed into</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit & Governance committee to explore the potential of a Councillors development group and associated programme. • Item to be added onto the A&G work programme for July 2025 • Deliver an Elected Member training day on 17 June 2025

<p>this process, recognising that officers have a role in recommending development opportunities. Encourage councillors who are new to areas of responsibility to attend Leadership Academy courses. This will build up networks of expertise from around the country and improve resilience of councillors.</p>	<p>Lead Officer(s): Monitoring Officer</p> <p>Timeframe: Medium Term</p>
<p>Recommendation 5: Continue to foster the positive culture of the organisation</p> <p>Officers are deeply committed to delivering the best for local communities. However, many of the officers the team met (formally and informally) are very stretched. Although the recent staff survey indicates that this is 'some' rather than 'many' staff, the peer team recommends that the council explore this further. This is affected by the demands of the Community Plan and work that is outside NSDC's remit. It is underpinned by staff having a strong commitment to deliver high quality, appropriate, supportive services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake a full review of the Community Plan (R1) and the Council's 'out of remit activities' (R9) to ensure that capacity is released wherever possible - completed and will be presented to full council on 20 May 25 • Maintain ongoing commitment to staff welfare programs and support functions which were recognised as best practice • Deliver a full review of the Job Descriptions and Job Evaluations for all employees (Project Recruitment & Retention, 'R&R') • Continue to deliver the annual Serving People & Improving lives (SPIL) awards that recognise staff dedication and achievements • Complete – all actions programmed in and refreshed for the current year <p>Lead Officer(s): Director of Customer Services & Organisational Development Business Manager – Human Resources Training</p> <p>Timeframe: Short Term/Long Term</p>
<p>Recommendation 6: Consider agreeing a Team Charter amongst the Joint Administration</p> <p>This should include a Communication Protocol and be linked with the review of Councillor Code of Conduct.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NSDC Peer Challenge working party to discuss the requirement for a team charter • Review the existing code of conduct (linked to R8) • A&G to review the communication protocol • Leader of the Council to consider • This has been reviewed by the current administration who felt that a team charter would not be beneficial at this time due to the group

	<p>being together for over two years. The standards of behaviour are clear and understood by all elected members.</p> <p>Lead Officer(s): Monitoring Officer</p> <p>Timeframe: Short Term</p>
<p>Recommendation 7: Strengthen and enhance the Annual Governance Statement</p> <p>The Annual Governance Statement (AGS) could be strengthened and enhanced to ensure that NSDC is assuring itself that governance and scrutiny arrangements are clear and strong. The AGS is an opportunity for the council to set out what it wants to achieve and how, along with clear indications of how plans will be scrutinised, overseen and taken forward by councillors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure annual review of the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) is present on the work programme • Undertake a review of the AGS in July 2025 • Explore opportunities to benchmark against other Local Authorities AGS where appropriate. <p>Lead Officer(s): Monitoring Officer</p> <p>Timeframe: Medium Term</p>
<p>Recommendation 8: Strengthen the application of the national code of conduct</p> <p>The Audit and Governance Committee had already agreed to explore how to strengthen the application of the national Code of Conduct, something which the Peer Team supports to mitigate the risk of the reputation, effectiveness and positive culture of the Council being undermined. The significant increase in formal and informal complaints against councillor conduct risks bringing the council into disrepute.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond to the upcoming changes to the national code of conduct • Review existing code of conduct to ensure it is clear and understood by all stakeholders • Present code of conduct at the Monitoring Officers network meeting for discussion and feedback. • A&G/Monitoring Officer to review the use of social media guidance • Monitoring Officer to apply the national code of conduct to the fullest extent in events of any future breach. <p>Lead Officer(s): Monitoring Officer</p> <p>Timeframe: Medium Term</p>

<p>Recommendation 9: Explore further options for scrutiny of Arkwood & Active 4 Today</p> <p>Arkwood Development Ltd and Active4Today report to Cabinet for scrutiny as a result of external legal advice. The peer team recommend that the council improves this scrutiny to ensure that more councillors have a clear understanding of their business planning and delivery. This could be through deep dives or other scrutiny mechanisms used by PPIC.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review governance agreements of Active 4 Today and Arkwood • Confirm existing arrangement is fit for purpose. i.e. Cabinet via Executive Shareholder committee applies scrutiny to both entities • Executive Shareholder Committee to consider future opportunity to delegate focussed scrutiny of Active 4 Today and Arkwood Development Ltd to PPIC <p>Lead Officer(s): Transformation & Service Improvement Manager</p> <p>Timeframe: Long Term</p>
<p>Recommendation 9: Review NSDCs ‘out of remit’ activities within the Community Plan and day to day business.</p> <p>There is currently a very ambitious 2023-27 Community Plan, which includes about 140 projects, and some of these projects fall within the remit of other organisations. Whilst this was done with the best of intentions at the time, it is putting a strain on capacity. The council needs to carry out a review of the Community Plan, with a view to ensure that sufficient capacity would be able to deliver the Council’s core services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy & Performance Improvement Committee (PPIC) to establish a working group to review and map any activities that may fall ‘out of the remit’ of a typical District Council. • A cross party working group has been formed and held their first meeting in April 2025. The second meeting is programmed in for June 2025 <p>Lead Officer(s): Transformation & Service Improvement Manager</p> <p>Timeframe: Medium Term</p>
<p>Recommendation 10: Review the communication plan of projects linking to ‘diversity and addressing inequalities in the district’.</p> <p>Little direct reference was made in conversations during the CPC to diversity or addressing inequalities, despite the work that the council is doing in this area. For example, work to support gypsies and travellers and relations with settled communities, and positive work on the resettlement of refugees. The peer team recommend that more is made of this work,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equality, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EEDI) lead to establish a strategy group no late than June 2025 to undertake a full review of the Council’s EEDI strategic internal & external approach. • Review communication plan with a focus on maximising awareness of the work the Council is delivering to address inequalities in the District.

<p>particularly when demonstrating achievement of the council's equality objectives and fulfilling its Equality Duty obligations.</p>	<p>Lead Officer(s): Transformation & Service Improvement Manager Business Manager Communication & Marketing</p> <p>Timeframe: Long Term</p>
<p>Recommendation 11: Review the performance of the housing allocation service area</p> <p>The total households on the housing waiting list as of 31st March 2023 was 89 households per 1,000. This compares reasonably with the England average of 82, but less favourably when compared to 39.4 amongst CIPFA near neighbours and 38.8 within East Midlands district councils.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out a full review of the housing allocation service with the aim of bringing the total number of households on the housing allocation list to a level that compares more favourably to our CIPFA neighbours • Review the updated figures when available for 2024/25 and explore opportunities for further improvements <p>Complete: A full-scale review of our housing register has been carried out and applications dropped to 2513 as at 31 March 2024. This now places us at 40.1 per 1000 households an improvement from 89.0</p> <p>Lead Officer(s): Business Manager Housing Services</p> <p>Timeframe: Short Term</p>
<p>Recommendation 12: Review of the staff appraisal mechanisms</p> <p>There is a clear performance management structure in the council including Business Managers reporting performance to SLT, Cabinet and PPIC quarterly. There is an individual staff appraisal system in place, but this is not consistently carried out across the council. The peer team suggests that NSDC should consider a review of the appraisal mechanisms to build a stronger performance management culture.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review current mechanism for staff appraisals • Explore opportunity to bring appraisal processes online to enable better assurance of appraisal completion and frequency • Carry out a pilot in 24/25 • Roll the new system out fully in 25/26 <p>Lead Officer(s): Business Manager Human Resources & Training</p> <p>Timeframe: Short Term</p>