

Agenda item 4

For decision – response to Peer Challenge

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Summary

This report provides a summary of the recommendations from the Local Government Association (LGA) led Peer Challenge Team following the Corporate Peer Challenge exercise in the summer. The report also sets out our proposed response including the development of an Improvement Plan that focuses on improving both the efficiency and effectiveness of the Council. Approval is sought for the establishment of an Improvement Advisory Group and a brief to guide its work that will report back to Council in January 2026.

Background

Frome Town Council has recognised for a while that we are in a period of transition as an organisation. As our responsibilities, scope, scale and complexity of our work have grown, we decided that we should commission the LGA to conduct a Corporate Peer Challenge. This is essentially a review with the aim of providing independent guidance on how to strengthen our organisation. A team of local government peers led by the LGA, delivered that review in July of this year, and we have now received their report together with recommendations. A copy of the full report can be viewed on our website here www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Frome-Corporate-Peer-Challenge-Report.pdf

What did the Peer Challenge consider?

The Peer Team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all corporate peer challenges:

- Local priorities and outcomes – are the Council's priorities clear and informed by the local context and is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
- Organisational and place leadership – does the Council provide effective leadership and are there good relationships with partners and the local community?
- Governance and culture – are there clear and robust governance arrangements?
- Financial planning and management – does the Council have a strategy and plan to address its financial challenges?
- Capacity for improvement – does the organisation have the capacity to support the delivery of its priorities and improve?

To inform the review, we submitted a position statement – [see Appendix 4.1 which can be viewed on the website here.](#)

What did the Peer Team find?

Strengths recognised by the Peer Team:

- Ambition and values-driven approach, clearly understood internally.
- Strong civic leadership and ability to foster community capacity and energy.
- Highly valued reputation in the community.
- Ethos of engagement, participation, and innovation.
- Responsiveness to local needs, willingness to operate beyond conventional boundaries.
- Committed, motivated, and loyal workforce.

The report also highlighted areas for improvement essential for an organisation of our scale and complexity, many that we were already aware of, and offered constructive recommendations on how to move forward.

A summary of the Peer Team's recommendations

- **Develop a medium-term financial plan and review and strengthen risk management** - would together improve the Council's ability to seize future opportunities e.g. future devolved assets and mitigate emerging risks – strengthening the resources and skills of the Finance Team would be an essential part of this
- **Strengthen governance and decision-making and invest in councillor development** – recognising that at times there have been differences in expectations around how and when work is carried out and there has been an overreliance on informal channels of communication affecting cohesion and relationships - developing more structured governance protocols, reviewing communication channels and investing in targeted councillor development are recommended
- **Embed project and performance management** – the report highlighted that although objectives within the current Council Plan are bold, many are not SMART and this limits the council's ability to demonstrate its progress and fully evaluate its impact – the introduction of SMART objectives (as proposed in the Council Plan update report on this agenda), strengthening project management and developing a council-wide performance framework would help monitor progress, support learning from others and ensure that projects remain responsive to changing needs
- **Prioritise staff wellbeing and development** – a recognition that staff need to be well equipped and supported to do the increasingly complex and demanding work that the Council is involved with - the Peer Team identified the need to fill a specific gap in dedicated HR expertise and support professional development to ensure that the Council retains the capabilities to deliver
- **Deepen collaboration with Somerset Council** – acknowledging the importance of the alignment of priorities of the two councils – the Peer Team recommended a more structured and proactive approach to this relationship with clearer lines of communication, regular engagement and shared forward planning
- **Align communications with strategic goals** – strengthening the Council's messaging and reinforcing the trust it holds within the community are vital to manage expectations and ensure that its leadership role remains clearly understood and valued
- **Leverage sector tools and networks** – taking full advantage of the resources and support available within organisations such as the Somerset Association of Local Councils (SALC) and the national association, NALC

Next steps

There is a requirement that FTC develops and publishes an Action Plan that provides clarity on the activity, milestones and timelines that the Council will work to in responding to the Peer Team's findings.

The recommendation to councillors is that this Action Plan should form part of a broader Improvement Plan for the organisation. We believe that rather than simply preparing a one-off response to the Peer Challenge, we should make a commitment to continuous improvement, and embedding a culture of learning, reflection and challenge across the organisation. Our Improvement Plan should bring together the insights from the Peer Challenge with the Council's own understanding, priorities and emerging challenges, creating a single, cohesive plan to guide our work to improve over the next two years. For the first time we will be proposing a designated Improvement Work Programme and Budget to reflect this commitment.

To develop and oversee this Improvement Plan, it is recommended that an Advisory Group is formed bringing together a small group of councillors and staff. This group will make recommendations to Council (it would have no decision-making powers in line with standing orders) in relation to both the Peer Challenge and the broader Improvement Plan. A report will be brought to Council in January 2026 together with a draft Work Programme and Budget for 2026/2027. Thereafter, updates will be brought to each Operations and Assets Committee meeting. The Peer Team will re-engage in the Spring of 2026 on a date to be confirmed to undertake a progress review.

[Appendix 4.2, which can be viewed on the website here](#), is the proposed brief for the Improvement Advisory Group which councillors are asked to approve.

Recommendations

1. To set up an Improvement Advisory Group to be chaired by Fiona Barrows as Chair & Leader and involving Nick Dove, Carla Collenette, Anne Hills, Mark Dorrington, the Acting Town Clerk, Responsible Finance Officer, Interim Deputy Town Clerk and Executive Assistant that will inform our response to the Peer Challenge and a broader Improvement Plan to be approved by Council in January 2026
2. Approve the brief for the Improvement Advisory Group in Appendix 4.3