

Agenda item 7

For decision – Draft Improvement Plan

Authors: Peter Wheelhouse, Acting Town Clerk & Cllr Fiona Barrows, Chair & Leader

Contributors to this report

Members of the Improvement Advisory Group:

Cllr Fiona Barrows (Chair)

Cllr Nick Dove

Cllr Carla Collenette

Cllr Anne Hills

Cllr Mark Dorrington

Peter Wheelhouse, Acting Town Clerk

Jane Llewellyn, Planning & Development Manager & Acting Deputy Town Clerk

Sarah Williams, Responsible Finance Officer & Business Manager

Laura Flaherty, HR Lead & Executive Assistant

1. Summary and Recommendation

Frome Town Council (FTC) has grown considerably over the last five years and we want to make sure our governance and systems reflect the increased scale, scope and complexity of our work. It is in the light of this that the Local Government Association (LGA) was invited by the Council to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge last summer. Having reflected on their findings, councillors made a commitment to develop and implement an improvement plan to strengthen governance and processes (see Aim 5 of the Council Plan) and agreed to set up an Improvement Advisory Group to explore in detail how a difference can be made.

This report sets out the outcomes of the work of the Advisory Group and the recommendation is as follows:

To delegate authority to the Acting Town Clerk to implement the proposed Improvement Plan set out in Paragraph 7 of this report.

2. Background

FTC has recognised for a while that we are in a period of transition as an organisation. As our responsibilities, scope, scale and the complexity of our work have grown, we decided that we should invite the LGA to conduct a Corporate Peer Challenge. This was 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 2025 and their recommendations were considered at the Council meeting on 29 October 2025. At that meeting councillors agreed to two things:

- A commitment to continuous improvement embedded in the Council Plan 2025-27
- Establishment of an Improvement Advisory Group to explore both insights from the Peer Challenge and the Council's own understanding, priorities and emerging challenges and create a single, cohesive plan to guide our work to improve over the next two years.

[The brief for the Improvement Advisory Group can be viewed here on the website here.](#)

Since then, the Improvement Advisory Group looked at four areas of our organisation, reflecting on the Peer Review Team's findings and our own thoughts. The outcomes of those discussions are set out below.

3. HR, Cultural & Councillor Development

What the Peer Review Team said:

- **FTC should strengthen governance and decision-making and invest in councillor development** – developing more structured governance protocols, reviewing internal communication channels and investing in targeted councillor development were recommended.
- **FTC should 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 Review 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

The Group considered how governance and decision making could be improved. There was an acknowledgement that Council meetings had become more irregular than had been the case in the past and with a higher workload of decisions to be taken, it had been necessary to introduce extraordinary meetings to conduct the business of the Council. The Group considered that a monthly cycle of Council meetings should be re-introduced and councillors adopted that suggestion at the January 2026 Council meeting.

The Group noted that currently, there are different approaches to the drafting of reports for Council and committees and they don't always cover all of the information that councillors need to help with decision making. The proposal is to introduce a standard template to address this point.

The Group recognised that Standing Orders and Financial Regulations already set out clear roles and responsibilities for the Chair, Proper Officer (Town Clerk), Responsible Finance Officer, Council and committees. However, greater clarity could be provided by the introduction of a Scheme of Delegation that brings that all together. A Scheme of Delegation would also provide an opportunity to review the delegation of duties and powers that would ensure an effective and efficient distribution of workload within the organisation. It was noted that other larger local councils had adopted a Scheme of Delegation to that effect.

Ways in which internal communication could be improved were considered by the Group. The Group heard how the Acting Town Clerk and HR Lead had put in place some facilitated discussions with staff to explore how internal communication could be improved. What was heard was more regular feedback from Council, committees and Management Team meetings that sets out not only what had been decided but also why would help to strengthen the commitment to delivering the Council's aims and objectives as set out in the Council Plan. The Acting Town Clerk has already acted on this – at weekly catch-up meetings with staff, an update on immediate past and forthcoming meetings and an opportunity to ask questions now forms part of the discussion.

It was acknowledged by the Group that the Council Plan adopted in October 2025 will be an important starting point in setting the objectives of individual staff at the beginning of 2026/27. The SMART goals set out in the Plan should be the 'golden thread' that runs through appraisals and one-to-ones.

The Peer Review Team noted that whilst staff did not raise direct concerns about individual performance, there was a shared view that annual appraisals were not consistently applied across the organisation. The next step will be to ensure that all staff are appraised twice a year (mid-year and end of year) and that there is a consistent approach across the organisation. Whilst neither the Peer Review Team nor the Advisory Group had identified behavioural expectations not being met, the Group felt that to protect the Council in the future, it would be beneficial for the behaviours that staff demonstrate in their daily interactions with other staff, councillors and the community to be included as part of appraisals.

The Group acknowledged the value of the role played by lead councillors and the importance of nurturing this approach to support internal communication between staff and councillors. However, expectations of lead councillors were not always clear. It is proposed to address this within the proposed Scheme of Delegation.

The development of a comprehensive induction process for councillors was highlighted as a valuable way of developing the knowledge and skills of councillors and ensure that they are equipped to fulfil their duties. Being prepared for the intake of new councillors following elections in 2027 was identified as being important. In the meantime, the Acting Town Clerk has begun to roll out a programme of training for councillors starting with training in meeting protocols and following that session, resources have been shared with all councillors and staff that may clerk meetings from time-to-time.

The Group identified an urgent need to address a lack of HR capacity which was holding back our ability to address fast moving legislative requirements and the needs of a growing staff body as well as drawing our Responsible Finance Officer away from important financial work. Action has already been taken to address this capacity issue. Laura Flaherty has been promoted to HR Lead recognising the knowledge she has developed through her professional qualification and we have recruited a Business & HR Administrator, Sian James, who will take responsibility for day-to-day HR administrative work.

The next step will be to implement a work programme to include:

- full engagement with staff to assess their development needs, develop our training programme and inform our recruitment and retention strategy
- review of our TOIL, flexible working and staff welfare package to ensure that staff are well supported
- briefings of both staff and councillors to raise awareness of legislative requirements that impose certain duties on the Council e.g. Health & Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and regulations published since, the Equality Act 2010 and Public Sector Equality Duty, the new Public Office (Accountability) Bill ('Hillsborough Law'), Employment Rights Bill etc., and putting robust policies in place to ensure that proper practices are followed

4. Finance & risk management

What the Peer Review Team said:

- **FTC should develop a Medium-Term Financial Plan and review and strengthen risk management** - together these would 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

The Group identified that a critical element in addressing our risks, financial or otherwise is to ensure that we have adequate capacity in place to do so. It was acknowledged that the Finance Team is under increasing pressure due to the growing scale and complexity of the Council's transactions and a number of measures have been put in place already including new procedures for payments and the contracting out of payroll. In addition, to deal with the Finance Officer's maternity leave, temporary staff have been employed to fill the gap in capacity. This is being kept under review to ensure that the organisation can cope with increasing workloads.

The Group identified the importance of maintaining legal and regulatory compliance focus and considered that future reports to Council and committees related to projects should explicitly document the risks, risk mitigation and legal considerations. In the meantime, it is proposed that an update on our Risk Management Plan is submitted to the March Council meeting.

The Group agreed with the Peer Review Team's recommendation that due to the growing scale of operations, the organisation should now be committing resources to the development of a Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP). This should be a 3-5-year plan. It should be regarded as a living document that guides longer-term decisions especially around the management of assets, capital expenditure and revenue generation. It should include inflation assumptions and scenario modelling.

Elements of the MTFP should include:

- A review of our reserves policy and assess whether this needs to be strengthened
- An examination of future potential income sources including s.106 funding, Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and grants

- An updated strategy for the Town Hall, Key Centre and other assets to incorporate a review of asset rents and future liabilities
- Keeping under review our approach to devolution – our current approach is consolidation of the assets and services that have been devolved by Somerset Council
- Workforce planning

It is proposed that the Improvement Advisory Group meets in June 2026 on a date to be confirmed to discuss a draft MTFP prepared by the Acting Town Clerk and Responsible Finance Officer with a view to a report coming to Operations & Assets Committee in July 2026 for approval.

5. Operational efficiency, performance and impact

What the Peer Review Team said:

- FTC should 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, 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.

The Group noted that the Council Plan adopted in October 2025 sharpened the aims and objectives for FTC to pursue and that the draft 2026/27 work programme was firmly underpinned by the aims and objectives in the Council Plan. The Group also noted that in developing the work programme, work had been undertaken to identify smarter objectives to assist with performance management. This will be kept under review and where necessary built upon.

The Group noted that many staff had received project management training and a Project Initiation Document template is in regular use. The proposal is for the Acting Town Clerk to review with the Management Team how relevant this template is to FTC's needs and how project management can be made more effective in the future with a report to be brought to Operations & Assets Committee in July 2026.

With regard to IT systems, the Group discussed AI and how that could help improve operational efficiency. It was noted that FTC holds 36 Microsoft Copilot licences but training is needed to support confident and safe AI use. It is proposed that an AI usage and data protection policy is adopted to address this and brought to Council together with other policy updates in May 2026.

As projects become more complex, so collaboration between teams and between staff and lead councillors becomes more important. A number of tools are being used to support this collaboration including Microsoft SharePoint and Teams. Further work is being undertaken by the Responsible Finance Officer & Business Manager to ensure that these tools are easy for staff and councillors to navigate.

6. External relationships and collaboration

What the Peer Review Team said:

- FTC was encouraged to 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
- We should 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
- We should lever 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)

In relation to the relationship with Somerset Council, the Advisory Group noted the successful conclusion to devolution negotiations with a range of assets and services having been devolved. The focus is now on consolidation to ensure that those new assets and services are operating effectively and delivering benefits to the local community but we should continue to review opportunities as they arise as noted earlier.

FTC has regular contact with Somerset Council on a range of topics and at a number of levels including Leader, Chief Executive, departmental heads, lead councillors and divisional councillors. Where opportunities arise, conversations of a more strategic and collaborative nature are pursued that will benefit the local community – examples include recent discussions regarding waste management in the town centre which are continuing and discussions around the potential of ‘Frome Riverside’ as a cultural destination. The proposed development of a ‘Frome Prospectus’ that identifies Frome’s future economic potential and how that can be exploited presents a further opportunity for collaboration with Somerset Council.

Since the Council Plan was published, every opportunity has been taken to show how the Council’s activities help to deliver the Council’s strategic aims and objectives. The development of the Council’s website and Marketing & Communications Strategy are within the draft work programme for 2026/27 and will present further opportunities to align communications with strategic goals.

FTC already makes extensive use of sector tools including attendance at Society Of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) conferences and the resources offered by SALC and NALC and will continue to do so to learn from others and keep up-to-date with legislative changes and developments in the sector.

7. Proposed Improvement Action Plan

Building on the work of the Improvement Advisory Group, it is proposed that the Acting Town Clerk implements the following programme of action:

Number	Action	Target date/regularity
1	To update the Council's Risk Management Plan and bring a report to Council on this	March 2026
2	To ensure that all staff receive appraisals and that they are undertaken in a consistent way addressing both performance against Council objectives and behaviours in their interaction with other staff, councillors and the community	To be implemented immediately
3	To ensure that future reports to Council and committees use a standard template and those related to projects explicitly document risks, risk mitigation and legal considerations	To be implemented immediately
4	To review and update our Standing Orders, Financial Regulations, Code of Conduct and other policies to ensure that they comprehensively address all legislative requirements	May 2026
5	Draft a Scheme of Delegation to be brought back to Council for approval	June 2026
6	To introduce a programme of facilitated briefings for both staff and councillors to raise awareness of the Council's duties	June – September 2026 and to be repeated annually
7	To develop a draft of a Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) with help from the Improvement Advisory Group (to meet in June 2026) and bring a report on this to Operations & Assets Committee	July 2026
8	To review our approach to project management and bring a report to Operations & Assets Committee for approval	July 2026
9	To engage with staff regarding TOIL, flexible working arrangements and staff welfare support and report back with recommendations to the Operations & Assets Committee	July 2026
10	To thoroughly assess the development needs of staff to inform our future training programme and spend on training in 2027/28 with a report coming back to Operations & Assets Committee	October 2026
11	To review our approach to recruitment and report back to Operations & Assets Committee	October 2026
12	To hold an annual facilitated meeting with staff to explore how internal communication can be further improved	Once a year – date TBC
13	To work with the Improvement Advisory Group to develop a comprehensive induction process for councillors	To be rolled out in May 2027 with annual refresher sessions
14	To continue to explore opportunities for strategic collaboration with Somerset Council and lever links and resources within the sector	

15	To ensure that through the update of the Council’s website and Marketing & Communications Strategy in 2026/27 that our communications align with the aims and objectives within the Council Plan	
----	--	--

8. Engagement and next steps governance

Once approved, a copy of the Improvement Plan will be sent to the LGA. The proposed Improvement Plan identifies a number of points at which reports will be brought to both Council and Operations & Assets Committee that will present an opportunity to engage not only councillors but also members of the community before elements of the Improvement Plan are implemented. As agreed by Council on 29 October 2025, there will be updates on progress brought to each Operations & Assets Committee and six-monthly updates to Council.

9. Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan

The development of an Improvement Plan is a key objective under Aim 5 (Be a bold and effective Council) within the Council Plan. The report sets out elements to be included within the brief for the proposed Medium Term Financial Plan.

10. Financial and Risk Implications

Proposals that will address the Council’s financial and other risks are set out in the proposed Improvement Plan. The budgetary implications of implementing the Improvement Plan are set out in the accompanying draft Work Programme & Budget for 2026/27.

11. Legal / HR Implications

The proposed Improvement Plan includes measures that are designed to ensure legal compliance and address staff wellbeing and development

12. Equalities Implications

The proposed Improvement Plan proposes that we update our policies to ensure compliance with the Equality Act 2010 and Public Sector Equality Duty and maximise awareness of our duties amongst staff and councillors.

13. Health and Safety Implications

Implementation of the Improvement Plan will help the Council to tighten up on our Health & Safety policies and maximise awareness of our duties under Health & Safety legislation and regulations.

14. Background Papers

- [LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Feedback report - July 2025](#)
- [Council report on Peer Challenge – 29 October 2025](#)
- [Brief for Improvement Advisory Group – 29 October 2025](#)

15. Report Sign-Off

Cllr Fiona Barrows, Chair & Leader – 06/02/26

Peter Wheelhouse, Acting Town Clerk – 11/02/26

Recommendation

To delegate authority to the Acting Town Clerk to implement the proposed Improvement Plan set out in Paragraph 7 of this report.