

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Tamworth Borough Council

29 – 31 October 2024

Feedback report



**Corporate Peer Challenge**



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## 1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance and governance information and then spending three days at Tamworth Borough Council to provide robust, strategic and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of Sector-led Improvement (SLI) put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are: Responsible for their own performance, Accountable locally not nationally and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

CPC assists councils in meeting part of their Best Value duty, with the UK Government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years.

Peers remain at the heart of the peer challenge process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

This report outlines the key findings of the peer team and the recommendations that the council are required to action.

## 2. Executive summary

There is a strong sense of pride, amongst all those who met with the peer team, about Tamworth, its ancient origins and unique heritage. We found the council is ambitious for the future, including major regeneration projects underway to transform the town centre.

The council's new chief executive (who started in April 2024) is helping to bring new energy, fresh ideas and thinking to the council. Together with the new Leader and political leadership (May 2024) they are setting a new organisational direction through the development of a new (draft) Corporate Plan. There are ambitions to

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strengthen digital transformation, innovation, visibility, equalities, community wellbeing and cohesion, whilst delivering excellent services. During our time at the council, we observed good joint working between senior officers and cabinet members. We also met with officers who are a great asset to the council. They are dedicated, passionate and committed to Tamworth as a place and as a council.

The council faces significant financial challenges and addressing this needs to be the council's immediate and pressing priority. The Medium-Term Financial Plan shows a deficit that increases from £3.3m in 2025/2026 to £5.0m in 2028/2029. The current projected use of reserves is unsustainable in the medium and longer term with a projected shortfall of £9m by 2028/2029. Whilst we found that the scale of this challenge is well understood by the senior political and managerial leadership, the time to act is now. It is the view of the peer team that the current areas for targeted savings appear aspirational rather than tangible and deliverable. We recommend that the council (and urgently) develops a clear savings plan incorporating tangible, costed and deliverable savings with robust senior management and member oversight. It will also be important to ensure that the draft Corporate Plan is closely aligned to the council's budget plans, required savings, resources, ways of working and capacity to deliver.

As the council progresses work on the new corporate priorities and savings plan, there is an opportunity to review organisational structures and ways of working. This is explored in more detail in section 5.5 of this report. This will help to ensure sufficient capacity and resource is in place to deliver against the agreed priorities.

The council's long-term assets comprise of some extensive liabilities including £20million of investment properties, £13million of long-term debtors and £10 million of long-term investments. We recommend that you continue to progress and prioritise work (already started) to implement the refreshed Asset Management Strategy. The council needs to be confident that it is able to exercise responsible ownership, manage risk and exercise control over the asset base.

The peer team heard from a wide range of statutory and voluntary sector partners about the council's rapid, joined up leadership and response to violent disorder that occurred at a local hotel housing asylum seeking people over the summer. The

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council were seen as a key convener and responded quickly to condemn the violence. We were pleased to hear how the council have commissioned an 'honest conversations' community engagement project to help build an understanding of the issues, challenges and strengths in relation to community cohesion.

We recommend that the council use the outcome of the 'honest conversations' project to inform work to review, develop and strengthen communication and consultation approaches. This emerged as a consistent theme during the peer challenge. (more details in section 5.1). It should also be used to inform work to build asset-based community engagement and strengthen community cohesion through the development of a new Community Cohesion Strategy for Tamworth (more details in section 5.3).

A new Equality and Diversity Strategy (EDI) is being developed. This is positive as we believe it will support the council's work on community cohesion. Fostering good relations between different groups of people is a key part of the public sector equality duty. We recommend that you use the new EDI Strategy to help bring to life a common vision and sense of belonging for all communities, staff and councillors.

We were impressed with the council's success in attracting significant external investment to re-generate Tamworth Town Centre. However, some residents and business stakeholders who met with the peer team said they are not always clear on how the Future High Streets Funding is being used or that they don't always feel that their views are heard. It is important that the work outlined above to strengthen communication and consultation approaches includes Town Centre Regeneration. It will also be important to continue work, already started, to bring together recent and planned developments to formulate a single Town Centre Regeneration Strategy.

The council is a social landlord and we heard how they have recently triggered a self-referral to the Regulator of Social Housing due to issues of non-compliance with the required standards. It is positive that the council's leadership have been pro-active, open and transparent in this way. While positive initial progress has been made it is important that you maintain corporate focus and drive on delivering the required improvements.

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During the Corporate Peer Challenge, the peer team were presented with examples of strong corporate governance and assurance processes. We recommend that you continue work to strengthen the culture of assurance and good governance across the council to ensure it is seen as everyone's responsibility. This should include, as part of your Member Development Plan, training on audit and governance for all councillors. There is also an opportunity to review the council's overview and scrutiny structures to ensure they align with your new emerging priorities.

Consideration should be given to strengthening how the statutory officers of the council (head of paid service, section 151 officer and monitoring officer) work together to ensure a voice in all decision making. This should be in line with the latest Lawyers in Local Government (LLG), Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants (CIPFA) and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) guidelines<sup>1</sup>. Consideration should also be given to the position of the statutory roles within the structure to ensure they contribute effectively to strategic leadership, decision making and policy development.

The peer team recommends that a clear plan is developed to address the ambition to strengthen digital transformation of council services. This should be aligned to the emerging Corporate Plan once agreed. It will be important to ensure the council has sufficient capacity and resource to achieve digital transformation that delivers innovative, efficient and effective service delivery to the customers

### 3. Recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following (below) are the peer team's key recommendations to the council.

The peer team recognise that there is a lot to do and that prioritisation and sequencing will be key. It is positive that work to strengthen community cohesion and equalities, diversity and inclusion is already progressing. In addition to this, ensuring future financial stability through achieving the required level of savings should be the

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<sup>1</sup> [Code of Practice on Good Governance for Statutory Officers](#)

council's immediate priority. This will be a key factor in the delivery of the council's future priorities and ambitions.

The peer team's recommendations relating to the council's future organisational structure, ways of working and digital transformation should also be prioritised as this will help to ensure corporate capacity to deliver against the council's stated priorities and deliver improved outcomes for communities.

### **3.1 Develop a clear plan to address your financial challenges incorporating tangible, costed and deliverable savings with robust governance oversight**

The council is currently relying on reserves and balances to meet the gap which is unsustainable in the medium and longer term. The council needs to act now to develop a clear savings plan incorporating tangible, costed and deliverable savings with strong political and managerial leadership and oversight.

### **3.2 Align your financial plans to your emerging new Corporate Plan**

Once agreed, the new Corporate Plan will guide planning and decision making for Tamworth Council over the next five years. It is important that the new Plan is aligned with the council's resources and capacity to deliver.

### **3.3 Ensure you are fully meeting obligations, managing risk and exercising control over the asset base and investments**

The council's property base comprises some important assets with extensive liabilities attached. Progress your work on Asset Management, following the recent refresh of the Asset Management Strategy. Ensure the council is confident that it is able to exercise responsible ownership, manage risk and exercise control over the asset base.

### **3.4 Ensure the new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy is used to bring to life a common vision and sense of belonging for all communities, staff and councillors**

Ensure leadership and organisational commitment to this work to help embed EDI

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principles across everything the council does including work to strengthen community cohesion.

### **3.5 Continue to deliver the Social Housing Improvement Programme working with residents and the Regulator of Social Housing**

It is positive that the council have been proactive, open and transparent, triggering a self-referral to the Regulator of Social Housing. It is important that you maintain focus and drive on your improvement journey.

### **3.6 Review, develop and strengthen communication and consultation approaches**

We recommend that the council develops an overarching communications and consultation plan. This should help to further strengthen closer engagement with communities. Use the outcome of the 'honest conversations' project to inform approaches.

### **3.7 Develop your overarching Town Centre Regeneration Strategy and use this as an opportunity to strengthen communication approaches in relation to town centre regeneration**

Continue the work (already started) to develop an overarching Regeneration Strategy, which seeks to masterplan development across the town and use this an opportunity to strengthen your communication approaches in relation to town centre regeneration.

### **3.8 Use the Honest Conversations Project to build asset-based approaches to your work in communities and inform your community cohesion plan**

It is positive that the council have attracted external funding to commission a project to engage different communities in honest dialogue about living in Tamworth, strengths, opportunities and challenges. This should be used to inform the development of a 'strengths based' community cohesion strategy and action plan for Tamworth.

### **3.9 Review your organisational structure and future ways of working, ensuring this aligns to/enables delivery of your priorities and ambitions**

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The aim should be to ensure that there is sufficient capacity and resource to delivery against agreed priorities.

### **3.10 Continue to strengthen the culture of assurance and good governance across the council, including how statutory officer functions work and are distributed across the authority**

This should be in line with the latest Lawyers in Local Government (LLG), Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants (CIPFA) and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) guidelines. It will also be important to ensure the Member Development Plan provides training on audit and governance for all councillors, helping to ensure assurance and governance are seen as everyone's responsibility.

### **3.11 Review the council's Overview and Scrutiny structures in support of your corporate priorities**

We heard particularly that there may be opportunities to review the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee to give it a greater focus on community wellbeing and community cohesion.

### **3.12 Develop a comprehensive plan to achieve digital transformation putting customers at the heart**

It is important that it aligns with the new corporate plan once agreed. It should ensure that the council has sufficient capacity and resource to achieve digital transformation that delivers innovative, efficient and effective service delivery to the customers.

## **4. Summary of peer challenge approach**

### **4.1 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 by the LGA on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Rebecca Huddleston, Chief Executive, Wyre Council.

- Councillor Alan Rhodes, Cabinet Member for Corporate and Financial Services, Bassetlaw District Council.
- Councillor Nick Worth, Leader, South Holland District Council.
- Gordon Bryant, Section 151 Officer, Torridge District Council.
- Andrea Curson, Head of Customer and Digital, Horsham District Council.
- Jyotsna Leney, Community Partnerships Manager, Folkestone and Hythe District Council.
- Peer Challenge Manager – Cindy Lowthian, Senior National Adviser, Local Government Association (LGA).

#### 4.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

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? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
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? What is the relative financial resilience of the council like?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does

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the council have the capacity to improve?

As part of the five core elements outlined above, every Corporate Peer Challenge includes a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance, and assurance.

At the council's request, under theme two, the peer team included a particular focus on community engagement and community cohesion. In relation to theme five, the peer team included a particular focus on the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to support innovation and delivery of priorities

### **4.3 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 the council and the challenges it is facing. This included a position statement prepared by the council in advance of the peer team's time on site. This provided a clear steer to the peer team on the local context at Tamworth Borough Council and what the peer team should focus on. It also included a comprehensive Local Government Association (LGA) finance briefing (prepared using public reports from the council's website) and a LGA performance report outlining benchmarking data for the council across a range of metrics. The latter was produced using the LGA's local area benchmarking tool called LG Inform.

The peer team then spent three days onsite at Tamworth Council during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 30 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to a wide range of people including a range of council staff together with councillors 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.

## 5. Feedback

### 5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

The political and managerial leadership are overseeing the development of a new corporate plan (to be shared at full council in February 2025) which sets out the council’s future vision, priorities and values for the next five years. The current Corporate Plan timeline expires in 2025.

We found that there has been positive engagement to inform the development of the new corporate plan. In addition to a review of socio-economic data, the council have used results from the latest residents’ survey, a series of consultation events between June and August 2024 and an on-line questionnaire. A strategic partnership meeting was held in September 2024 to discuss opportunities for collaborative working around emerging priorities.

Conversations we had with staff indicate a renewed focus and sense of optimism around the new draft corporate plan and a desire to be involved. We heard *“I couldn’t recognise where I was in the old Corporate Plan, now I can see where I am.”*

However, there are concerns around capacity to deliver from some staff at all levels of the council. We heard that *“it is difficult to re-build the plane whilst you are flying it”*. As the council moves forward with the emerging (new) corporate plan, it is important to ensure that this is aligned to the medium-term financial strategy, wider organisational resources, ways of working and capacity of the council to deliver. Clear prioritisation and sequencing of associated programmes and projects will be key.

The council’s senior political leadership are committed to becoming a ‘Co-operative Council’ as part of the Co-operative Council Innovation Network. This network is a collaboration between councils who are committed to finding better ways of working for, and with, local people for the benefit of their local community. We recognise that the council is at the early stages of this journey, but it will be important for the

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council's political leadership to provide greater clarity for councillors, officers and communities on what this means for them and for Tamworth and agree next steps.

Peers were pleased to learn that a new Equality and Diversity Strategy (2025 to 2028) is being developed. It is positive that empowering staff to participate within and create staff networks is identified as an action. It is important that all involved see the link between this new strategy and wider work on community cohesion. Fostering good relations between different groups is a key part of the public sector equality duty. We recommend that you use the new strategy to help bring to life a common vision and sense of belonging for all communities, staff and councillors.

Tamworth Council own and manage their own social housing stock (c. 4,300 homes). In accordance with the requirements set out by the Regulator of Social Housing, the council triggered a 'self-referral' to the Regulator in August 2024. The self-referral relates to issues of non-compliance or potential non-compliance with the required 'Consumer Standards<sup>2</sup>' (published in April 2024).

It is positive that the council have been proactive, open and transparent, triggering the self-referral and publishing details as part of public reports to both the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet in October 2024. An improvement plan has been developed, overseen by a Homelessness and Housing Advisory Board, with weekly updates to the council's Leadership Board.

The published reports (referred to above) show progress is now being made across all asset compliance areas. It is important that you continue to maintain corporate focus and drive on delivering the required improvements, working with the Regulator of Social Housing. This includes the need to improve overall tenant satisfaction measures which are down from 78 per cent (2022/2023) to 58 per cent overall (2023/2024). It is positive that work is currently taking place to develop a refreshed tenant involvement and engagement strategy.

In 2019, the council made a commitment to become net-zero carbon for its activities by 2050 (and an aspiration to achieve 2030 should the council be financially able to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/factors-for-assessing-regulatory-issues>

do). There are examples of positive work taking place including a Greenhouse gas baseline inventory (August 2022), energy efficiency commitments within the Housing Strategy (2020 – 2025) and the adoption of an Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure Strategy. A workshop was held recently with officers and assistant directors to update on this work<sup>3</sup>. However, during the peer challenge we heard very little reference to climate change from those who met with us. We understand the council has recently commissioned work to develop a clear plan to embed climate change priorities across the organisation and it is important that you maintain momentum on this.

### **5.1.1 Performance**

Peers considered LG Inform<sup>4</sup> benchmarking data and how the council compare to their statistical nearest neighbours. We saw how most of this comparative data compares favourably or around the average of statistical nearest neighbours.

The council compares less favourably to statistical nearest neighbours for the average time taken to process housing benefit claims and change events for 2023/2024 (Tamworth is five days and the average is four days). However, their performance is around the average of all district councils in the West Midlands.

The council also compares less favourably for the rate of new business enterprises/start-ups per 10,000 population aged 16 and above (latest benchmarking data is for 2022). The rate for Tamworth is 43.4 and the average is 53. It is positive that the council's regeneration plans for the town centre include provision for new start-up businesses, as this will be an opportunity to increase this number,

Peers were pleased to see that the council has an agreed performance management framework in place, aligned to the current Corporate Plan which expires in 2025. As the council finalises development of the new Corporate Plan, it is important to review the performance management framework, including performance indicators, to ensure alignment with the new Corporate Plan.

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<sup>3</sup> Quarter One Performance Report, Tamworth Council

<sup>4</sup> LG Inform is the Local Government Association's Benchmarking Tool

Peers were impressed that almost 100 per cent of staff have had a Personal Development Review (appraisal). Looking ahead, we were pleased to hear how the focus will now be on improving the quality of these reviews. This will be important as the appraisal process is a key tool for the council to manage performance, provide learning and development opportunities and identify talent.

We were pleased to see how quarterly performance reports are shared with Corporate Management Team and published, in an open and transparent way, as part of papers to the council's Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet. As the council finalises the development of the new Corporate Plan, we recommend that you review this report template to see if can be made more succinct/user friendly as it currently comprises of over 105 pages. There are also opportunities to strengthen the use of benchmarking data. This will help the council to compare how it performs relative to others.

## **5.2 Organisational and place leadership**

The council's chief executive (who started in April 2024) is helping to bring new energy, fresh ideas and thinking to the council. As outlined above, together with the new Leader and political leadership (May 2024) they are setting a new organisational direction through the development of a new (draft) Corporate Plan.

Both the managerial and political leadership are seen as visible, recognised and respected. Staff welcome the monthly 'chat with the chief' on-line meetings, providing an opportunity for them to learn more about different work areas. We heard about regular 'walkabouts' involving the chief executive, ward members and relevant staff. They meet in different wards and localities to discuss issues and this is valued by all those involved.

During this peer challenge, we met with resident groups, voluntary and community sector groups and business representatives who voiced some frustrations about the council's current approach to communication and engagement. The regeneration of the town centre was cited as an example. There were also mixed levels of understanding about physical access points (for the council), accessibility of council staff and the future of Marmion House.

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The peer team acknowledge that the groups who met with us can represent only a narrow sample of stakeholders and cannot reflect the voice and perspectives of all stakeholders. We also heard of positive examples of engagement approaches including work to develop the new Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy and new approach to commissioning of a 'statistically representative' and 'benchmarked' residents survey.

We recommend that the council should build on these positive examples to review, develop and strengthen the council's overarching communication and consultation approaches. This will also be key in supporting the council's overall approach to community cohesion. We'd encourage the council to consider the development of an agreed set of principles to underpin future consultations, along with an overarching plan aimed at building more consistent, planned, timely, genuine and accessible approaches. There may be opportunities to build on the work already taking place to develop the new Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy (rather than duplicating this).

We were impressed with how the council has, over a number of years, successfully attracted significant external funding to drive forward regeneration of the Town Centre. This includes £21.6m from the Future High Street Fund. It also includes funding awarded via the Cultural Recovery Fund, National Lottery Heritage Fund, United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Funding (UKSPF), Heritage Lottery Funding and the Local Enterprise Partnership 'Single Growth Fund'.

During our time at Tamworth, peers visited the town centre to learn more about this work. Transforming Tamworth is described on the council's website as '*a whole range of plans and initiatives, all coming together to change the town for the better*'. This is funded via a mix of external funding and Tamworth Council funding.

Transforming Tamworth involves the re-location of Tamworth College into a new town centre building, development of a new enterprise centre for small businesses, enhancements to the Castle Gateway and work to transform St Editha's Square. The council is also developing plans to regenerate the 'Gungate Development' on the edge of the town centre. It will be important to continue work, already started, to bring together recent and planned developments to formulate a single Town Centre Master

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Plan. This should help to maximise outcomes from the investments and shape future schemes.

As outlined above, we picked up some frustrations from resident and business representatives associated with perceptions around communication and consultation in relation to town centre regeneration. Some told us that they are not always clear on how the Future High Streets Funding is being used or that they don't always feel that their views are heard. As you work towards formulating your single Town Centre Regeneration Strategy, which seeks to masterplan development across the town (as outlined above), we recommend that you use this as an opportunity to strengthen your communication approaches in relation to this and Town Centre Regeneration.

As part of this work, there are also opportunities to strengthen Tamworth's Place narrative, building on 'Transforming Tamworth'. The aim should be to strengthen a shared understanding and 'expression' of Tamworth as a place and support place marketing objectives. Residents, in particular, are proud of Tamworth's heritage and see this as a significant asset.

The council should also maintain focus on the timeline for the development of the new Local Plan (2022 – 2043). This will replace the current Local Plan which covers the period 2006 to 2031. The new Local Plan will be a key document to guide future regeneration and development in the borough.

The council's voluntary, community, statutory and private sector partners spoke positively about partnership working and welcome the drive, led by the Chief Executive, to re-establish (in September 2024) the Tamworth Strategic Partnership. We understand that next steps will include shaping a shared strategic borough wide plan to deliver shared ambitions for Tamworth. This is important as it will help to build partnership capacity around the delivery of shared priorities including community cohesion.

The council is also a well-respected partner on the Staffordshire Leaders Board which brings councils, including Staffordshire County Council, together. We understand the Board have recently written to government about their readiness to work them in relation to future devolution opportunities. During the peer challenge,

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national government indicated that they may look at future local government re-organisation (LGR) in some areas, with further details to follow. In this context, it will be important for the council to continue to engage in these discussions whilst not losing sight of delivery of its agreed priorities and ambitions for Tamworth.

### **Community Cohesion**

As outlined earlier in this report, we heard from a wide range of statutory and voluntary sector partners about the rapid, joined up response to violent disorder that occurred outside a local hotel housing asylum seeking people over the summer. There was a sense that the council acted as a convenor, working together with partners to condemn the unrest, respond to the immediate events and support all those affected. We heard how staff went above and beyond to support the clean-up operation after the disorder.

We were pleased to hear how the council's leadership have worked constructively with government following this unrest and secured £600,000 of external funding from the Community Recovery Fund. We heard how the council are using this funding to commission an 'honest conversations project' to engage communities in honest dialogue about living in Tamworth, strengths, opportunities and challenges.

We recommend that the council use the outcome of the 'honest conversations' project to help build asset-based community engagement approaches and community cohesion across the borough. This approach involves working alongside communities to identify and harness existing assets, such as resident groups, community groups, cultural heritage groups, art groups, faith groups, schools and other networks, to help bring communities together and build positive relationships and understanding. It will be important to work through the re-established Strategic Partnership on this to ensure wider partnership ownership, build capacity and shared resources.

We also recommend that the council agree clear project governance for the 'honest conversations' project and for allocation of remaining funding. It will be important to engage and co-design the overarching approach with local voluntary, community, faith and business sectors.

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As outlined earlier in this report, peers were pleased to meet with resident representatives who clearly care for Tamworth and have a passion for their local communities. We encourage the council to consider opportunities to involve these residents, and other resident groups, in this project and ongoing work to build community engagement and community cohesion.

Listening to the views of residents will also be important to help address misinformation and quell rumours that may circulate, particularly on-line. It will be important to link the 'honest conversations' project with the work, referenced earlier in this report, to strengthen communication and consultation. This will help ensure views can be heard and inform the council's responses to issues (e.g. through FAQs). On-going partnership working will also be important to help support and address vulnerabilities amongst young people. This should include maximising partnership working opportunities with Staffordshire County Council through early intervention projects to support community cohesion.

Considering the community leadership role of ward councillors, who know their communities the best, is important. We recommend that consideration is given to the training and development needs for councillors in relation to asset-based community engagement (what it is and how to adopt this approach) and community cohesion. This should build on the existing equalities and diversity training that is already in place. It will also be important to ensure PREVENT and supporting vulnerable people is included as part of internal safeguarding training.

During the peer challenge, we heard how on-line rumours and misinformation, particularly via social media, may have had a part in fuelling some of the violent disorder referenced above. LGA guidance on this is due to be issued imminently and we recommend that the council use this as you progress work on community cohesion.

It will also be important to consider any new national cohesion strategy (at the time of writing, we are anticipating a new strategy next year), along with the outcome of the Home Office's 'rapid review' of counter-extremism. We also understand that the latter will be used to inform the development of a new national strategy.

### 5.3 Governance and culture

The senior managerial and political leadership are working well together; peers observed good joint working between senior officers and cabinet members. We met with the Cabinet who appeared cohesive and enthusiastic with a diverse range of skills and experiences. Officers from the Corporate and Executive Leadership Teams have extensive experience and knowledge of Tamworth. We heard from senior officers who told us that they are working well together as a unified team. Staff who met with peers are clearly dedicated, passionate and committed to Tamworth as a place and as a council.

Alongside the development of the new draft Corporate Plan, work is taking place to review organisational values/behaviours to ensure residents and communities remain at the heart of all the council does. The peer team heard this referred to internally as ‘the auntie test’; with officers encouraged to think about how they would like their close family members to experience interactions with the council. It is important that the council continues to engage officers on the emerging new values and behaviours. We understand that a staff survey and staff conference are being planned as part of this.

As the council moves forward with its new ambitions around being a more innovative, accessible, visible and data driven council, ongoing engagement with staff at all levels of the organisation will be critical. This includes engagement on future ways of working to ensure the right mix between the application of home working policies and office working policies to meet future ambitions and priorities. This is explored more in section 5.5.

Peers considered the External Auditor’s Report for 2022/2023 and were pleased to see that the auditor anticipates an unmodified audit opinion on the council’s financial statements. For 2023/2024, the audit of the financial statements is nearing completion and, subject to the satisfactory resolution of some requests for further information, the external auditor also anticipates issuing an unmodified audit opinion.

The external auditor’s opinion on the council’s Value for Money arrangements is complete for 2022/2023. Although some improvement recommendations are made, no risks of significant weakness are identified. A more recent report for 2023/2024,

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shared with the audit and governance committee in November 2024, also indicates that no significant weaknesses have been identified, with more details to be included as part of the Auditor's Annual Report.

The council hosts a shared internal Audit service with a neighbouring council. We heard from officers that this is well established, and that the arrangement was renewed in October 2023 for a further two years. We did hear of some challenges associated with internal officer capacity. The council should consider, ahead of October 2025 when the arrangement is due to be renewed, reviewing this shared service to ensure that it continues to provide the internal audit capacity, expertise and resilience required.

The peer challenge team were presented with examples of strong corporate governance and assurance processes, including the Member Development Plan, Whistle Blowing Policy and Complaints Policy. We were pleased to see how the Corporate Risk Register is shared on a quarterly basis with the Audit and Governance Committee, Corporate Management Team, Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Annual Governance Statement and Code of Corporate Governance for 2023/2024 were also shared with the peer team. Financial sustainability, the re-profiling of capital schemes and Welfare Reform are identified as significant issues. Looking ahead, we would encourage the council to consider housing compliance issues when developing the next AGS for 2024/2025.

It is important that the council continues its work to strengthen a culture of good governance and assurance across the council. We recommend that the council's Member Development Plan incorporates training on audit and governance for all councillors, in addition to bespoke training for members of the Audit and Governance Committee. This will help to ensure assurance and governance are seen as everyone's responsibility. The council should also continue its efforts to recruit external members to the council's Audit and Governance Committee.

In October 2024, the Executive Director Finance post (statutory section 151 officer position) became vacant. It is positive that the council's chief executive acted quickly

to cover this key post with an interim appointment for the next six months (internal) and will recruit to the permanent position after this.

During the Corporate Peer Challenge, the peer team were pleased to hear how the Executive Leadership Team, comprising of the three Executive Directors and chief executive, meet on a weekly basis. The Corporate Management Team, comprising of Assistant Directors, also meet on a regular basis.

The council's statutory officer roles, alongside the chief executive, are critical and influential positions within the council with collective responsibility for governance. Work to review how these officers work together and where in the organisation the roles sit, should be in line with the latest Lawyers in Local Government (LLG), Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants (CIPFA) and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) guidelines.

As referenced above, the council's Member Induction and training timetable for 2024/2025 was shared with the peer team. We heard of some challenges with participation levels. It will be important to continue to work with all group leaders to encourage greater participation.

The council has three overview and scrutiny committees: Corporate, Health and Wellbeing and Infrastructure, Safety and Growth. As the council progresses the development of the new Corporate Plan, there are opportunities, working with scrutiny chairs and members, to review the overview and scrutiny structures and ensure they align to the new agreed priorities. We heard particularly that there may be opportunities to review the Health and Wellbeing committee to give it a greater focus on community wellbeing and community cohesion.

#### **5.4 Financial planning and management**

The council faces significant financial challenges with the Medium-Term Financial Plan showing a deficit that increases from £3.3m in 2025/2026 to £5.0m in 2028/2029. The council is currently relying on reserves and balances to meet the gap and have made slow progress in delivering the required level savings to date.

The current level of useable reserves appears healthy, including £30.9m in general



fund balances at the end of March 2024. LG Inform benchmarking data<sup>1</sup> shows how the council's reserves as a percentage of service spend are the above the average of their nearest statistical neighbours for 2023/2024. Furthermore, in 2022/23 there was a general fund revenue underspend of £3,309,000 which was mainly due to an over-achievement of income from treasury management interest and dividends. It is the view of peers that these healthy cash balances and interest received are potentially hiding the true position.

The current projected reliance on reserves to achieve a balanced budget is unsustainable in the medium and longer term. By 2027/2028, there are insufficient balances remaining and by 2028/2029 there is a projected £9m shortfall.

We were pleased, from the conversations we had with senior officers and cabinet members, that the scale of this financial challenge is well understood. We heard from the political leadership that there is a willingness to take tough decisions. This includes a decision, in August 2024, to increase garden waste charges for the first time since fees were introduced in 2017.

In June 2024 the council approved a Financial Stability Plan, alongside its Productivity Plan, aimed at addressing the 2025/2026 budget deficit and future budget pressures. The Plan aims to reduce the use of General Fund Balances between 2025/2026 and 2027/2028 and set a balanced budget without the use of reserves by this point.

Whilst this is a positive step, it is the view of the peer team that the current areas for targeted savings appear aspirational rather than tangible and deliverable. We recommend that the council quickly/urgently develops a clear savings plan incorporating tangible, costed and deliverable savings at pace, with robust senior management and member oversight. This should be treated as a key priority as the time to act is now.

The council's Annual Governance Statement (AGS) for 2023/2024 highlights the need to closely monitor slippage in capital spend, including Future High Street Fund, and ensure schemes are managed in accordance with agreed funding criteria. It shows re-profiling of capital scheme spending from 2022/23 into 2023/2024 and from

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2023/2024 to 2024/2025. It will be important to ensure this is closely monitored through the Asset Strategy Steering Group.

The Council's long-term assets, valued at £327m in March 2024, comprise of some extensive liabilities, including £20million of investment properties, £13million of long-term debtors and £10million of long-term investments. The council has updated a draft Asset Management Strategy for 2024/2025 (at the time of writing, this was going through scrutiny/decision making processes). It is important that the council ensures this Strategy, and associated Asset Management Plans, are progressed at pace so that the council is confident that it is able to exercise responsible ownership, manage risk and exercise control over the asset base. This will involve the need to take some clear decisions on the future of key assets.

The peer team met with officers from the finance team who are clearly experienced and well respected. We found prudent assumptions are built into the budget setting process. We were also pleased to see how regular quarterly monitoring reports are shared with Corporate Management Team and published as part of quarterly performance reports to both the Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny committee. As outlined in section 5.3 of this report, the external auditor has not identified any weaknesses in arrangements.

As outlined in section 5.1, the council is a stock holding authority with a Housing Revenue Account (HRA). Quarter One monitoring shows how this is projected to be in a surplus position over the next five years. Balances are projected to be £6.1m at the end of 2026/27 and £9.6m by the end of 2028/2029. However, the capital programme is dependent on using earmarked reserves which is not sustainable in the long-term. Maintaining focus on monitoring and managing the costs of the capital programme included in the thirty-year HRA business plan will be critical.

Tamworth Council is not currently experiencing some of the significant financial pressures associated with costs of temporary accommodation that many other councils face. The latest LG Inform benchmarking data shows Tamworth has lower than average number of households in temporary accommodation compared to statistical neighbours. The council should consider how to share their learning and approaches in relation to this with sector colleagues.

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## 5.5 Capacity for improvement

As outlined in section 5.3 of this report, staff are dedicated, passionate and committed to Tamworth as a place and as a council. From the conversations we had with a range of staff, they recognise their roles in relation to the new emerging corporate plan, they value on-going engagement on this, are open to change and recognise that transformation is needed.

A People and Organisational Strategy, alongside an Action Plan, was agreed in January 2023. This sets out eight thematic areas of focus aimed at ensuring Tamworth is an Employer of Choice. We understand this Strategy, which expires in 2025, will be subject to review and development. This review should be aligned to the council's new (emerging) corporate priorities and transformation ambitions. It is important that staff are supported to develop any new skills required and that the council is able to attract and retain new talent in support of their ambitions.

The council has a small workforce with many loyal and long serving staff. Succession planning is included as a thematic area in the Workforce Strategy, but the council's position statement shows that the approach to date has been informal and unstructured. It is positive that the council are seeking to address this through the development of a new succession planning policy focussed on development opportunities for existing employees.

In the context of the global pandemic in 2020, and similar to other councils, the council has moved towards agile working. Over 220 employees are home or hybrid workers (out of a workforce of 386 staff, or 334.08 full time equivalent) with the remainder being site workers.

The latest staff survey was focussed on the theme of agile working (the council refer to this as SMART working). Conducted in December 2022, it shows how staff welcome the agile working approach, with 64 per cent of respondents saying that it has helped create a better work life balance. However, the results also identify some challenges around internal communication including perceptions about accessibility of some teams. It is positive that the leadership team have acted on these findings through the implementation of an agreed action plan. It will be important to keep this under review.

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During the peer challenge, we heard of examples of strong cross service/team working. But we also heard of challenges associated with silo working. We also picked up some mixed views and understanding about the home/hybrid working contracts in place at the council. In particular, if a 'twice monthly' contractual attendance at Marmion House/other site location for some staff is a maximum or minimum and the flexibility attached to this.

We recommend that the council engage staff, customers and residents to review the current approach to agile working. This is in the context of the emerging new Corporate Plan priorities which include an enhanced focus on the council being 'visible, approachable and accountable'. It is also in the context of the recent re-opening of a face-to-face customer service reception at Marmion House. The council needs to be satisfied that it has struck the right balance between home working and office working, face-to-face customer contact and digital and telephone customer access. Ways of working need to enable delivery of the council's agreed priorities, meet customer needs and deliver improved outcomes for residents.

Given the scale of the financial challenges faced (outlined in more detail in section 5.4), progressing digital and service transformation to boost capacity, deliver efficiencies and achieve savings will be critical. It is positive that the council recognise the need for this and have identified this within the Financial Stability Plan referenced in section 5.4.

We recommend that the council develops a clear vision and priorities for digital and service transformation through the development of a comprehensive Plan. This should build on the work already undertaken through the current ICT Strategy which expires in 2025.

The council's position statement highlights the council's digitalisation journey to date through the existing ICT strategy. It shows how there is more work to do to grow digital transformation across a range of areas including customer contact, back office, use of data/intelligence and ICT infrastructure. It will be important to ensure that the council's ICT services have the capacity and capability to support the council's digital and service transformation ambitions.

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A key part of this approach will be to ensure the council's organisational structure aligns to the delivery of its agreed priorities and transformation ambitions. We recommend that you review the organisational structure and, as identified above, future ways of working in support of agreed priorities. The aim should be to ensure that there is sufficient capacity and resource to deliver the agreed priorities, achieve efficiencies and deliver services that meet the needs of residents.

The development of a comprehensive plan for digital and service transformation will help to guide investment decisions. This includes the future use of key assets such as Marmion House. It also includes investment in digital technologies. Prioritisation, pace of change and sequencing will be key. It will also be important to ensure ongoing engagement of residents, staff and councillors and bring these with you on your journey. Ensuring strong governance and oversight for service and digital transformation should be considered.

## 6. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. The LGA will continue to provide on-going support to the council.

The council should publish this report no later than three months of the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC). The council should also develop and publish an Action Plan showing how the recommendations within this report will be implemented. This Action Plan should be published no later than five months after the CPC.

As part of the CPC, the council are also required to have a Progress Review and publish the findings from this within twelve months of the CPC. The LGA will also publish the progress review report on their website.

The progress review will provide space for a council's senior leadership to report to peers on the progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations, discuss early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC Action Plan. The progress review will usually be delivered on-site over one day.

In the meantime, [Helen.Murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:Helen.Murray@local.gov.uk), Principal Adviser for the West

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Midlands, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Helen Murray is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

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<sup>i</sup> LG Inform is the Local Government's benchmarking tool for councils