

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Horsham District Council

4 – 6 February 2026

Feedback report



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# 1. Introduction

A team of local government peers, led by the Local Government Association (LGA) delivered a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) of Horsham District Council (Horsham District Council) from 4 - 6 February 2026. This was the council's second peer challenge and follows a recent [Governance Peer Challenge in 2024 and](#) an LGA Communications Health check in 2025.

CPC is a well-established and respected improvement and assurance tool that provides robust, strategic and credible challenge and support to councils. Further details about the CPC process can be found in Appendix A.

Our peer team consisted of highly experienced and knowledgeable senior local government councillor and officer peers (see section four). We considered the five core areas covered by all CPCs: local priorities and outcomes, organisational and place leadership, governance and culture, financial planning and management and capacity for improvement.

This report provides Horsham District Council with feedback on the peer team's findings. It provides the council with a set of a high-level recommendations alongside further recommendations under each of the CPC's core areas. There is an expectation the council will publish this report and a clear action plan to respond to all the recommendations highlighted.

# 2. Executive summary

Horsham District Council is a well-run, financially resilient and well-regarded organisation with a strong sense of identity, pride and public service. The peer team found a council that is highly committed to its communities, supported by a very positive organisational culture, constructive political-managerial relationships and an engaged, motivated workforce. Staff, Members and partners consistently describe Horsham as a "listening" council that values collaboration, delivers effectively on its priorities and maintains a robust performance in key areas, particularly economic development, business engagement and homelessness prevention.

The council's financial position is resilient, underpinned by consistently balanced budgets, high and stable reserves, no external debt and a high performing investment portfolio. This provides a firm foundation for Horsham's future, including major capital commitments and the uncertainties associated with Local Government Reorganisation (local government reorganisation). Members and officers share a clear understanding of the financial picture and demonstrate a commitment to prudent stewardship, with opportunities to further embed social, economic and environmental value into future financial planning and decision making.

Horsham is also operating within an increasingly demanding environment, shaped by an expanded capital programme, rising interdependencies across services and capacity pressures in specialist roles such as property, project management and housing development. Delivery remains proficient, but the scale and pace of current ambitions require strengthened programme discipline, enhanced workforce planning and more flexible access to external delivery support.

Leadership in Horsham is visible, trusted and collaborative, with staff reporting high levels of psychological safety and feeling empowered to innovate and take ownership. Internal communications, particularly around local government reorganisation, are valued. Cross-party relationships remain constructive, and partners across the public, private and voluntary sectors regard the council as responsive, outward facing and solutions focused, though some system level coordination challenges persist.

As organisational demands increase, aspects of governance, culture and systems will need to continue maturing. Scrutiny practice would benefit from greater consistency and a well-defined focus on executive decision-making; risk advice can feel overly binary; and expectations around Member conduct – particularly in committee and planning settings – should be reinforced. The peer team also noted variability in cross-council working and limited visibility of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) leadership, which should be strengthened to embed inclusive practice more systematically across programmes and decisions.

Looking ahead to local government reorganisation, there is a significant opportunity for Horsham to consolidate its strengths, articulate a clear and shared 'Story of

Place', and further strengthen the capacity, systems and partnerships needed to deliver its ambitions and leave a strong legacy for any future authority.

To support the council in this next stage, the peer team has identified ten key recommendations, which are outlined in the next section.

## 3. Recommendations

The following are the peer team's key recommendations which have been prioritised on the grounds of urgency and importance.

### 3.1 Recommendation 1: Social value

Embed a strong and consistent understanding of social, economic and environmental value obligations across the organisation, particularly within financial planning and decision-making. Consider applying the Five Case Model or similar systematically to ensure that commercial, social and economic value are all fully considered in business cases.

### 3.2 Recommendation 2: Capital programme

To deliver an ambitious capital programme, prioritise projects that are realistically deliverable and identify where external partners or outsourcing may provide a better or quicker outcome. Where projects are delivered internally, review capacity and expertise to ensure timely progress.

### 3.3 Recommendation 3: Asset transfers

Build on the current approach to asset transfers, taking account of the capacity and ambition of the parishes and newly established town council.

### 3.4 Recommendation 4: local government reorganisation

Continue to build on the council's strong approach to local government reorganisation, with particular emphasis on maintaining the high-value internal communications that staff appreciate.

### 3.5 Recommendation 5: Risk appetite

Approach to Risk: Develop a common understanding around senior officer and political leadership approaches to risk to enable the administration to deliver on their key priorities, within the context of appropriate governance.

### **3.6 Recommendation 6: Communications**

Continue implementing the recommendations from the LGA communications health check. Adopt a more proactive, outward-facing approach by actively seeking opportunities to promote positive stories.

### **3.7 Recommendation 7: Scrutiny**

Although scrutiny has strengthened significantly since the 2024 governance review, the council should continue aligning its approach with Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) best practice. This includes shifting focus from scrutiny of officers to effective scrutiny of the administration and its decision-making.

### **3.8 Recommendation 8: Member and officer relationships**

Strengthen officer and member development by reviewing the training offer and formal processes for addressing member/officer relations with regards to planning decisions. Ensure feedback loops are completed so that everyone has confidence in the system. Explore adopting the [LGA Debate Not Hate](#) standard. Consider providing refresher training on operating within a political environment particularly within statutory service areas to help reset member-officer relationships.

### **3.9 Recommendation 9: EDI**

Establish explicit corporate leadership and governance for EDI, moving from a data heavy compliance model to a narrative and outcome focused approach to ensure that EDI is seen as a cultural and placed based agenda, not solely a governance or reporting exercise.

In addition to the key recommendations section five of this report captures our detailed feedback and additional recommendations within each of the CPC's core areas of focus.

## 4. Peer team

Peer challenges are conducted by experienced LGA peers, including elected councillors and senior officers. The composition of the peer team was shaped by the specific focus of the challenge, with the LGA selecting peers based on their relevant expertise. The peers for this CPC were:

- **Julia Smith** Chief Executive, Blaby District Council
- **Cllr Bridget Smith**, Leader of South Cambridge District Council and LGA Liberal Democrat member peer.
- **Cllr Holly Whitbread**, Epping Forest District Councillor and Essex County Councillor and LGA Conservative member peer
- **Paul Brookes**, Director of Sustainable Communities, Chelmsford City Council
- **Aysha Rahman**, Assistant Director, Customer and Communities, Melton Borough Council
- **Jack Baldwin**, Communications Improvement Advisor, Local Government Association, Shadow Peer.
- **Megan Hermes**, Local Government Association, Peer Challenge Manager.

## 5. Detailed feedback and recommended actions

When developing the action plan in response to the CPC's findings, the council should consider both the key recommendations presented in section three and the additional recommendations set out below.

### 5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

Horsham District Council has a clear Council Plan supported by an Annual Plan that is genuinely co-owned by Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Staff, partners and members repeatedly describe Horsham District Council as a "listening" and responsive organisation, with particularly strong delivery in business engagement, town centre vitality and wider economic development. The Enterprise

Team is highly regarded by local businesses, who consistently emphasised the council's willingness to reach out, problem solve and support growth. Partners such as Gatwick Airport also described Horsham District Council as a district council that "stands out" for constructive engagement and proactive relationship building.

Strategic ownership and the 'golden thread' from Corporate Plan to delivery are visible. Staff feel empowered to act, and partners experience a council that works constructively across organisational boundaries. This positive culture contributes to unambiguous delivery momentum. The council's preventative approach to homelessness, the stability of its housing register and the effectiveness of its in-house temporary accommodation model (140 units) demonstrates strong outcomes in areas where many authorities are facing acute pressures. However, rough sleeping has increased modestly and remains an area requiring continued attention. There is opportunity to utilise willing external partners, for example Saxon Weald Housing Association, to help deliver the Council's priorities in respect of Housing capital projects.

From the limited groups the peer team met the voluntary and community sector interface, though improving, remains fragmented. Engagement tends to lean more towards parish style community groups rather than the breadth of charities supporting vulnerable groups (e.g., mental health, domestic abuse, homelessness, equalities led organisations). While operational relationships are positive, partners and staff described the absence of a strategic engagement framework that consistently captures the voices of seldom heard or underrepresented communities. This reduces understanding of residents' lived experiences across the district and makes it harder for the council to consistently focus on inequalities.

Delivery capacity remains the principal constraint to the Council delivering its projects. Historic slippage in capital linked programmes, recruitment challenges in specialist roles (e.g., property, project management) and the complexity of crosscutting policy agendas (housing, health, climate) create risks to pace. Stakeholders also reported that when issues span multiple services areas, internal join up can be slow or unclear. For example, some businesses highlighted that while engagement with individual officers is excellent, cross departmental coordination can

be inconsistent, placing pressure on them as external stakeholders to ‘join the dots’ between services. It is also worth noting that there are business anxieties around not understanding what is happening with local government reorganisation, the council should be mindful as plans progress to ensure any LGR comms ensure businesses are included.

Community level issues shape local priorities. Fear of crime features prominently in resident surveys, and initiatives such as the ‘Safe and Happy Horsham’ campaign demonstrate the council’s willingness to respond to community concerns.

Health and wellbeing outcomes present a mixed picture. While the council demonstrates strong partnership working on homelessness and safeguarding, local data indicates a widening gap between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy. Opportunities exist to embed population health, health inequalities and active lifestyles more explicitly within programme design: notably through the ageing leisure estate, future investment planning (including the known deficit of 3G pitches) and forthcoming procurement of the leisure contract. The council has recognised that this contract, as a major commissioning opportunity, is a chance to embed social value, preventative health outcomes and community partnership working at scale and are acting on this.

Tightening the line of sight between corporate priorities, capacity and funding remains essential. There is scope for Horsham District Council to adopt more consistent cross council programme mechanisms so that multiservice outcomes – such as those associated with economic growth, community safety, youth provision and health – are delivered cohesively. Strengthening the voluntary and community sector interface, widening engagement to include equalities organisations and specialist charities, and adopting more systematic stakeholder mapping would also support more inclusive, insight driven priorities.

This is intrinsically linked to Recommendation 1 (Social Value), which asks Horsham District Council to embed social, economic and environmental value throughout planning and decision making. The emphasis on whole system outcomes, transparent benefits and inclusive engagement is central to how priorities should be set, tracked and evidenced.

**In addition to the key recommendation above, we recommend the council progress the following actions:**

- **Consider publishing an annual ‘Priorities to Projects Map’:** to tie annual plan commitments to intended success measures, capacity assumptions and funding source, including social and environmental value to ensure projects are linked to corporate priorities.
- **Explore the opportunity to work with external partners to help deliver capital projects.**
- **Consider establishing a VCS forum:** with clear thematic leads and feedback loops to Cabinet and SLT ensuring engagement includes equalities led, health, youth and vulnerability focused organisations.
- **Designate senior ownership for population health and health inequalities:** Ensuring health outcomes and metrics are regularly reported to senior officers and councillors.

## **Performance**

In terms of performance benchmarking, Horsham was an outlier for the following performance measures as identified in LG Inform:

In 2024/25, the reserves as a proportion of 'service expenditure' for Horsham was 98.1 per cent, which was above the Horsham CIPFA nearest neighbours median proportion of 28.3 per cent.

In 2024/25, the total reserves as a proportion of 'net revenue expenditure' for Horsham was 116.7 per cent, which was above the Horsham CIPFA nearest neighbours median proportion of 32.9 per cent.

In 2024/25, 1.3 complaints per 100,000 people were upheld in Horsham, the second highest compared to Horsham CIPFA nearest neighbours mean of 0.6 complaints.

In 2024/25 the average number of days taken to process housing benefit new claims and change of circumstances - annual in Horsham was 9 days. This compares to 7 days in England and 6 days on average in comparison to Horsham's CIPFA nearest neighbours.

In 2025/26 Q2 there were 2.40 households per 1,000 living in temporary accommodation in Horsham. This compares to 5.48 households per 1,000 in England and an average of 1.43 per person in comparison to Horsham's CIPFA nearest neighbours.

In 2024/25 there were 53 affordable homes built in the Horsham area. This compares to 258 built on average in comparison to Horsham's CIPFA nearest neighbours.

In 2024/25 the total expenditure on cultural and related services per head of population in Horsham was 56.18, the highest compared to the mean of 25.20 in Horsham CIPFA nearest neighbours.

## **5.2 Organisational and place leadership**

Leadership in Horsham is visible, trusted and collaborative. Staff consistently emphasise an open culture, routine communication from the Chief Executive, and an ethos of support and empowerment. Weekly updates from SLT are highly valued, and staff describe feeling listened to, respected and confident to raise ideas. The Officer Member relationship can be strained when complex planning schemes or contentious planning related issues are being discussed in public forums. Targeted development and clarifying expectations of roles, behaviours and boundaries will help maintain the strength of political-managerial working.

Regarding members, cross-party relationships are constructive and all members the peer team spoke to, reported positive access to officers and clear communication. The peer team identified that senior officers and Cabinet also work well together as a 'top team', with visible alignment around corporate priorities and a shared commitment to constructive challenge. The organisation is well regarded for its responsiveness, and the peer team noted a strong sense of collective ownership across Cabinet and SLT. Staff highlighted high levels of psychological safety, openness and trust, reinforced by coaching, development opportunities and an empowered management culture. The Monitoring Officer sits within the SLT structure and maintains regular contact with the Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer, although feedback indicates that some governance matters, such as member behaviour, are managed informally which can give the impression to Members and

Officers that issues raised are not being effectively addressed.

The peer team identified an opportunity to further strengthen the council's approach to statutory assurance in a way that supports delivery of its strategic priorities. Financial advice was at times perceived as being focused primarily on income generation or limiting expenditure, rather than enabling appropriate, outcome-based investment that delivers clear social value within a robust and sustainable financial framework. In addition, some governance advice was experienced as being more compliance led and risk averse, where earlier, more collaborative engagement could help resolve issues proportionately and build shared ownership of solutions. Developing a more enabling, place focused and solution-oriented approach across statutory functions would support organisational confidence, maintain strong controls, and help the council progress at pace. The council may want to investigate the possibility of formalising a more consistent approach referencing resources such as around [Solace's Code of Practice on Good Governance for Statutory Officers](#) and the [LGA's Golden Triangle](#).

The council demonstrates strong place leadership, especially in economic development, town centre regeneration and engagement with the wider subregional economy. Businesses described Horsham District Council as an outward looking authority that "stands out" for its willingness to collaborate, reach out when it needs expertise and support innovation. Engagement with Gatwick Airport, the BID, schools and the enterprise community is a notable strength. Staff and partners equally emphasised Horsham District Council's pride in place and its understanding of the district's economic, cultural and environmental assets.

However, stakeholders also highlighted that when issues cut across several services, including community safety, youth provision, transport, or health-related challenges, internal silo effects become more visible. Partners described excellent operational relationships but fewer strategic, system-wide forums to align long-term priorities across statutory bodies, voluntary and community sector partners and regional agencies. Without a single 'front door' for multi-service issues, partners sometimes struggle to navigate the organisation, and this can limit the pace of cross-cutting

programmes.

Relationships with the county have historically been cautious, and while collaboration has strengthened through local government reorganisation activity, there remain opportunities to deepen joint working around health inequalities, transport connectivity, skills, young people, environmental ambitions and integrated place-based planning. Parish councils and the soon to be established Horsham Town Council are increasingly central to local leadership of place. On the whole engagement with parish councils is positive and as local government reorganisation in West Sussex progresses Horsham District Council will need to ensure it communicates appropriately with all stakeholders in a timely manner.

The council's leadership of place is strengthened by its understanding of the district's identity, but this is not yet consistently articulated through a single outward-facing narrative. A unified 'Story of Place' that brings together Horsham's town-and-rural identity would give partners and residents an articulate view of long-term priorities while strengthening the council's position in regional and national funding and investment conversations. This is important to consider regarding the council's legacy going into local government reorganisation.

Staff feel well informed and reassured by leadership's transparency. Externally, there is scope for a more proactive, outcome-focused approach addressing misconceptions early, explaining complex decisions with clarity, and sharing positive impact stories across communities, sectors and geographies. A more systematic approach to stakeholder mapping alongside a unified 'Story of Place' could help with strategic communications and enhance cross-department working, which is crucial for internal and external communications.

Overall, Horsham District Council's organisational and place leadership is a core strength, underpinned by visible, accessible leaders; high staff morale; strong business and partner relationships; and a commitment to collaborative working. Strengthening strategic coordination via a single partner 'front door', a clearer 'Story of Place', and deeper system-level forums will help the council maintain momentum, reduce silo effects and continue delivering effectively for all parts of the district.

**In addition to the key recommendations under this theme, we recommend the council progress the following actions:**

- **Publish a concise ‘Story of Place’** that integrates the town-and-rural offer, clarifies growth, health and climate ambitions, and anchors external engagement and partnership working.
- **Create a ‘single front door’ for partners** engaging on cross-cutting issues (e.g., town centre, health, community safety), supported by clear service leads and escalation routes.
- **Use local government reorganisation structures to refresh joint priorities with the county**, strengthening collective influence and access to external investment.

### **5.3 Governance and culture**

Governance at Horsham has strengthened since 2024, supported by robust internal audit activity, effective oversight through the Audit Committee and a broadly positive organisational culture committed to improvement. Staff across services report high levels of psychological safety and feel able to raise concerns and contribute ideas, while managers describe being trusted and empowered to deliver. Internal Audit’s most recent annual opinion provided Reasonable Assurance over governance, risk management and internal control, with no significant weaknesses identified through external audit value for money work. The Annual Governance Statement is clear, honest and regularly monitored, outlining both strengths and areas requiring further improvement.

While the control environment is sound, the peer team felt that the application of risk and compliance within decision making was more cautious than it was ambitious. The peer team saw examples where legal, procurement or finance advice was experienced as binary or ‘stop-go’. This limits options rather than enabling proportionate, risk aware solutions and can slow momentum, particularly given capacity pressures in delivery teams and the increasing complexity of the capital programme. This sort of advice needs to be seen as the beginning of a conversation within the political sphere appropriately informed by risk appetite. Staff welcomed the

introduction of the Lighthouse risk management system and its strong assurance rating but emphasised the need for clearer articulation of the council's approach to risk across both senior officers and members.

Scrutiny has made meaningful progress since the 2024 governance peer challenge, including earlier access to cabinet papers, clearer agenda planning and improved liaison between chairs and the executive. However, scrutiny's culture remains in transition. At times, discussions become disproportionately focused on officers rather than cabinet, and task and finish groups can create significant officer workload without consistently adding value. Not all committee members feel confident to challenge, with a small number dominating debate. The absence of cabinet members at some committees can also limit the opportunity for genuine executive scrutiny. Strengthening confidence, clarifying roles and embedding a more consistent understanding of scrutiny's purpose and its relationship with cabinet, will help ensure the function adds maximum value. An example of this is where cabinet members attend scrutiny meetings when invited by the scrutiny committee chair as opposed to their attendance being standard practice. In the event a cabinet member attends scrutiny without an invitation, the expectation is that they sit with the general public and may not be called upon whereas the responsible officers for the service area are expected to speak. However, it is usually the cabinet member who is expected to lead on reports with technical advice and support provided by officers. Having a better understanding around good practice in scrutiny would benefit relations in this area.

Isolated but repeated examples of inappropriate member behaviour especially within planning have negatively affected officer confidence. While these incidents do not reflect the overall respectful and collaborative culture, they do highlight the need for clearer expectations around conduct by members, with more consistent follow-up, and visible reassurance to staff. This is something that group leaders can also take responsibility for in helping to manage member behaviour. Some concerns are managed informally, which can support resolution but does not always lead to sustained behavioural improvement or build wider confidence in the process.

EDI leadership is emerging but not yet fully visible within governance structures. Staff

networks are developing and positive intent is recognised, but equality considerations are not consistently or prominently reflected in cabinet templates, business cases or programme documentation. Clearer ownership, routine equality impact analysis and a visible corporate lead would help shift the council from a compliance focused model toward a more outcome focused approach aligned with organisational values.

Overall, the governance framework is increasingly robust, but the council would benefit from enabling risk advice, consistent scrutiny mechanisms, clearer expectations around member-officer relationships and greater visibility of EDI leadership.

To support continued improvement in this area, we recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **Adopt a concise Scrutiny Protocol** that clarifies roles, focuses scrutiny on Cabinet, and sets clear evidence standards for call-in and review.
- **Run a member–officer ‘ways of working’ reset in planning**, covering roles, respectful challenge, appropriate escalation, and reinforcing zero tolerance for poor behaviour.
- **Designate visible corporate EDI leadership** and embed equality insights within cabinet reports, business cases and programme governance.
- **Encourage an enabling, solution-focused approach to risk advice**, setting out practical options and mitigations while still meeting compliance and assurance requirements.
- **Strengthen member development**, with targeted training scrutiny practice, behaviours, decision-making, and risk.

#### 5.4 Financial planning and management

Horsham District Council enters the medium term from a position of financial strength. The council has consistently delivered balanced or surplus outturns and maintains high and stable reserves: £48.747m at the end of 2024/25. This is significantly above pre-pandemic levels and within the upper quartile for district councils. This robust financial base has enabled the council to sustain discretionary

services, maintain cultural assets and invest in community infrastructure at a time when many authorities have been forced to scale back.

External audit work provides further assurance. Ernst & Young's value-for-money assessments for both 2023/24 and 2024/25 identified no significant weaknesses, and the Annual Governance Statement demonstrates a clear and honest appraisal of the council's governance and financial arrangements. Internal audit opinions, including Reasonable Assurance over financial systems and Substantial Assurance for the newly implemented risk-management platform, reinforce the robustness of financial controls. Budget monitoring, treasury reporting and scrutiny through the Audit Committee provide stable and effective oversight.

There is a shared understanding between senior officers and Members of the council's financial position and the challenges ahead. Staff and Members described good communication from the Section 151 Officer, clear modelling of assumptions, and a strong internal culture of financial discipline. Budget setting is grounded in credible forecasts, constructive challenge and close alignment with the Council Plan and the Annual Plan for 2026/27. Financial plans are transparent and generally well-connected across revenue, capital, treasury management and workforce considerations.

However, the financial context is shifting. The external funding environment is tightening, with the fair funding review expected to reduce core spending power by around £1m in 2026/27 and a further £0.9m in 2027/28. Government consolidation of grants including food waste funding into Revenue Support Grants introduces ongoing uncertainty. Demand pressures, like in temporary accommodation, continue to be volatile despite Horsham's sound homelessness prevention record. While the council's no-debt position provides resilience, the scale of the capital programme represents significant future commitments and increases exposure to delivery risk.

The capital programme is the most substantial in recent years with £26.7m in 2026/27 alone including major schemes such as the Capitol Theatre refurbishment, new family housing acquisitions, and the Highwood community facility. Although capital planning has strengthened since 2024, the council has historically delivered only 60-70 per cent of planned capital spend, even at smaller scales. The peer team

heard consistent feedback from Members and officers that internal capacity constraints, particularly in property and project management, remain a barrier to delivery. Some cultural reluctance to consider external delivery partners, combined with the increased programme size and local government reorganisation-related uncertainty, poses further risk. Several Members questioned whether a more strategic approach to outsourcing could enable faster progress and better protect value for money.

Financial planning is prudent but would benefit from greater scenario-based modelling, especially for temporary accommodation volatility, investment income reductions, and local government reorganisation transition. The council's decision to stop relying on investment income for revenue budgets is financially sound and aligns with sector expectations, but it requires the council to deliver sustained efficiencies and income generation from other sources. Earmarked reserves are substantial, but their utilisation should continue to be governed transparently, particularly as significant amounts are allocated for capital schemes such as the Capitol Theatre. Clearer articulation of reserve purpose and risk-based deployment will help ensure long-term sustainability.

Commercial activity remains modest and proportionate. The council's £56m investment property portfolio performs well, generating £4.1m net income with high occupancy levels. Members and officers highlighted the importance of aligning commercial decisions with social and environmental value, reinforcing the need for a more consistent application of the Five Case Model to major business cases. The peer team felt that given the council's strong financial position greater consideration should be given to activity that focuses more on social and environmental return than purely financial return.

Financial governance is strong, but scrutiny arrangements need to continue maturing. Scrutiny committees receive regular budget and capital monitoring reports, but opportunities remain to strengthen pre-decision scrutiny of major schemes and ensure that Members have sufficient training and confidence to interrogate financial, risk and performance information effectively. A refined focus on Cabinet decision making as opposed to operational issues, will support more effective financial

oversight. For example, whether a scheme generates income or not will be one of many factors that cabinet will consider, social value and progression of the administration's priorities need to be equally considered.

Overall, Horsham District Council has a proficient understanding of its financial position and has credible plans to navigate future challenges. To maintain long-term sustainability, the council will need to strengthen capital delivery capacity, develop more structured scenario planning, increase transparency over reserves, enhance scrutiny capability, and embed social and environmental value more systematically within financial decision-making.

In addition to the key recommendations above, we recommend the council progress the following sub-recommendations:

1. **Review the purpose and deployment of earmarked reserves:** review whether ear marked reserves need consolidating. Ensure reserves are used transparently and strategically, considering external advice where appropriate, and maintain clear links to risk, capacity and organisational priorities.
2. **Enhance business case discipline:** apply the Five Case Model or similar more consistently to major schemes, ensuring financial, commercial, social and environmental value are fully assessed before decisions are made.
3. **Strengthen capital programme deliverability:** prioritise deliverable projects, consider external delivery partners where internal capacity is constrained, and ensure programme governance reflects the scale of the capital ambition.
4. **Develop scrutiny capability around finance and risk:** provide targeted development for Members of the finance and assets, performance and scrutiny committees, focusing on financial scrutiny, understanding of reserves and risk, capital programme oversight and pre-decision scrutiny of major schemes.

## 5.5 Capacity for improvement

Horsham District Council benefits from a motivated and proud workforce, with consistently high staff satisfaction and a strong 'Team Horsham' ethos. Staff describe

an open, supportive and developmental organisational culture where they feel listened to and trusted. The move to the new office has been very well managed and received, HR/OD improvements are embedding, apprenticeships and internal mobility are increasing, and trade unions report positive and constructive relationships. Staff understand the council's priorities and where their work contributes to corporate ambitions, reflecting clear internal communication and an accessible SLT.

The organisation can mobilise effectively, particularly in business-facing services where delivery is recognised as a strength. However, capacity pressures are acute in specialist functions such as housing development, property, project management, commercial roles and technical disciplines. Programme complexity is rising, and the expanded capital programme places considerable pressure on these limited skillsets. Managers and officers described silo effects that can slow multi-service delivery, with some teams still adjusting to more strategic ways of working across boundaries.

Recruitment challenges persist in several hard-to-fill professional roles, reflecting a competitive labour market, the technical nature of the council's programme portfolio, and the perceptions of local government reorganisation's impacts on job security. Nonetheless, clearer messaging, targeted campaigns and an enhanced narrative about the opportunities associated with reorganisation would help address unnecessary hesitation among applicants and existing staff.

To sustain delivery, particularly of the capital programme, the council will need to strengthen workforce planning and establish faster, more flexible access to external delivery capacity. Staff and Members highlighted the need for a more formalised approach to commissioning, with pre-approved frameworks and trusted delivery partners available when internal recruitment proves difficult or slow. This will help maintain momentum on priority schemes, protect value for money, and avoid bottlenecks that delay benefits to residents.

Leadership development is gathering pace, with coaching widely valued across the organisation. Grouping this into clear communities of practice and a single project leadership programme used across the council. As the council continues to transform, leadership capability across all levels, political and officer, will be

increasingly important.

Organisational health indicators are largely positive: morale is high, staff feel empowered, and internal communications around local government reorganisation are widely praised for their clarity and honesty. However, workforce capacity is stretched in areas critical to transformation and capital delivery. Staff also reported that internal collaboration, while improving, still relies heavily on relationships rather than consistent structures or system design. Ensuring a stable and well-communicated transformation plan aligned to savings, digital modernisation, improved customer pathways and data-driven insight, will help the council prioritise, sequence and resource its ambitions effectively, both internally and externally.

Digital capacity is growing, and the AI taskforce offers a promising platform for innovation. To accelerate benefits, the council could proactively adopt proven use-cases from peers to release officer capacity and support customer access improvements. Transparent governance and guidance around the use of AI will help build confidence and ensure risks are managed safely.

Overall, the council has the foundations it needs to deliver on its priorities. This is especially important with local government reorganisation on the horizon. With clearer resourcing plans, enhanced leadership development and strengthened cross council working, Horsham District Council has the capacity not only to deliver but to leave a compelling legacy for any future authority.

In addition to the key recommendations under this theme, we recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **Ensure workforce strategy recognises key risks and potential single points of failure that would result in non-delivery of key projects.**
- **Broaden targeted recruitment approaches** and market supplements for hard to fill roles and establish rapid commissioning routes for external partners where recruitment rounds are unsuccessful.
- **Scale leadership development** through coaching, communities of practice or similar, and cross-council project leadership training, ensuring consistent delivery capability across services.

- **Communications:** There is also the opportunity for the council to have a follow up to the LGA communications health check with a new head of communications having recently joined.

## 6. Action plan and progress review

The senior political and managerial leadership of the council should review and reflect on the findings and recommendations from this CPC.

To promote the principle of transparency, it is a requirement of the CPC process that the final report of the peer team is published in-full within three months of the review being completed. However, in light of extenuating circumstances, the report is to be published no later than **10 June 2026**.

There is a requirement for Horsham District Council to develop and publish an action plan within five-months of the peer team being onsite, no later than **6 July 2026**. This action plan should provide clarity on the activity, milestones, and timelines that the council will work to in responding to the team's findings.

The action plan will also be central to the peer team's re-engagement with Horsham District Council through a progress review which is due to be completed by **6 February 2027**.

## 7. Contact details

In the meantime, Will Brooks, Principal Adviser for the Southeast, is the main contact between your council and the Local Government Association. Will can be contacted on [william.brooks@local.gov.uk](mailto:william.brooks@local.gov.uk) if the council wants to discuss any further support:

## Appendix A – What is CPC?

CPC is a valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officer peers undertaking a comprehensive review of key information and spending three days at the 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 LGA to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These principles state that councils are responsible for their own performance; accountable locally, not nationally; share a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector; and rely on the LGA to provide the tools to support them. CPC is also key to councils in meeting their [Best Value duty](#). UK Government expect all councils to have a CPC at least every five years.

### Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five areas which form the core components of all CPCs. These 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?

5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

### **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 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 information on the local context at the council and what the peer team should focus on. It also included a comprehensive 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 spent three days onsite at Horsham District Council during which they gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 35 meetings, in addition to further research and reading and spoke to over 100 council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders.