

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

West Suffolk Council

23 – 26 July 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 4 days at West Suffolk 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

West Suffolk Council (WSC) is a rural district in Suffolk that was established in 2019 from a merger of St Edmundsbury Borough and Forest Heath District Councils and is the eighth largest district in England by population. It is a high-performing council with sound financial management and a strong reputation both internally and externally. Since its last Peer Review, the council has demonstrated its ability to handle major change; in particular, the formation of the council and a new joint administration - the West Suffolk Working Partnership (made up of the Independents and the Progressive Alliance grouping (Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green) in 2023. The Chief Executive and Leader are both well-respected and the council benefits from an approachable officer leadership team and ambitious portfolio holders.

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**Chief Executive:** Joanna Killian

**President:** Baroness Grey-Thompson

The five main settlements in West Suffolk include Bury St Edmunds, known for its historic abbey and cultural facilities and Haverhill with significant housing developments and a large industrial area housing manufacturing and scientific firms. Newmarket is renowned as the international home of horseracing, supporting around 9,300 full-time jobs in the industry. Brandon and Mildenhall are traditional market towns, with Mildenhall having expanded significantly in the 1970s due to new housing developments. West Suffolk's proximity to Cambridge and the presence of over 11,000 US visiting forces personnel significantly impact housing affordability and availability. Balancing housing growth is challenging due to the needs of the horseracing industry, biodiversity net gain and conservation designations covering 30 per cent of the district, particularly around Brandon.

In December 2023, WSC adopted new strategic priorities focused on affordable homes, environmental resilience, sustainable growth, and thriving communities. Housing stands out as the highest priority, with a united commitment from members to use their political mandate to influence the delivery of more housing that meets the needs of the community including a greater number of affordable homes. Peers recommend that WSC works to define the enabling factors to underpin their sustainable growth priority to meet the needs of the district's different communities and the wider region. Examples like the conceptual Cambridge-Norwich tech corridor illustrate how strategic development can drive economic aspirations, requiring tailored approaches for each area.

Over the past year, the housing ambition has evolved under the new joint administration, emphasising mixed, balanced communities in the local plan. The council recently announced the Brandon Commission to tackle the town's complex development challenges. Located near a Special Protection Area, Brandon faces development limitations. The Commission will bring together expert advisers and stakeholders to explore growth options while supporting biodiversity, addressing broader issues such as deprivation, transport links, affordable housing shortages, and balancing growth with environmental protection.

The council set aside a significant allocation of its capital programme to attribute to the growth priority through an 'Investing in Growth Fund' and there's a positive

approach to sustainable growth. However, since specific projects are not defined at the time of fund allocation, this has resulted in a considerable amount of carry forward, particularly in the growth section of the Capital Programme. As the detail for this priority continues to evolve, peers highlight that it will be critical for the council to align its resources and capabilities more tightly with its growth aspirations, ensuring a balanced and achievable approach to development across West Suffolk. Peers recommend that WSC consider implementing a structured governance mechanism, such as a dedicated Capital Assurance Board, comprising both members and officers to provide robust oversight and scrutiny. This could serve as a single point of contact and provide outcomes focused coordination and assurance for capital projects.

Feedback to the peer team revealed that not all residents appreciate the leading role WSC takes in working with partners and through systems to deliver strategic priorities. To address this, peers recommend that WSC explores how the council's new communications and engagement strategy could be optimised to strengthen the engagement with residents to shape and support the delivery of organisational priorities and outcomes. One way this can be achieved is by building on existing engagement efforts, such as recent consultations with the environment and sustainability reference group, private landlords, the horseracing industry, and other stakeholders in the development of the housing strategy.

Peers observed strong collaborative relationships with a diverse range of strategic partners who praise the council for its proactive approach and the respect it has earned for its work. Partners highlighted the council as a pleasure to work with, with meaningful joint efforts spanning numerous service areas. Peers recommend that the collaborative approach should be expanded to involve local communities in co-creating an outcomes-based vision and narrative. By focusing on effective messaging in external communications, the council can clearly articulate its housing priority, and address unique district challenges. A detailed, evidence-based narrative will help residents and stakeholders better understand the council's decisions and the importance of its strategic priorities.

WSC is supported by strong leadership within both its member and officer senior teams. The senior management team, predominantly made up of long-serving

officers, possesses a deep understanding of West Suffolk and a genuine affection for the council. The chief executive is respected among peers, frequently sharing his knowledge and experience with the other district chiefs in Suffolk and participating in conversations around devolution. The leader and cabinet are recognised for their strategic vision and collaborative forward thinking. The council's commitment to professional development is evident through its robust learning and development programmes, which have enhanced the skills of both staff and members. Peers recommend that WSC continues to develop the senior leadership team and cabinet members in their roles, creating capacity for the leader and chief executive to further enhance West Suffolk's external profile.

It was evident to the peer team that WSC recognises that its people are key to delivering its services, and this is reflected in the council's people-focused management approach. Staff expressed feeling valued, listened to, and part of a work family. Leadership was described as visible and accessible, providing professional support, and promoting flexible working that allow employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance. WSC has implemented a robust programme for developing and retaining talent, with a particular focus on engaging young people through apprenticeship schemes and upskilling. The council's NextGen group, for staff up to the age of thirty, is actively involved in key strategic discussions, such as the emerging housing, homelessness reduction and rough sleeping strategy. Peers recommend that the council continues the excellent people-focused work, particularly building on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) work to build staff networks, while continuing to engage with the trade unions.

Peers suggest that the council could achieve more from the scrutiny function to drive further improvement and ensure effective governance. The scrutiny committee does not frequently engage in pre-decision scrutiny or call-in papers, and currently the process for inviting cabinet members to scrutiny sessions requires a form submission which some members reported as inconvenient. The peer team heard concerns about the length of committee papers, particularly for Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee, with members preferring more concise information to facilitate better decision-making. To avoid political discussions influencing audit work, peers suggest

the council may want to consider whether audit would be more effective as a standalone committee, with performance oversight responsibilities transferred to the scrutiny committee. This change could lead to more focused scrutiny of performance metrics, further enhancing accountability and driving targeted improvements.

WSC is committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2030, working within the Suffolk Climate Change Partnership. As part of its 2022-23 budget, the council committed a £9 million capital investment facility to support its net zero ambitions. An additional £2.75 million committed in 2024-25, which took the total to £11.75 million. In September 2023, WSC approved an environment and sustainability action plan and a further one-million-pound fund for decarbonisation initiatives. The plan includes community and business support for reducing climate impact, upgrading streetlights to LED, and exploring renewable energy. Significant progress has been made with energy-efficient buildings like West Suffolk House and the Mildenhall Hub, and the council-owned West Suffolk Solar Farm, which generates green energy and income for local services. The peer team recommends building on significant work towards environmental resilience by agreeing what the intended outcomes are and developing an accessible route map with key milestones and costings.

### 3. Recommendations

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

#### 3.1 Recommendation 1

Use the community voice to reflect an outcomes-based narrative that links strategic priorities to decision-making and resource allocations.

#### 3.2 Recommendation 2

Explore how the council's communications and engagement strategy could be optimised to engage residents to shape and support the delivery of organisational priorities and outcomes.

### **3.3 Recommendation 3**

Define the conditions needed to underpin the sustainable growth priority to meet the needs of the district's different communities and the wider region. Use this to influence the strategic infrastructure requirements to meet that growth.

### **3.4 Recommendation 4**

Build on significant work towards environmental resilience by agreeing what the intended outcomes are and developing an accessible route map with key milestones and costings.

### **3.5 Recommendation 5**

Continue to develop the Senior Leadership Team and Cabinet Members in their roles, creating capacity for the Leader and Chief Executive to further enhance West Suffolk's profile on the wider stage.

### **3.6 Recommendation 6**

Continue the excellent people-focused work, particularly building on EDI work to build staff networks, engaging with the trade unions.

### **3.7 Recommendation 7**

Maximise the scrutiny function to drive further improvement and ensure effective governance.

### **3.8 Recommendation 8**

Consider implementing a structured governance mechanism, such as a dedicated Capital Assurance Board, comprising both members and officers. This could serve as a single point of contact and provide outcomes focused coordination and assurance for capital projects.



## 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 based on their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- **Lead Member Peer** – Councillor James Dawson, Leader, Erewash Borough Council
- **Chief Executive Peer** – Mark Davies, Chief Executive, Lancaster City Council
- **Member Peer** – Councillor Marianne Overton MBE, Lincolnshire County Council and North Kesteven District Council, and Leader of the LGA Independent Group
- **Member Peer** – Councillor Nick Worth, Leader, South Holland District Council
- **Officer Peer** – Kit Wheeler, Chief Finance Officer/Section 151 officer, Hastings Borough Council
- **Officer Peer** – Alison Hatcher, Assistant Chief Executive, Westmorland and Furness Council
- **Officer Peer** – James Arnold, Strategic Director (Place), North West Leicestershire District Council
- **LGA Peer Challenge Manager** – Aimee Wittams-Smith, Regional Adviser (East of England)
- **LGA Programme Support Officer** - Onyekachi Abajingin

### 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 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.

In addition to these themes, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on:

- the robustness of the council's strategic priorities and the alignment of the budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy
- renewing the approach to engagement both internally and externally, with Councillors, staff, partners, stakeholders and communities, in order to enhance decision making and collaborative working.
- the council's track record and future capacity and ability to deliver against its ambitions, including through the continuation of more efficient working and a drive for greater productivity.
- further integration and system-working within the public sector system, including through the proposed Suffolk devolution deal and LEP transition.

The feedback on these four areas has been incorporated into the five themes in this report.

### **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 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 West Suffolk 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 then spent 4 days onsite at West Suffolk Council, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 60 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 110 people including a range of council staff together with members 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

In December 2023, WSC adopted new strategic priorities based on local evidence, political priorities, challenges, and opportunities. Developed through member-led workshops for the new administration, the priorities focus on affordable, available and decent homes, environmental resilience, sustainable growth, thriving communities, essential services, and engagement. Additionally, the medium-term financial strategy (MTFS) was reviewed, and a two-year balanced budget was agreed to support these priorities. Clear strategic priorities are in place, developed by the administration and endorsed by the council. It was apparent to peers that the priorities are well understood by staff across the council.

With the 2024-2028 strategic priorities in place, the detail for each priority needs to be further developed. While there is a clear ambition for growth across the district, the specifics of this vision are still being defined. For example, the council acknowledges the importance of improving transport links and leveraging the Cambridge corridor to drive development, however it has not clearly set out how it will do this. There's a positive approach to sustainable growth, with a focus on enhancing manufacturing and skills development and an ambitious programme of delivery that will continue to require significant capacity and capability, that will need to be kept under review. As the detail for this priority continues to evolve, peers suggest that the council works to align its resources and capabilities more tightly with specific projects within its growth aspirations, ensuring a balanced and achievable approach to development across West Suffolk.

Portfolio holders demonstrate a clear understanding of strategic priorities and provide leadership within their specialist areas. There is an opportunity now to develop a more accessible and detailed cross-cutting vision for the district, enhanced by an outcomes-based narrative from members that addresses the unique challenges and opportunities of each settlement. An example of this is the ambition for Haverhill. Members described the council's vision to transform Haverhill from a dormitory town for Cambridge into a "jewel in the crown" with aspiration to make Haverhill a thriving

epicentre for start-ups, offering affordability and fostering collaboration. To achieve this transformation, the council aims to capitalise on the district's existing strengths, particularly in the defence and high-tech sectors, with a focus on attracting more businesses to the area.

Peers heard from residents and stakeholders that they welcome the focus on the strategic priorities, but they are unclear about what the priorities mean and recommend that WSC should improve public understanding of its priorities by clearly communicating the outcomes it aims to achieve and the necessary actions to get there. The peer team suggest the council should focus on effective messaging in external communications to explain the housing priorities, unique district challenges, and more specific needs like homelessness. By providing a detailed and evidence-based narrative, the council can help residents and stakeholders understand its decisions and the importance of its initiatives and policies, such as the housing strategy. This approach will enable WSC to incorporate effective use of data while keeping stakeholders informed and engaged.

Housing stands out as the council's highest priority, with a united commitment from members to push for the delivery of more housing including a greater number of "affordable, available and decent" homes. WSC plans to increase the affordable housing requirement on larger greenfield sites from 30 per cent to 40 per cent and to collaborate on regenerating brownfield sites, exploring diverse housing models, such as custom build-to-rent and community build housing. Peers recommend that this priority should be supported by a comprehensive narrative that encompasses all of the council's work, projects, evidence, neighbourhood plans, and long-term opportunities. As part of developing the council's ambitions for engagement, this narrative should be further refined in collaboration with communities, drawing on a detailed, evidence-based understanding of the area.

Place-shaping is a key responsibility of district councils and it is important for WSC to be recognised for leadership in this area. To achieve this, the council must clearly define the infrastructure required to enable growth that delivers sustainable development. Strategic partnerships with Cambridgeshire and active participation in the Suffolk Housing Board among other key partnerships will be essential in

enhancing housing availability and quality. As place-shapers, WSC should leverage these partnerships to ensure that necessary infrastructure, which may be beyond the financial reach of developers, can be secured through alternative funding sources provided by Suffolk County Council (SCC) or the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA). Peers suggest that WSC should adopt a more assertive approach to guarantee the delivery of the right infrastructure through its partners during the planning process.

The emerging housing, homelessness reduction and rough sleeping strategy seeks to combine statutory requirements with broader housing objectives. Consultation so far includes an online survey, member workshops, and a partner organisation workshop. Priorities for the strategy have been shaped through engagement with groups such as the environment and sustainability reference group, private landlords, and the horseracing industry, with further planned sessions with young people, registered providers, developers, and disability groups. This level of collaboration highlights the council's open and transparent approach and should be used as a precedent to develop closer working with local communities and businesses to co-create place-based vision and narrative to inform the development of priority projects.

Barley Homes, a housing company owned by WSC, was set up in as part of the One Public Estate programme. Barley Homes will be an important vehicle for the council, including by building more affordable homes, improving access to good private rentals, finding more temporary housing, and dealing with empty homes. Barley Homes has a commitment to meeting community needs, as well as making a financial return, with three sites currently progressing and multiple projects in the five main settlements.

Members recognise that whilst housing is a means to meet the distinct needs of local communities and address inequalities, it can also serve as a strategic tool to enable economic growth. The conceptual Cambridge-Norwich tech corridor, along with areas like Brandon and Mildenhall, are prime examples where new housing development can support economic aspirations. Unique constraints and opportunities in each area necessitate tailored approaches. Over the past year, under the new joint administration, peers heard that the housing narrative has evolved significantly, and

the local plan emphasises communities that are balanced and meet a range of different needs. Peers suggest that the council considers developing place plans for each of the key settlements to identify the distinct needs and growth potential for each place, working with the local communities. These place plans could set out the place vision, supported by some more detailed work on growth capacity and supporting infrastructure requirements.

WSC recently announced the Brandon Commission to address the complex challenges facing the town's development. Brandon is covered by the buffer zone of the nearby Special Protection Area (SPA) for Stone Curlews and other species, so new development has limitations. The Commission aims to bring together expert advisers and engage residents, developers, and stakeholders, including government and statutory agencies, to explore viable options for growth while supporting biodiversity. It will address more than just housing needs, including Brandon's broader issues like deprivation and investment requirements. Key considerations will include improving transport links, addressing affordable housing shortages, and balancing growth with environmental protection. The council's work to carefully navigate the balance between growth and preservation of Brandon's unique natural assets will lay the groundwork for a well-informed vision.

The peer team were made aware of concerns from residents about the council's housing ambitions, questioning viability with such a diverse range of unique local areas within the district boundary and with the required infrastructure that would need to be matched to the ambition. Residents held a perception that developers take advantage of "loopholes" and that requirements are not effectively enforced. Peers recommend developing place plans to identify the infrastructure requirements to support sustainable housing growth. Whilst work on the infrastructure delivery plan linked to the new local plan will help identify what a developer can fund, there will be a need for additional external investment to enable infrastructure. Place plans could provide an additional format for presenting the evidence base to make the case to strategic partners for investment in enabling infrastructure to unlock housing delivery that will deliver sustainable communities.

WSC has demonstrated commitment to climate action, aiming to be carbon neutral



by 2030 through substantial efforts and collaboration within the Suffolk Climate Change Partnership. In July 2023, WSC reviewed and approved the updated environment and sustainability action plan and in September 2023 approved a further one-million-pound decarbonisation initiatives fund to accelerate progress towards this goal. The plan includes initiatives such as supporting communities and businesses in reducing their climate impact, increasing energy efficiency, and exploring renewable energy opportunities. The council has made significant progress in decarbonising its estate, with energy-efficient buildings like West Suffolk House and the Mildenhall Hub serving as key examples. West Suffolk Solar Farm (Toggam Solar) is owned by the council and produces green energy and income that is invested back into local council services. To enhance these efforts, peers recommend developing an accessible net zero route map with key milestones and costings. Additionally, commissioning a local area energy plan and a nature recovery plan to align with the local plan could further elevate WSC's climate initiatives, ensuring comprehensive and strategic progress towards net zero.

### **5.1.1 Performance**

WSC has implemented an effective approach to performance measurement using Microsoft PowerBI, enabling the council to respond swiftly to data trends. By applying a wealth of interactive Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), the council effectively uses data to inform its decisions and the council's shift from reporting against targets to analysing trends offers a deeper understanding of its progress towards strategic priorities. In 2023-24 arrangements were developed to ensure indicators monitored by the Office for Local Government (Oflog) were included in the dashboards monitored by members. There is an opportunity to further enhance value by tailoring data presentations to different audiences, for example in presenting performance data to members of the public versus different internal and external stakeholders. This data-driven approach helps align outcomes with resources, which will be increasingly important as budgets tighten as forecast in future years.

The council's performance management framework provides transparency on progress towards strategic priorities for councillors, officers, partners, stakeholders, and residents. There is a strong connection between corporate priorities, strategic



plans, service plans and performance management indicators together with identified projects for each corporate priority which demonstrates a good corporate grip on delivery against corporate priorities. Sound programme management provides effective assurance and oversight on what the council says it wants to do and what it is actually doing.

Quarterly reviews of financial and key performance indicators are conducted by the Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee and a strategic risk register and risk management group are in place. For 2022/23, the internal audit service manager concluded reasonable assurance regarding the internal control environment and the council published its draft 2022/23 financial statements on 31 May 2023, adhering to audit and accounts regulations. These statements, verified for accuracy and alignment with the CIPFA Code, were made available for public inspection.

The council has a culture of engaging with significant partnerships through a wider public sector network, in particular governance boards and regular management meetings. These boards monitor KPIs and assess delivery against objectives. Partnerships include Anglia Revenues Partnership (ARP), whose performance is monitored and considered separately at the ARP Joint Committee. Periodic financial reporting of Barley Homes (a wholly owned company) is regularly reviewed by the council. Quarterly progress review is reported to the shareholder advisory group which consists of elected members, supported by the section 151 office and the monitoring officer. The group also meets regularly with the directors of Barley Homes to scrutinise the performance of the company and to represent the interests of the shareholders.

According to the [LGI Inform headline report](#) that peers reviewed, the council's financial management shows strong performance, with a good level of reserves as a percentage of net revenue expenditure. In revenue collection, WSC collected 97.13 per cent of due council tax in 2023/24, surpassing the England average of 95.94 per cent. Similarly, business rates collection at 97.90 per cent exceeded the national average of 97.23 per cent. This efficient revenue collection provides a solid financial foundation for the council's operations.

Planning services are performing above national and regional averages. In the first

quarter of 2024, the council processed 94.5 per cent of major development applications and 90.3 per cent of non-major applications within the target timeframes, compared to England averages of 88.3 per cent and 87.5 per cent respectively. Furthermore, the proportion of major applications overturned on appeal is low at 2.8 per cent compared to a regional average of 3.6 per cent among district councils in the East of England.

The council's housing performance is also shows evidence of progress. In 2023/24 Q3, WSC had significantly fewer households in temporary accommodation (1.16 per 1,000) compared to the England average (4.70 per 1,000). According to the council's own data, rough sleeping figures have significantly reduced from a peak of 14 in October 2020 to 5 at the end of 2023/24. Additionally, the council facilitated the construction of 207 affordable homes in 2022/23, outperforming its neighbours in the region. The council's internal PowerBI system reports an average processing time of over 11 days for many months of the year 2023/24 for housing benefit claims, reducing to 7.4 days by the end of quarter four, which is good compared to the national average for the quarter of 19 days.

There are areas with room for performance improvement. The council's waste management performance is below average, with 35.90 per cent of household waste sent for reuse, recycling, and composting in 2022/23, significantly lower than the regional median of 43.30 per cent. Moreover, the amount of residual household waste collected per household (504.40 kg) was higher than the regional median (429.85 kg). In its delivery of its strategic priorities, WSC intends to work with colleagues through the Suffolk Waste Partnership to ensure the changes required through the Government's policy on simpler recycling work for the benefit of both Suffolk residents and the environment.

West Suffolk Council integrates equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) into its operations through a community-focused approach, using local data and families and communities officers to identify and address diverse needs. This includes supporting locality-based and interest-based communities, such as through the West Suffolk Disability Forum. The council applies the public sector equality duty, identifying necessary interventions for fairness and inclusion. For instance, they translated

tenant information letters into multiple languages for HMO residents in Newmarket and introduced a new process to ensure reasonable adjustments for customers with disabilities or neurodivergence are consistently implemented across all services. Although the council has a published equality scheme, peers observed that the EDI perspective was not prominently featured in discussions with officers or in council strategies and publications and that this focus could be made more central.

## **5.2 Organisational and place leadership**

WSC demonstrates strong leadership within both its member and officer senior teams. The senior management team, largely comprised of long-serving officers, possesses a deep understanding of the council and a clear affection for the organisation. The chief executive is highly regarded among his peers, and with his long tenure as a chief executive in Suffolk and significant senior local government experience, he has welcomed and mentored newly appointed chief executives at the other districts, offering guidance and sharing insights. His willingness to share knowledge and support his peers highlights his commitment to the broader success of the region and his influential role within the local government sector.

The leader is respected for his dedicated leadership of the joint administration, with crucial support from his deputy. The cabinet members, having just completed their first year of office, have shown enthusiasm for their portfolio areas and have made concerted efforts to familiarise themselves with their specialist areas. Peers suggest that portfolio holders could further enhance their understanding of how initiatives span multiple portfolios, particularly in support of key priorities such as housing, which intersects with environment and growth among others. Cabinet members have expressed a commitment to working collaboratively across planning, housing, regeneration, and property sectors, and report positive working relationships with officers in these areas. This cross-cutting approach is evidenced in various town and locality projects.

The council's service managers advised the peer team of constructive cross-team collaboration, with project managers bringing in external expertise when required. The service manager group, which meets fortnightly as the senior management team

(service managers, directors and the chief executive), fosters conversation and shared understanding of project frameworks. Peers observed emerging concerns from members and staff regarding staff capacity, which was cited as stemming from responding to ongoing new priorities as well as austerity and savings programmes. While the leadership demonstrates enthusiasm for new initiatives, they must continue to guard against the risk of overextending the council's capacity to deliver on all fronts simultaneously. Staff have noted a marked shift in their interactions with members since the administration change, requiring adjustment to new working relationships and methods. Officers describe positive working relationships with portfolio holders and acknowledge new council leadership has prompted a re-evaluation of established practices. This change has encouraged a fresh perspective on organisational processes and decision-making.

Last year, members voted to stop substantial investment in the Western Way development plan, which included plans for a new leisure centre in Bury St Edmunds, choosing instead to refurbish the existing facility and extend its life by 10 years. The decision, driven by the risks of a 40-year loan, faced opposition that saw the refurbishment as a shorter-term fix that could become costly in the long-run. Despite nearly £2.5 million already spent on the new centre's feasibility, the decision appears to have been well-managed and thoroughly considered, reflecting a willingness from the administration to take officer advice and confront challenging decisions head-on. Residents and partners that were interviewed conveyed to peers their respect for the council's choice, expressing their belief that it was the right decision.

WSC has established strong collaborative relationships with a diverse range of strategic partners, including the NHS, Suffolk County Council, neighbouring districts, the Police and Crime Commissioner, One Public Estate, the Jockey Club, the Armed Forces, and West Suffolk College. Partners across the board praised the council for its proactive approach and the respect it has earned for its work. Feedback to the peer team highlighted the council as a pleasure to work with, with meaningful joint efforts spanning numerous service areas going above and beyond. For example, the council has secured a three-year funding agreement with Citizen's Advice, recognising the importance of financial security and effective forward planning for its

partners.

WSC has positive relationships with the county, town councils, and neighbouring councils, with officer and member senior leadership well-regarded by all. The council's collaboration with SCC and the health sector has been particularly notable to partners in their joint efforts in the development of a new hospital, West Suffolk Hospital. The council also maintains effective working relationships with parish councils, recently supporting them with one million pounds to upgrade streetlights to LED, which will save money and benefit the environment. Additionally, WSC is building connections with CPCA, a key move for advancing its housing delivery priority and securing necessary infrastructure support.

West Suffolk Hospital, built in the 1970s with structural defects associated with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) in its roof and walls, is set for a rebuild approved in 2022. WSC entered into a Planning Performance Agreement with the hospital which included the appointment of a dedicated planning officer as a single point of contact for this project, who has been described as “incredibly supportive” and proactive on all fronts, particularly regarding Section 106 agreements. Peers observed that partners attributed the success of these partnerships to the council's quality of leadership, strong relationships, adherence to plans, and willingness to collaborate to achieve desired outcomes.

WSC is a clear leader and facilitator for place-based solutions, for example the Mildenhall Hub, which was completed during the pandemic and brings together a school, leisure centre, café, library, health centre, Citizen's Advice office and working spaces for the police and council officers. Funding for the project came from a collaboration between West Suffolk Council, the Education and Skills Funding Agency, the Academy Transformation Trust, Suffolk County Council, the National Lottery, Sport England and the Suffolk Police and Crime Commissioner. Mildenhall Hub won 'Project of the Year' title in Government Property Awards in 2022 and has received praise for its green credentials and for increasing school attainment as flagship One Public Estate (OPE) project.

Beyond its own projects, WSC advocates for stakeholders in the business community. For example, the council is supporting a business festival and is praised

as a strong facilitator between SCC, West Suffolk College, and the business sector. One business even suggested to peers that they estimated £25 million of economic benefit per year is retained in the district due to the council. Businesses that have liaised with planning officers described good advice being given with regards to guiding businesses to the best locations for the company and the community, “we wouldn’t have had a clue without the council”. The peer team heard that WSC were seen as the best of any other council the businesses they spoke to had worked with.

The council has a positive relationship with the police. Officers share a working space at the Mildenhall Hub, and the council keeps the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) informed about key priorities like housing plans. The PCC hopes to develop the positive relationship and to explore further collaboration on additional projects, for example exploring the use of developer contributions and addressing the impact of prison expansion on services. Potential areas for further cooperation include building on the current arrangements around night-time economy licensing, developing the plans for using council buildings for low-risk court cases, and discussing the upcoming crime plan and early-stage crime prevention through design.

The council’s positive approach to health and wellbeing is demonstrated through its strong relationships with the health sector and leisure providers, for example through its participation in the West Suffolk Alliance. Locality teams collaborate on addressing local needs to improve care and support, ensuring a comprehensive and coordinated approach to community health. Peers were particularly impressed by WSC’s partnership work on early intervention, such as the outreach initiatives with Abbeycroft Leisure. This joint effort goes beyond the typical expectations of a district council’s role in healthcare with Abbeycroft Leisure describing an “open book relationship” with WSC. The Active Communities team do a wide range of work as part of the leisure contract, supporting areas of deprivation, mental health, and physical health. This innovative partnership between health and leisure sectors has seen the Integrative Care Board (ICB) commissioning leisure activities that support the NHS, showcasing how WSC steps into the health space to understand stakeholders and devise beneficial community solutions.



WSC is progressive in recognising education and skills as vital to supporting the local community. While unemployment is low, wages and skill levels are also below average. The council looks to the district's geographical advantages, such as the A11 and A14 corridors – the latter connected to the freeport in Felixstowe and proximity to Cambridge's technology hub, to enhance skills opportunities for residents. The council actively supports West Suffolk College, for example in building new facilities, and has a good relationship with the council. Significant projects like Sizewell C in the county present further opportunities for skills development. The council advocates for more local decision-making on skills funding to better address these issues and boost the local economy.

Peers were impressed by members' and officers' deep understanding of their local area and recommend that WSC leverage this knowledge to communicate a shared vision, garnering support from a broad range of stakeholders to address structural inequalities. By effectively influencing and negotiating with stakeholders, WSC can continue to maximise benefits for West Suffolk, such as advancing its work on growth corridors and place plans to meet strategic priorities. This collaborative approach will ensure that the council's efforts are well-supported and aligned with the broader goals of the community.

Peers heard feedback that residents were “not clear on what district, county, and town councils do and who to contact for issues” and were unaware of any changes made, for example in response to planning consultations. There is the opportunity to work with other authorities and local public services to enhance communication and clarity about roles and responsibilities. This could include providing transparent updates on planning consultation outcomes, which would improve residents' understanding of, and engagement with, the council. West Suffolk Council is undertaking many great projects, successfully and consistently delivering. The peer team recommends enhancing efforts to effectively communicate these achievements to residents.

Devolution and integration of LEP functions into the upper tier authority presents a significant opportunity. WSC has a good working relationship with SCC in the shaping and development of plans and new delivery arrangements for economic

development across the county. Aligned to the opportunities through devolution and LEP integration, WSC will be developing its own economic strategy. This provides the chance for WSC to set out its vision and to be clear on what WSC will do to support economic growth and what other tiers and partnerships will take a leading role on (thereby avoiding duplication between tiers of local government). Through development of this strategy, WSC can further clarify its longer-term objectives and define its role as a place leader. WSC will also need to use this strategy to influence CPCA and where WSC can deliver CPCA objectives.

Peers recognise that following the recent general election, the council will be building relationships with new MPs to secure the best outcomes for the area. WSC has already taken steps in this direction, having reached out to all new MPs to initiate open dialogue and build working relationships. WSC's chief executive has been actively involved in discussions surrounding devolution, including Suffolk's efforts to secure a county deal. This provides a solid foundation for progressing devolution discussions with the Ministry for Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG). Despite the uncertainty, peers emphasise the importance of the new leadership team and cabinet working collaboratively on this journey and enhancing WSC's voice within the county, regionally and nationally.

### **5.3 Governance and culture**

Peers observed open, healthy relationships at all levels, both among officers and members. The chief executive provides strong leadership, setting clear expectations for directors, and staff report feeling well-informed and trusting of his leadership. The leader expresses pride in his cabinet and portfolio holders, maintaining open and honest relationships, including with the new Conservative group leader following a recent change in leadership. Peers received positive feedback from recent enhanced internal engagement with other councillors led by portfolio holders. The council ensures all members are kept informed at appropriate times, with advice from statutory officers (head of paid service, monitoring officer and section 151 officer) both sought and respected, contributing to a cohesive and transparent governance environment.



Service managers reported that they feel empowered to engage with portfolio holders, collaboratively discussing and executing priorities. Portfolio holders take appropriate and active ownership of their areas, often working closely with senior officers to deliver on their objectives. There is an opportunity for the council to strengthen collaboration between members and officers by enhancing engagement beyond senior management. By encouraging portfolio holders to work more closely with lead officers across different levels, the council can ensure that the valuable expertise of officers is further integrated into the decision-making process. This approach reinforces the principle that while members lead and make decisions, officers provide essential professional advice. Expanding this collaborative environment, in line with the constitution, will allow the council to build on its current success, making the best use of both members' and officers' strengths to further improve governance and decision-making.

Members, portfolio holders in particular, are impressed with the development offered to them. They advised peers that they are given the tools to develop their own ideas as opposed to prescriptive training on how they should be approaching their service areas. There is also a training budget that allows all members to access development opportunities, for example the Conservative Group recently had training on effective opposition, supporting the group to provide scrutiny and constructive challenge to council decision-making. Following the 2023 local elections, the member induction programme was revised to increase awareness of operational teams and functions, and to build relationships across the organisation. Specific training has been delivered to enhance committee effectiveness. The Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee, for example, received training on reviewing annual financial statements and understanding their role in monitoring the council's budget, performance, and risk management. In March 2024, the council introduced a new skills audit for members. This skills matrix aims to provide an overview of training programmes undertaken and skills acquired by members, with the intention of informing future training programmes. The above examples provide strong evidence of how the council is using the training of members to ensure the appropriate skills are developed to support members in discharging their committee responsibilities.

Auditors have raised no governance concerns, and their feedback indicates that there is healthy and appropriate challenge to the section 151 Officer within the council, suggesting strong performance management reporting and governance. Peers considered that the combined Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee could blur the lines between the apolitical nature of audit and the more political nature of scrutiny. Audit, as a statutory committee, should remain impartial, while scrutiny often involves political debate. To avoid political discussions influencing audit work, peers suggest the council may want to consider whether audit would be more effective as a standalone committee, with performance oversight responsibilities transferred to the scrutiny committee. During an observation of the committee, peers noted that the discussion appeared to be limited. Councillors must ensure that decisions made during formal meetings are perceived as transparent to uphold public trust and accountability. Whilst it is essential that members are well-briefed prior to meetings, it remains vital for councillors to then ensure that they foster an open dialogue during meetings to reinforce the legitimacy of their decision-making processes.

The interim audit opinion for 2022/23 is positive, with external auditors yet to complete their audit and opinion for the 2023/24 statement of accounts, but no material concerns have been noted so far. WSC's internal audit quality assurance includes independent reviews every five years, the most recent in March 2023 with positive results, along with individual audit reviews, customer satisfaction questionnaires, and ongoing internal quality checks to ensure compliance with standards.

WSC undertakes regular reviews of the council's risk register to ensure it remains fit for purpose, with key risks reported on in the annual governance statement. The risk register informs the audit plan, with the internal audit service manager collaborating with services to develop it. Main financial system audits are conducted annually to provide independent assurance to the section 151 Officer, ensuring adherence to financial procedure rules and the treasury management strategy. Additionally, one-off audit activities identified by management and internal audit contribute to a balanced audit plan, enabling internal audit to deliver a statutory annual opinion on the

council's risk management, control, and governance processes.

Peers suggest that there is an opportunity to maximise the scrutiny function with more frequent engagement in pre-decision scrutiny and call-ins of papers. These practices could be strengthened at WSC and would help drive further improvement and ensure effective governance. Currently, the chairs of Overview and Scrutiny and Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committees meet with the leader. The process for inviting cabinet members to scrutiny sessions requires a form to be submitted and members feel the process could be streamlined. Members also expressed concerns about the length of committee papers generally, suggesting a preference for more concise information to facilitate better decision-making. Reviewing and refining these aspects could improve the scrutiny function's contribution to the council's governance and help with better engagement in the democratic process.

It was clear to the peer team that WSC recognises that its people are key to delivering its services, and this is reflected in its people-focused management approach. As a "caring council," it cultivates an environment where employees enjoy working, and express feeling valued, heard, and part of a work family. Leadership is both visible and accessible, providing professional support and promoting flexible working conditions that allow employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Peers noted the lively atmosphere and full desks at both West Suffolk House and Mildenhall Hub, despite the absence of a requirement to work in the offices for a set number of days, indicating that staff choose to be present, so a formal policy has not been necessary.

WSC's business partner model is effective, ensuring that all relevant policy, HR, legal, IT, communications and finance requirements are integrated into the development of policies, strategies, and service modifications. This model allows corporate and support services to provide specialised support and expertise to all service areas and project teams, fostering a collaborative environment. The extensive network of business partners across all services is well-embedded, contributing significantly to the council's success in delivering cohesive and compliant services. This approach enhances operational efficiency and ensures comprehensive oversight and alignment with the council's strategic objectives.

WSC has implemented a robust programme for developing and retaining talent, with a particular focus on engaging young people, who report that they feel well-supported, with a clear focus on their success and confidence-building. The council's NextGen group, for staff up to the age of thirty, is actively involved in key strategic discussions, such as the emerging housing, homelessness reduction and rough sleeping strategy. This approach fosters engagement and encourages internal mobility, allowing staff to explore different career paths within the organisation.

The council has been proactive in addressing potential staffing gaps, particularly in areas that face national recruitment challenges such as planning, legal services, and frontline roles in waste and street scene. By 'growing their own' talent through apprenticeships and upskilling programmes, they have successfully filled positions for planning officers, Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers, and building control staff, reducing reliance on agency workers. This strategy has yielded positive results, with the council boasting a fully staffed building control department, a rarity among local authorities. Commitment to learning and development is evident through the iLearn platform and apprenticeship schemes, although there is a recognition that retaining apprentices beyond their initial two-year roles is an ongoing challenge. Continued monitoring of retention rates and apprenticeship outcomes will be beneficial.

Peers heard examples of cases that demonstrate a clear commitment to zero tolerance for discriminatory behaviour, but also identified that there is the opportunity to enhance WSC's approach to EDI. For example, the council could improve workforce recruitment practices by actively seeking to recruit a diverse range of candidates in the council's job advertisements. While the relationship with trade unions is productive, with positive feedback from both sides, the peer team noted a shortage of visible staff EDI groups. By further developing bottom-up internal communication with staff and actively supporting and nurturing these staff networks, the council could build on its strengths and empower employees. The opportunity to improve equality and diversity practices is further supported by the willingness of trade unions to collaborate.

In response to the council's invitation to provide advice as part of the peer challenge, peers recommend that the council should consider the value of developing a

comprehensive AI strategy, focusing on both maximising opportunities, and minimising external threats. While this could represent a valuable use of resources, it is important to assess whether the potential benefits outweigh the demands on time and resources. AI is a rapidly evolving field with many known and unknown variables, and navigating this landscape effectively is a challenge that all councils are currently facing. A thoughtful approach is necessary to determine if an AI strategy can offer significant advantages without overwhelming the council's resources.

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

The council has a four-year MTFS, and the first two years of the plan are balanced, with a gap of £6.3 million forecast by 2027/8. The budget report assumes an implementation of changes to the funding system including the loss of Revenue Support Grant, Rural Services Delivery Grant, New Homes Bonus, and the Funding Guarantee – together these assumptions reduce income by £6.8 million and are the main driver behind the projected gap. Peers considered that this is prudent.

In terms of financial stability, WSC has an established process of estimating significant financial pressures and the funding sources. The strategic plan sets out the high-level priorities for the council, then each service area creates a business plan aligned with it, these then shape the MTFS. The MTFS identifies and allocates the resources needed to deliver services and is updated annually through consultations with budget managers about their specific responsibilities. This ensures that resources are allocated according to the priorities set out in the strategic and business plans and the council have established a framework to identify and respond to financial challenges.

The budget makes comprehensive provision for growth, inflation, and budgetary pressures. The s151 officer's section 25 sign-off makes appropriate reference to risks and is logically consistent with the decisions taken. With no clear government grant levels in the medium to long term, WSC is working on annual savings and income plans to tackle future financial challenges. A business rates reserve is in place to manage sudden funding drops, providing short-term stability and time to implement further savings if needed. The peer team recommend that portfolio holders and

officers use the next two years wisely to jointly consider longer term savings plans.

The WSC policy is to always hold a general fund balance of £5 million. This equates to around 20 per cent of annual net expenditure. Earmarked reserves are expected to be £42.4 million in 2024/5 falling to £38.5 million in 2027/28. At this level, the use of reserves is sustainable. The strategic priorities and MTFs reserve have been used to fund specific council initiatives and has been built up through the New Homes Bonus and benefits from the business rates pool.

The budget report sets out the council's capital strategy with plans to invest £131 million over the next ten years with £97 million in the first two years, £76 million of which is funded through borrowing. Substantial investments are planned in affordable housing through Barley Homes (£12 million), Advanced Manufacturing Units (£11 million) and the council's Sustainable Growth agenda (£30 million). Estimates of the proportion of financing costs to net revenue stream are expected to increase from 7.23 per cent in 2022/3 to 12.66 per cent in 2026/7.

The draft final capital outturn for 2023/24 was reported to the Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee on 30 May 2024 and showed a spend of £12.96 million against a revised budget of £48.48 million, with 71 per cent carried forward. The largest element of carry forward relates to £15 million of the 'Investing in the Growth Agenda' fund for investments that offer strategic, social, and economic benefits, carried forward due to project timings and uncommitted balance. Peers suggest that it would be prudent to have defined projects within the strategic priorities to reduce optimism bias and recommend that WSC considers streamlining capital programme management and enhancing oversight through a joint member and officer single point of contact such as a Capital Assurance Board. This would help to ensure that the capital programme is more tightly aligned with council's strategic priorities.

The council demonstrates effective asset management through its asset management plan, which aligns with strategic priorities and seeks to maximise revenue while recognising the value of wider regeneration and social benefits that making effective use of assets can bring. For example, job creation, fostering startups, strengthening ties with educational institutions, and investments purchased to support retention of key staff. Members and officers refer to this as "blended

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**Chair:** Councillor Louise Gittins

**Chief Executive:** Joanna Killian

**President:** Baroness Grey-Thompson



returns.” By adopting a strategic approach, the council not only advances its own priorities but also contributes to wider economic and social outcomes. Peers suggest that WSC should enhance the visibility of the impact of its economic assets, thereby increasing its contribution to the broader UK plc.

To enhance decision-making and financial oversight, peers recommend that the council should tailor financial management information to suit the needs of different audiences, such as portfolio holders and service areas. Customising reports and data presentations helps ensure that each group receives relevant, actionable insights. For instance, portfolio holders benefit from high-level summaries and strategic financial overviews, while service areas may need detailed breakdowns and performance metrics pertinent to their specific functions. By aligning financial information with the needs and responsibilities of various stakeholders, the council can improve transparency, facilitate more informed decisions, and drive more effective budget management.

## **5.5 Capacity for improvement**

The new cross-party councillor leadership is working well and is ready for further development, and national engagement, to offer and gain further insights. The new leadership team structure has been designed to enhance strategic focus and operational efficiency, with portfolio holders clearly accountable for their responsibilities. There are good structures in place to develop future officer leaders, for example, the Aspiring Leaders programme. Peers suggest that continued development of the senior team and cabinet members in their roles will create capacity for the chief executive and leader to increase WSC’s profile on the wider stage regionally and sub-regionally. Additionally, the council should continue to develop its officer talent and focus on succession planning to maintain organisational resilience as long-serving senior staff eventually retire.

The council's stable financial position over the next two years offers a crucial opportunity to address the anticipated shortfall projected for 2026/27. This stability allows for strategic groundwork to be laid in preparation for difficult financial decisions in the future. The council should use this period to proactively plan and position itself

to manage future challenges effectively.

To better connect with residents, the council should optimise engagement through co-production and more proactive communication. Effective communication and celebration of successes are vital for maintaining momentum and morale. The council should more actively share its achievements and good practices, ensuring that successes are recognised and used as examples of effective service delivery. As part of this, a clear outcomes-based narrative linking strategic priorities to decision-making and resource allocations will enhance support from partners and residents and help them understand the underlying rationale.

The council's role in housing growth and its strategic position offers significant opportunities to influence regional transport improvements. By building on partnerships, the council can continue to enhance its collaborative efforts to deliver on its strategic priorities. Addressing challenges such as biodiversity net gain and ensuring that development contributions are effectively employed for infrastructure improvements will be critical. Additionally, there is an opportunity to position West Suffolk as a key player in supporting housing growth in the region. In return, WSC could use its role in enabling this growth to influence strategic improvements in east-west transport links.

Engaging with the NextGen group for insights from young people on policies, such as housing, has proven beneficial and could serve as a model for future initiatives. Developing more opportunities for staff to contribute ideas could enhance overall effectiveness. Additionally, the NextGen group are keen to share their ideas, such as updating the staff portal with a “who’s who” guide and organising more frequent social events which could further improve internal communication and cohesion.

There is potential to enhance the council’s performance management by re-evaluating the current structure and considering the transfer of performance oversight responsibilities from the audit committee to the scrutiny committee. This strategic change could lead to more focused and detailed scrutiny of performance metrics, ultimately enhancing accountability. Aligning performance oversight with the scrutiny committee may lead to more active identification of areas for improvement and the implementation of targeted interventions. This shift would demonstrate the



council's commitment to continuous improvement and robust governance.

WSC is currently in a stable and strategically advantageous position, with a solid financial foundation that allows for proactive planning and the capacity to address future challenges. Strong internal frameworks provide a robust support system for continued growth and improvement. The council's commitment to effective asset management, strategic partnerships, and community engagement positions it well to capitalise on opportunities for regional influence and enhanced service delivery. WSC is well-equipped to define and achieve its long-term goals, ultimately benefiting residents and stakeholders.

## 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. 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.

The date for the progress review at West Suffolk Council will be circa May 2025.

In the meantime, Rachel Litherland, Principal Adviser for the East of England, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Rachel is available to discuss any further support the council requires. [rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk](mailto:rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk), 07795 076834.