

Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan update – March 2025

RAG rating definitions:

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| Action on hold, significantly behind schedule with a risk of non-delivery or not started, or does not have funding. |
| Action changed and/or timeline revised, but on track for delivery. Further or additional funding may be needed which could cause some delay in delivery. |
| Action on track or completed. |

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| <p>Work at pace to develop a new Corporate Plan that has a clear and well-defined strategic vision with strategic priorities, owned by members and clearly communicated to staff, residents and partners. <i>Having a Corporate Plan, supported by the agreed budget and a financial sustainability plan, is crucial for ensuring all staff, members and stakeholders understand what the council is seeking to achieve and how staff, members, partners, and stakeholders can share the responsibility in delivering these goals. Now is the time to work together to agree on and deliver a new Corporate Plan.</i></p> | | <p>The Corporate Plan was adopted by Council in April 2024 and is published on the website. The annual update on actions is going to the March 2025 Policy & Resources Committee meeting.</p> |
| <p>Action 1.1</p> | <p>We have started to develop the new Corporate Plan with the administration and officers working together to agree the strategic priorities.</p> | <p>Complete</p> |
| <p>Action 1.2</p> | <p>We will analyse the feedback parish/town councils and residents have given at Area Committees following the presentation of the proposed priorities at the September 2023 round of meetings.</p> | <p>Complete</p> |
| <p>Action 1.3</p> | <p>We will develop the strategic priorities in more detail by Service Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs working with heads of service, to make sure that everyone understands how they will be achieved within the agreed budget.</p> | <p>Complete</p> |

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| Action 1.4 | We will carry out sessions with staff, members, partners and stakeholders to communicate what the council is seeking to achieve and to encourage shared responsibility in delivering the goals. | Complete |
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| <p>Develop and embed joint values and behaviours for Swale members and officers. <i>It is important that joint values for the organisation are in place, lived and modelled by all the senior leaders in the organisation. Having these in place will help the council develop a culture of trust and respect between members and officers.</i></p> | | |
| <p>Action 2.1</p> | <p>We plan to hold sessions with members and officers at all levels to agree and develop joint values and behaviours.</p> | <p>Values workshops ran at the Swale Managers Forum in December 2023 and at the All Staff Event in June 2024. Draft values developed and shared at All Staff Webinar in September 2024. Now on hold while Member/Officer Relations work is completed, and then the Values project will be picked up with Members to develop a shared set of Values.</p> |
| <p>Action 2.2</p> | <p>We will work with Members to agree how the values and behaviours fit with the staff code of conduct, the member code of conduct and the officer/member protocol.</p> | <p>This will be arranged once the Values have been agreed.</p> |
| <p>Action 2.3</p> | <p>We will provide training in neurodivergence to assist with everyone having a better understanding of individuals different ways of working, learning, communicating, and perceiving the environment.</p> | <p>Webinars were delivered January 2024.</p> |
| <p>Action 2.4</p> | <p>Once the joint values and behaviours have been agreed we will ensure they are embedded and promoted in the organisation through regular Member and officer training sessions.</p> | <p>To be actioned once joint values and behaviours have been agreed.</p> |

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| <p>Develop a robust and detailed savings plan, ensuring clear ownership of projects/plans by the administration and officers. <i>Develop a savings plan with both the administration and officer accountability, and proactively manage this, alongside day-to-day active fiscal management, and controls. Have regular conversations with staff, members, and budget holders communicating Swale's budget position, and instilling ownership of savings plans and projects across the organisation.</i></p> | | |
| <p>Action 3.1</p> | <p>We will work towards communicating the budget position to staff and members on a regular basis. This will be done through regular all-staff briefings and six-monthly budget briefings with all members.</p> | <p>For 2025/26 – Regular meetings were held with the coalition administration from March 2024-December 2024 and then the Labour administration group in January and February 2025. Meetings were held with opposition groups during the budget preparation period and a cross-party group met to discuss the budget position following P&R on 5 February 2025.</p> <p>An update to staff was given at the January 2025 all staff briefings.</p> |
| <p>Action 3.2</p> | <p>We will provide accountable managers and the administration with more in-depth briefings on the budget position which will include information on overachieving and underachieving income streams, risks and budget gaps to assist with making decisions on savings plans and projects.</p> | <p>Budget holders are provided with monthly reports on their budgets with quarterly reports discussed at EMT/SMT.</p> |
| <p>Action 3.3</p> | <p>The finance sub-group will continue to work on developing measures to recommend to Full Council to ensure the council set a balanced budget and have a robust Medium Term Financial Plan.</p> | <p>Finance sub-group meetings with the administration have been held over the summer with detailed discussion on the current budget position used to inform MTFP. Meetings are set to continue for the full year to maintain the focus for the budget position for the duration of the administration.</p> |

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| Action 3.4 | These actions will ensure that the administration will have clarity on the budget position and the requirement for savings in the short term and in future years. | Ongoing. |
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| | <p>Continue to work on the member/officer protocol and work to improve member/officer relationships. <i>There is room for improvement in the levels of collaboration, mutual understanding, and tone of communication between some elected members and staff. Work on this has started, with defining and managing ways of working between members and officers, through the member/officer protocol; it is recommended that work on improving relationships be considered a priority for the new administration.</i></p> | |
| <p>Action 4.1</p> | <p>The work on developing joint values and behaviours will assist with achieving mutual understanding and tone of communication between some elected members and staff.</p> | <p>Ongoing and will be achieved once joint values and behaviours have been agreed.</p> |
| <p>Action 4.2</p> | <p>We will take a proposed protocol, which unions will have been consulted on, to the Standards Committee. Once agreed it will be communicated to members and staff.</p> | <p>The Protocol has now been adopted by Council and following a process of minor amendment has been communicated to all members and staff.</p> |
| <p>Action 4.3</p> | <p>The Communications Strategy to reflect how the member/officer protocol should be communicated.</p> | <p>Members approved the communications strategy, and member/officer protocol updated and communicated.</p> |
| <p>Action 4.4</p> | <p>We will put more robust mechanisms in place to better communicate the issues raised at exit interviews and take action where necessary.</p> | <p>A process for exit interviews has been agreed and implemented in May 2024.</p> |
| <p>Action 4.5</p> | <p>We will put in place a safe-space for people to talk about problems that may arise with member/officer relationships and provide external mediation where necessary.</p> | <p>The Member/Officer Protocol achieves this action.</p> |

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| | <p>Develop a comprehensive induction and support programme for members which includes the statutory roles of the council, budget responsibilities, and building internal/external positive relationships. <i>It is important that members are supported to deliver their roles and responsibilities as elected members. Building relationships both internally and externally will enrich the council and enable groups and external partners to all pull together. Introduce briefings for all members on key issues, providing the opportunity to have open discussions across all parties. These should include training and briefings on financial understanding and monitoring, to enable effective financial scrutiny and decision-making.</i></p> | |
| <p>Action 5.1</p> | <p>Although there is already an extensive member training programme in place, we will carry out a review with members to identify any gaps.</p> | <p>The member training programme for the civic year 25/26 is due to be finalised by the Member Development Working Group at their next meeting scheduled for March 2025.</p> |
| <p>Action 5.2</p> | <p>We will implement a four-year rolling training programme for members including refresher training and to ensure continued reinforcement of principles.</p> | <p>A wide range of planning training has been programmed, with bi-monthly “bitesize” sessions, and other bespoke offers.</p> <p>A member-senior officer ‘buddying’ scheme is in operation.</p> |
| <p>Action 5.3</p> | <p>We will record training sessions so they are available for members to watch at a later date.</p> | <p>Complete and ongoing. A Teams folder has been created for Members which contains resources such as slides from briefings.</p> |
| <p>Action 5.4</p> | <p>We will link members to the Employee Assistance Programme.</p> | <p>Complete</p> |
| <p>Action 5.5</p> | <p>We will set up two-way training with external partners so that members understand how they work with the council and partners understand local government and political processes.</p> | <p>Training sessions have taken place with Administration Members, Strategic Management Team and the Local Government Association (LGA). Further sessions will be scheduled throughout the year.</p> |

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| <p>Conduct a review of committee meetings including the number of meetings and capacity to support their frequency. Test further opportunities for wider scrutiny and challenge within the committee system. Review the number of committees looking at opportunities to reduce duplication and increase efficiency. Also, look at ways of enabling scrutiny as part of the committee system.</p> | |
| <p>Action 6.1</p> | <p>We will work with the Leader to conduct a review of committees including the number of committees, the frequency of meetings and agenda items.</p> <p>The review was carried out and the number of committees is unchanged, but the frequency has been reduced.</p> |
| <p>Action 6.2</p> | <p>We will discuss with members how scrutiny is carried out and develop an annual scrutiny programme within the committee system.</p> <p>The Constitution Working Group (CWG) was satisfied that the constitution was clear on scrutiny being the responsibility of the individual committees. It was then for committees to consider their own scrutiny work programs.</p> |

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| | <p>Maximise your links with small and big businesses. Tap into their work on corporate social responsibility activity, employment opportunities and how these can support your local priorities. <i>Use the current opportunity and goodwill in the business sector to capitalise on the relationships built with the business community during and after the pandemic. With many large businesses in the borough, proactively engaging with the whole sector could help deliver Swale’s ambitions for economic development and expand the apprenticeship and training ambitions and opportunities for local people.</i></p> | |
| <p>Action 7.1</p> | <p>We will agree with members expectations and resource within existing budgets to work with businesses.</p> | <p>The Corporate Plan 2023-2027 balances expectations and resources. It acknowledges that Shared Prosperity Funds (UKSPF and REPF) have been a primary means of delivering economic development / business support from 2022/23 to 2024/25. A confirmed UKSPF funding allocation for 2025/26 means this approach can continue. Town Centre and Rural Business grant schemes have offered the most direct and tangible business support.</p> |
| <p>Action 7.2</p> | <p>There are already a number of established links with local businesses, the council’s vision is to develop further engagement with businesses and how we work with them.</p> | <p>UKSPF and REPF are limited tools to widen our business reach. We have received confirmation of continued UKSPF investment in 2025/26 and are developing spend proposals.</p> <p>Broader engagement work cuts across Council services, including procurement and social value, climate change and skills and employability.</p> <p>The wider use of the Council’s underused property assets to support local business</p> |

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| | | <p>continues to progress, specifically at Masters House and Swale House, which continue to welcome new tenants.</p> <p>The Sheerness Revival Levelling Up Fund construction contracts offer strong examples of social value outcomes.</p> |
| Action 7.3 | We will signpost and co-ordinate relationships between businesses to maximise links and encourage joint working. | Our business newsletter and website updates continue. There is limited current capacity to be more proactive in this domain, but opportunities are engaged with as they present including, for example, regular engagement with KMEP. There has been widespread promotion of UKSPF and REPF grant schemes. |
| Action 7.4 | We will share the council's unspent Apprenticeship Levy with businesses that can develop a programme that will benefit the council and businesses. | Two work strands are at an infant stage to pool the levy, SBC are looking to work with Breaking Barriers and the Medway & Swale Health Care Partnership. |

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| | <p>Prioritise work on developing your communications and engagement strategy. <i>Having these strategies in place will help to ensure information from the council to residents, and between members and staff flows effectively. These will be key to ensuring the smooth dissemination of key messages, goals, and initiatives both internally and externally. Swale having clear and well-defined strategies in this area will help with keeping members, staff, and residents informed, aligned, and engaged, fostering a sense of clarity and purpose alongside the new Corporate Plan.</i></p> | |
| <p>Action 8.1</p> | <p>We are in the process of developing a corporate communications strategy alongside the Corporate Plan.</p> | <p>Corporate communications strategy approved by members.</p> |
| <p>Action 8.2</p> | <p>The strategy will ensure there is an effective flow of information both externally with residents and internally with members and staff.</p> | <p>Strategy addresses need for effective flow of information, with actions to improve communications externally and internally.</p> |
| <p>Action 8.3</p> | <p>We will encourage and train members and staff to be proactive in photographing and filming news of the Council's achievements.</p> | <p>Training had been identified, need to determine who to receive and how to fund.</p> |
| <p>Action 8.4</p> | <p>We will encourage and train members and appropriate staff to effectively use social media to communicate news of the Council's achievements and share information that is of value to residents.</p> | <p>Potential training identified, need to agree funding and arrange.</p> |
| <p>Action 8.5</p> | <p>We will provide more diverse information on cultural events. The communications team will develop a diary of cultural events, including awareness days.</p> | <p>No steer on which days to include, though some celebrated through things like Sheerness Clocktower lighting. Still need input on what events/days to include that the organisation will support in meaningful way to avoid tokenism.</p> |
| <p>Action 8.6</p> | <p>We will give accessibility guidance to members and staff to ensure that any communications are easily accessible to all residents equally.</p> | <p>Accessibility resources shared, and continue to emphasise importance as part of day-to-day work.</p> |
| <p>Action 8.7</p> | <p>We are developing different approaches to community engagement to ensure effective consultation takes place.</p> | <p>Consultation approach being drafted, and will be progressed when resources allow.</p> |

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| | <p>Celebrate and communicate the Council's successes. <i>It is important that Swale Borough Council celebrate and effectively communicate the successes of the council. Doing so will help to boost staff morale, reinforce a positive organisational culture, and may enhance the council's external reputation.</i></p> | |
| <p>Action 9.1</p> | <p>We will improve service engagement and information sharing from and to service areas.</p> | <p>Good news stories are shared at All Staff Briefing sessions. Discussions will take place at the Corporate Leadership Team meetings to identify good news items, these will be taken to the Senior Management Team to agree which stories will be selected to spotlight.</p> |
| <p>Action 9.2</p> | <p>We will celebrate and communicate staff achievements. This year we have reintroduced the Swale Stars awards which celebrates staff achievements. Feedback from staff has been positive.</p> | <p>Swale Stars will take place in the summer of 2025. We have introduced a regular scheduled item at the All-Staff Briefings to celebrate long service and staff achievements on a regular basis.</p> |
| <p>Action 9.3</p> | <p>We include an award for external partner engagement.</p> | <p>Work is being carried out to review the Swale Stars categories and include a partnership award.</p> |

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| | <p>Closely monitor the impact of the 34-hour week, considering the impact on the organisation and residents. <i>It is important to recognise that this policy is a departure from the customary working practices within the council and local authority sector. Acknowledge that it carries risks as well as benefits. Work to balance the innovative spirit of the policy with a data-driven monitoring and review process to help identify and mitigate risks and inject timely contingencies as needed.</i></p> | |
| <p>Action 10.1</p> | <p>We carry out monthly staff surveys to monitor the impact of the introduction of the 34-hour week. We will share the findings with members.</p> | <p>Complete</p> <p>Staff surveys will continue to be carried out periodically to monitor the impact of the 34-hour week.</p> |
| <p>Action 10.2</p> | <p>We will capture individual teams' views and ensure regular discussions at team meetings and one to one check-ins with staff are taking place. Heads of service will make themselves available at drop-in sessions should staff feel more comfortable giving feedback in that way.</p> | <p>Complete</p> |
| <p>Action 10.3</p> | <p>We will ensure the feedback managers receive from staff is passed onto the 34-hour implementation group.</p> | <p>Complete</p> |
| <p>Action 10.4</p> | <p>We will run sessions with officers before the permanent move to a 34-hour week takes place.</p> | <p>Complete</p> |