

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Morecambe Town Council

22 – 24 March 2023

Feedback report





Contents

- 1. Executive summary..... 3
- 2. Key recommendations 5
- 3. Summary of the peer challenge approach..... 7
- 4. Feedback 9
- 5. Next steps 18

1. Executive summary

Morecambe is a seaside town in the county of Lancashire with a population of 34,590. Following a downturn in tourism at the end of the 20th Century, which impacted negatively on the local economy, Morecambe is entering a period of significant regeneration, the most prominent of which is the Eden Project Morecambe that it is hoped will be a catalyst to drive a positive future for the town.

Morecambe Town Council (MTC) is operating in the context of county, district and town council tiers of local government. It was established in 2009 and has twenty-six members across eleven wards (political make-up when the peer challenge took place comprised: Liberal Democrats – 8 seats, Morecambe Bay Independents – 6, Bay Independent Group – 5, Independent – 3, Labour – 3 and Renew – 1).

This is an ambitious town council with a desire to make a fundamental and long-lasting change to Morecambe. This is illustrated through the drive and progress that has been made by MTC over the last 2 years by both members and officers, demonstrated for example through improvements to governance arrangements, expansion of public realm work, enhanced engagement with the community and delivery of a successful programme of events.

There is recognition that whilst progress has been made, MTC is at the start of a journey and there is still much to do. For instance, the Community Action Plan needs to be revisited to become more strategic and should look to capitalise on the new opportunities whilst managing the changes and challenges these developments may present. Decisions on future direction should be informed by more targeted approaches to reaching out to communities where there is greatest need, such as neighbourhoods located in the West End of Morecambe.

The peer team saw commitment to Morecambe from MTC members, staff and key stakeholders, including Lancaster City Council, Morecambe Business Improvement District (BID), Eden Project Morecambe and Marketing Lancashire, matched with a strong vision for Morecambe and visible leadership from both the Chief Executive Officer and Chair. This has contributed to a sense of optimism for the town from the range of stakeholders that we spoke to. Peers believe there is a need for MTC to collaborate more with the different tiers of local government and partners, such as Morecambe BID and local community groups, and play a key role in place shaping

for Morecambe. This could include the co-creation of a strategic narrative for the town. MTC will need to continue to build confidence amongst partners and become further embedded in community partnership networks, such as those convened by Community Connectors.

The peer team witnessed a commitment to continuous improvement at MTC and were impressed by the developments that have been put in place over the last 2 years. As stated by an interviewee, “there is hope, optimism and a sense of looking forward”.

Commitment to developing income generating opportunities is also evident; with a programme of events and the initiation of a District-wide weeding contract commissioned by Lancashire County Council, providing additional revenue for the council. The peer team felt that to build on locally-led service delivery it will be important for MTC to build up confidence and credibility as a service provider. In this regard it is important that in administering the weeding contract, any risks to delivery are appropriately managed.

MTC has implemented a one-off increment to the precept this year to create a £1m Community Action Fund. This will be held as a reserve and will be used to attract additional funding to mobilise the community to submit a bid to develop a section of a prime seafront site into a venue for community use.

Ensuring that there is capacity to deliver on the council’s ambitions will be crucial. The council may wish to review whether current capacity is adequate and should look to fully assess the impact of their strategic plans on the running of the organisation and capacity to deliver.

The peer team heard that relationships between members have historically been challenging, but that they have recently become more constructive, respectful, and collaborative. MTC signed up to the local council sector’s Civility and Respect Pledge in March 2023. It is important that this is implemented in full moving forward.

The peer team heard that internal communication from officers to members is not as effective as it might be, with members noting that they do not always feel up to date. They want to ensure that they are well informed and in a position to influence decision making and the leadership of the council. The council should consider developing more inclusive approaches to internal governance, so that all members

feel involved in the running of MTC and have adequate opportunity to scrutinise decision making. This could include for example, senior councillor and group leader briefings, all councillor presentations and briefings, pre-application discussions, and decision/project progress updates.

Focus also needs to be given to increasing and enhancing the reach of internal and external communications to improve both resident and member engagement and enhance the reputation of the council.

The Corporate Peer Challenge at MTC is an important milestone in Morecambe's improvement journey. The council should use it to both reflect on the progress that has been made in recent years, but also to respond to the recommendations that have been identified by the peer team.

2. Key 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:

2.1 In collaboration with partners, including Lancaster City Council and Lancashire County Council, play a key role in place shaping in Morecambe

Undertake a key role in place shaping for Morecambe, particularly in regard to the Eden Project Morecambe, and co-create a strategic narrative for the town that involves all tiers of local government and partners.

2.2 Develop a clear, co-produced corporate mission statement which will help the council to clearly define its purpose and aspiration for the local community

Co-produce a corporate mission statement with relevant local stakeholders and partners, such as Lancaster City Council and local community groups, which is underpinned by a new strategic plan, shared outcomes and an aligned longer-term budgeting profile.

2.3 Review the staffing structure to ensure it meets the current needs and future ambitions of the council

This should include a focus on developing leadership capacity and ensuring

that MTC has the capacity to deliver against the strategic plan.

2.4 Create and become further embedded in local partnerships, involving for example Lancashire County Council, Lancaster City Council, Marketing Lancashire, Eden Project Morecambe, Morecambe BID and local community group networks, to influence the delivery of shared outcomes in line with the refreshed mission statement

This could include exploring the feasibility of MTC adopting a role as a facilitative council, working with partners to enable the achievement of common outcomes.

2.5 Establish a communications strategy

Develop a communications strategy that increases and enhances the reach of internal and external communications, which should include a rapid review of the web site.

2.6 Continue to implement codes of civility and respect

Following agreement to sign up to the local council sector's Civility and Respect Pledge, ensure that this commitment is implemented in full moving forward.

2.7 Consider developing a visible, branded, street level hub for residents to access information and signposting

In collaboration with partners, explore the feasibility of establishing a one-stop shop for Morecambe residents to access council services from one place.

2.8 Instigate more targeted approaches to consulting with communities where there is greatest need

Implement creative mechanisms to engage with hard-to-reach communities in ways that local residents can easily access, understand and feel involved.

2.9 Employ a prudent approach when considering taking on additional income generating, or locally-led service delivery opportunities – gradually building confidence and gaining credibility

This will be important to build further trust with all tiers of local government and associated partners.

2.10 Develop more inclusive approaches to internal governance

Ensure that all members feel involved in the running of Morecambe Town Council and have appropriate opportunity to scrutinise decision making.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1 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 on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Mark Williams, Town Clerk at Falmouth Town Council
- Sara Butler, Mayor of Frome Town Council
- Anders Hanson, Member Services Manager – National Association of Local Councils
- Rachel Robinson, CPC Manager – Local Government Association
- David Pye, Shadow CPC Manager - Local Government Association

3.2 Scope and focus

The LGA and NALC corporate peer challenge offer for local councils, utilises the strengths and experience of the LGA's expertise, working with peers from the town and parish council sector, and with the National Association of Local Councils engagement and support. This peer challenge spent two days onsite engaging with a range of stakeholders.

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. The scoping meeting with Morecambe Town Council added to the themes, refining the areas of focus.

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?

- *The council asked for consideration to be given to their role in building community resilience, with a particular focus on how their programme of events and festivals can generate community pride and ownership of place.*
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
 - *The council also asked the team to consider their approach to stakeholder engagement, how this can be strengthened and how their brand identity can be developed and promoted nationally, working to improve outcomes for the sector and helping to build the reputation of Morecambe from a tourism perspective.*
 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?
 - *The council sought views on how they can acquire further assets, along with feedback on income generation opportunities.*
 5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?
 - *The council asked peers to assess available capacity and resources aligned to their overarching ambitions, with a particular focus on understanding staffing models / structures that successful authorities use to achieve similar objectives to Morecambe, along with methods of working practice that they can implement to improve future knowledge building.*

3.3 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 (including a brief position statement prepared by the council) in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent two days onsite at Morecambe Town Hall, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from a number of meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Undertook a tour of Morecambe to see key development sites within the town council area.
- Spoke to more than 25 people including a range of council staff together with members (although it was acknowledged that due to availability issues, the 3 Labour party members were unable to take part in the peer challenge interviews) 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.

4. Feedback

4.1 Local priorities and outcomes

Morecambe is proud of its historic past that saw it evolve as a thriving seaside resort at the start of the 20th century, attracting mill workers from across Yorkshire, who flocked to the area for holidays and retirement. By the late 20th century, like many seaside locations, the area experienced a decline in tourism which impacted negatively on the local economy. Morecambe has areas with significant deprivation (of Morecambe's 25 Lower Super Output Areas, nine of these fall within the 10% most deprived areas in the country). However, Morecambe is now at the start of a period of significant regeneration, the most prominent of which is the Eden Project Morecambe, which it is hoped will be a catalyst to drive a positive future for the town.


It is estimated that Eden Project Morecambe will attract around 760,000 visitors per year, with the development seen as having the potential for a transformative impact on Morecambe's economy and prosperity.

Morecambe Town Council is an ambitious council that wants to make fundamental and long-lasting change to Morecambe. This is illustrated through the drive and progress that has been made by MTC over the last two years by both members and officers. Following the appointment of the new Chief Executive Officer and election of the current Chair, there have been changes to governance arrangements, such as strengthening the budget setting process and system of internal controls. There have also been improvements to the public realm through an enhanced programme of street cleansing and weeding, as well as increased engagement with the community and delivery of a successful programme of events, such as the Platinum Jubilee Lunch.

The peer team spoke with a range of stakeholders, including Eden Project Morecambe, Lancaster City Council and Marketing Lancashire, who fed back that there is a genuine excitement about the place Morecambe could become and the role the council can play in this. There is a recognition though that despite progress the council is at the start of a journey and there is still much to do.

MTC has a strong appetite for developing the role of the council in shaping the local economy and supporting the community. The Community Action Plan, 'A Voice for Morecambe', published in 2021, was developed through an assessment of the needs and aspirations of Morecambe and sets out a number of strategic aims that include a focus on making Morecambe a better place to live, work and visit, with an overarching mission statement to "enable communities to better influence and participate in local decision making – providing a platform and voice for all".

This commitment to providing the residents of Morecambe with a voice is translating into action, with early signs of increased engagement with the community. For instance, there was an extensive consultation exercise to gauge views on how a prime seafront site could be developed. This informed the creation of an expression of interest to Lancaster City Council proposing how the site could be regenerated for community use and also informed decision making regarding the increase to the precept. As a result of this consultation, a Community Forum made up of local



residents has been established. Peers believe this approach to community engagement should be built on, with the development of more targeted approaches to engage communities where there is greatest need, particularly in areas such as the West End, which has significantly high levels of deprivation.

The peer team saw how excitement, and ambition for the council has been generated in the last few years, spearheaded through a programme of creative and successful events led by MTC which attract over 50,000 visitors annually and are raising additional funding for the council (projected income of £22,000 during 2022/23). Most notably the record-breaking Platinum Jubilee Lunch held last year on the promenade, which gained extensive press coverage, along with the commission of 'Mars' by Luke Jerram that saw the renowned exhibition orbit the Morecambe Winter Gardens for three weeks last November. MTC also works with partners, including for example Morecambe BID, Marketing Lancashire and Lancaster City Council, to support projects, festivals and events that champion the arts and cultural sector within the town, such as the Baylight Festival and Vintage by the Sea.

The peer team heard that a focus on improving the public realm by the Town Rangers, who are providing cleaner streets in the Morecambe area, is demonstrating in a practical way to residents the value that MTC brings to the area and building confidence in their ability to deliver improvements for the community. This model will be further enhanced in the coming year, as MTC have taken on a District-wide weeding contract commissioned by Lancashire County Council, which follows from an ambition of MTC to take on additional locally-led services and generate further income for the council, increasing the visibility and profile for the council with its residents and partners.

Building on these activities, the peer team felt that the Community Action Plan needs to be revisited to become more strategic and, alongside the Neighbourhood Plan, should look to capitalise on upcoming opportunities whilst managing any new changes and challenges these developments will present. This will ensure that future development, such as the Eden Project Morecambe, will benefit all parts of the community. This will be a useful exercise to take stock of the most pressing things to do in the short, medium and long-term and will help to manage expectations about what can be achieved, by when and what the resource, capacity and capability demands there are. It will be essential too that this is accompanied by clear

outcomes and an aligned financial strategy.

Ensuring that future plans are developed in partnership with members, groups and residents will be essential.

4.2 Organisational and place leadership

The peer team saw a great commitment to Morecambe from MTC members, staff and key stakeholders, matched with a strong vision for Morecambe and visible leadership from both the Chief Executive Officer and Chair. There is a sense of optimism for the town council from the range of stakeholders that we spoke to, including Lancaster City Council and Marketing Lancashire. Staff and members are proud advocates for both Morecambe and the town council, with comments such as “Morecambe is on the cusp of something amazing happening” being shared with the peer team. Peers believe that moving forward there is a need for MTC to collaborate with all tiers of local government and partners and play a key role in place shaping for Morecambe, including the co-creation of a strategic narrative for the town. The peer team heard about the range of initiatives and organisations currently operating in Morecambe that are seeking to provide opportunities and improvements for the local community. In partnership with lead organisations, such as Lancaster City Council, MTC could undertake a more strategic role as a facilitative council to galvanise and provide a framework for all partners to work together towards their common goals for Morecambe.

This is particularly important in regard to the Eden Project Morecambe. To maximise impact and benefit for all residents, MTC should play a clear role in advocating for and providing the structure to enable the town to be ready for Eden. This includes championing sustainable tourism, encouraging the creation of a 365-day visitor and night-time economy that thrives, lobbying for public realm improvements to the promenade and ensuring residents are prepared for the impact of the anticipated growth in visitor numbers. Peers also noted a need to ensure that all parts of the town feel involved in the changes that are taking place, especially the West End.

Peers noted that positive links with external agencies and partners are being developed, including a commitment to collaboration and codesign, particularly in relation to events such as Morecambe Pride. However, the peer team believe that in

order for MTC to maximise its impact and approach to stakeholder management, there is a need for the council to continue to build confidence amongst partners and become further embedded in existing partnership networks within Morecambe, for example Morecambe Business Improvement District (BID) and community partnership networks, which will be particularly important if it is to take on a more strategic role in place shaping. The peer team heard that the council's relationship with the city and county councils has improved over the past twelve months and members are keen to build on this by exploring further opportunities for collaborative working and service delivery where appropriate. It is clear however, that greater understanding is needed across the 3-tiers of local government amongst officers and members of their roles and functions and how they play out at a local level in Morecambe. It was suggested that following the upcoming elections, a joint induction session with Lancaster City Council members (and potentially local county councillors) could present an opportunity to raise awareness of these roles locally and build mutually supportive relationships.

The peer team heard how many residents feel confused at times around the different functions provided by the 3-tiers of local government, which is not uncommon across the sector. As noted in section 4.1, the peer team heard how recent public events have been a positive showcase for the town, promoting Morecambe on an international stage. However, it was acknowledged that improvements are needed to the council's 'shop window' to ensure its noticeboards, branding, web site and social media content is consistent, easy to digest and informative. Peers felt that the council should consider the feasibility of creating a new brand for MTC and in turn Morecambe, which would involve working closely with organisations such as Marketing Lancashire who work on a regional footing and whom MTC currently actively engage with. Aligned to this, peers believe that there is a need to create a Communications Strategy in line with the Community Action Plan, to promote the work of the council, its events, and role and function, with a rapid review of the web site seen as particularly important.

Peers feel that the town council, in collaboration with partners including Lancaster City Council and Lancashire County Council, should explore the benefits and feasibility of developing a visible, branded street level hub (one-stop shop) for residents to access information and signposting to the appropriate council interface,

which will both improve resident experience and raise awareness of the town council.

4.3 Governance and culture

In November 2022 MTC became the first parish and town council in Lancashire to achieve Quality Gold accreditation through NALC's Local Council Award Scheme. This scheme assesses standards in transparency, responsible governance and exceptional community impact, with Quality Gold illustrating that they are not only meeting basic requirements but are also demonstrating good practice in a range of areas and are a good employer. This followed improvements made after the council received a highly critical Internal Audit report covering the period 2020/21, which (in addition to financial weaknesses noted in the next section) identified a range of governance concerns including the provision of adequate risk assessments, the constitution of formal committees and management of data protection risks. The current Chief Executive Officer joined MTC during the latter part of 2020/21 and has undertaken significant work to address the identified issues and improve transparency and governance. This is evidenced through the 2021/22 Internal and External Audit reports that provide assurance that the council now has a sound system of internal control.

MTC currently has a small staffing team of six officers. The peer team saw evidence of good internal and supportive relationships between staff but noted that current and growing demand is placing significant pressure on the team, stretching their capacity. Peers believe that the council should work to develop a mutual understanding between officers and members of workload demands and set realistic expectations of what is achievable with the current staffing complement. To achieve MTC's future ambitions (and avoid the risk of failure, or damage to credibility), the council should assess the impact of their strategic plans on the running of the organisation and be clear on priorities.

Peers noted that internal staffing processes could be strengthened, such as staff induction, but noted that this would require additional capacity to do so. The peer team also heard that when vacancies arise, more time should be allocated to support an effective and timely recruitment process.

MTC has five Committees (Finance and Governance, Grants, Festivals and Events, Environment and Personnel), with a scheme of delegation in place to officers. The


peer team heard that relationships between members have historically been challenging, but that they have recently become more constructive, respectful and collaborative. This is empowering the council to become more strategic in its thinking and has enabled key decisions to be agreed, such as the commitment to prepare an expression of interest to develop a prime seafront site. MTC signed up to the local council sector's Civility and Respect Pledge in March 2023. It is important that this continues to be implemented in full.

The peer team felt that members would benefit from more training being made available, particularly in relation to their roles as councillors and the function and role of MTC. The May 2023 elections provides an ideal opportunity to commence a tailored member development programme.

The peer team heard that internal communication from officers to members is not as effective as it might be in all parts of the council, with members in particular noting that they do not always feel informed about what activity has been taking place. It was also noted that members would welcome more opportunities to influence decision making. For example, they would like to see more feedback from council working groups. In addition, members currently meet as a council every 2 months, which they would like to see increased. The peer team heard that councillors are willing and keen to support the delivery of council ambitions. Peers believe that there is a need to develop more inclusive approaches to internal governance, so that all members feel involved in the running of MTC and have adequate opportunity to scrutinise decision making. This could include for example, senior councillor and group leader briefings, all councillor presentations and briefings, pre-application discussions, and decision/project progress updates. However, the impact on officer capacity to service these increased demands would need to be taken into consideration.

4.4 Financial planning and management

The peer team were on site for two days and did not conduct an in-depth financial review of the council (this could be something that the council may wish to consider commissioning). The peer team heard that financial management has been strengthened and comprehensive action has been taken since the 2020/21 Internal Audit report, which identified numerous financial internal control weaknesses,



including for example, compliance with financial regulations, the sharing of budgetary control information with members, the existence of an expenses policy and the maintenance of asset and investment registers. As noted above, the journey of improvement is evidenced through the 2021/22 Internal and External Audit reports, which provide assurance that the council now has systems of internal control.

The council is keen to increase income generation and expand its delivery of local services. The annual budget for 2023/24 has risen to £739,000 (from £467,000 in 2022/23), with most of the additional expenditure funded by new income generating activities. Finance updates are shared with members at full council meetings, which take place every other month.

The council has taken on the delivery of the district-wide weeding service on behalf Lancashire County Council for 6 years, which will lead to approximately £450K of additional revenue. The council are also in the preliminary stages to assess whether a tourism information service could be delivered in the coming years, following the announcement of the Eden Project Morecambe. MTC is also in discussions with Lancaster City Council to transfer 5 small parcels of land with the intention to enhance the public realm in these areas. The peer team felt that to build on income generating opportunities it will be important for MTC to start with small projects, build up confidence and gain credibility as a service provider. It is important therefore that in administering the weeding contract, any risks to delivery are appropriately managed, particularly capacity issues. The peer team suggest that the council should seek to clarify their vision for locally led service delivery and income generating opportunities as part of the refresh of their strategic plan. This could incorporate exploring how they can add value by fulfilling gaps in service delivery across partner organisations and looking at the financial resources available to MTC, including whether there are opportunities in how reserves are used in future. Consideration may also need to be given to pump prime new initiatives, as further income generation opportunities may require upfront resourcing. As above, capacity and capability to deliver will need to be considered and may be an area where the council seeks technical support. MTC may also wish to learn from practice in other areas including exploring how other Town and Parish councils work with the different tiers of local government to deliver devolved services for instance.

MTC has accounted for a one-off increment to the precept this year to create a £1m

Community Action Fund. This equates to a 230% (approx.) increase in the precept, raising the Band D cost from £44 to £146 a year, which is considerably higher than the 22/23 Band D national average of £77.21. It is the intention that this fund will be held as a reserve and will be used to attract additional funding, which will enable the submission of a bid to develop a section of a seafront site that is owned by Lancaster City Council into a venue for community use. It is however important that the Council ensures that its general reserves remain healthy.

Peers heard how the successful programme of events have been and are likely to be a growing source of income for the council. Given this new focus on income generation, the council may wish to consider the feasibility of recruiting to a dedicated finance role (RFO) to provide additional capacity and expertise. This would have an additional benefit of releasing capacity for the Chief Executive Officer to focus on strategic matters.

4.5 Capacity to Improve

The peer team witnessed a commitment to continuous improvement at MTC and were impressed by the developments that have been put in place over the last 2 years. As stated by an interviewee, “there is hope, optimism and a sense of looking forward”.

The council is keen to co-design with partners, district and county councils, residents, businesses and wider stakeholders, to further develop initiatives to enable improvements for local residents and opportunities to maximise the impact of the Eden Project Morecambe, building on the success of the programme of arts and cultural festivals and events.

MTC is committed to continuous improvement as demonstrated by membership and engagement with professional bodies, such as NALC and seeking external challenge through this peer challenge process.

The staff team at MTC are highly committed with huge potential and are proud of the work that they undertake with the council. There are training opportunities available for officers and the council is currently in the final stages of creating its own registered training centre with Lantra (an awarding body for land-based industries).

Given the level of activity likely required to deliver on MTC’s ambitions, the council

may wish to consider whether current capacity is adequate and whether the officer structure is fit for purpose. Aligned to this the council should also consider whether it has adequate succession plans in place to ensure capacity levels are maintained.

The council may also wish to consider whether further investment should be made to ensure that staff have access to appropriate tools and equipment. For example, data capture software may be beneficial to help officers undertake robust post-event analysis and public space maintenance equipment could improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public realm work. There is also scope to explore how better access to training support can be obtained via the Lancashire Association of Local Councils and Society of Local Council Clerks Branch.

The peer team felt that in the context of the council's capacity to improve, focus should be given to increasing and enhancing the quality and reach of internal and external communications to improve both resident and member engagement and enhance the reputation of the council. Again, staffing in this area should be considered as part of the wider capacity considerations noted above.

5. Next Steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

The CPC process includes a Progress Review, which will provide space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, NALC is able to discuss any further support that you may require by emailing anders.hanson@nalc.gov.uk . In addition, Falmouth Town Council have offered to maintain a dialogue as another mechanism for support.