

BINGHAM TOWN COUNCIL
RUSHCLIFFE BOROUGH COUNCIL

24th May, 2022

REPORT OF THE BINGHAM TOWN COUNCIL IMPROVEMENT BOARD

1. Public Interest Test

The Improvement Board has determined that the contents of this report are not of a confidential nature.

2. Purpose of the Report

2.1. In response to a significant local *Bingham Deserves Better* petition that was submitted to Rushcliffe Borough Council on the 5th April, 2021, Rushcliffe approved with Bingham Town Council to establish a local Improvement Board to:

- (i) Deliver an action plan responding to the issues raised in the petition presented by the Bingham Deserves Better Group
- (ii) Support improvement in the Council's wider governance arrangements
- (iii) Ensure that a range of voices, including those independent to the Council contribute to the development of governance at the Council
- (iv) Help the Council to develop a culture of respect between Councillors and between Councillors and employees.

2.2 This independent peer review approach and terms of reference was agreed at a meeting between the Leader of Rushcliffe Borough Council and the Chair, on behalf of Bingham Town Council, and ratified by all Members at Full Council on the 21st November, 2021.

3. Introduction

3.1. Following the adoption of the Improvement Board initiative the following were appointed to undertake the independent review work:

Jonathan Owen: Chief Executive, National Association of Local Councils

David Pye: Lead Analyst, Commissioning & Research Team for the Local Government Association, and parish councillor

Neil Taylor: retired District Council Chief Executive

Rowan Bird: Bingham Town Councillor

Gareth Williams: Bingham Town Councillor

The Independent Board members have written this report based on their findings and the representatives of Bingham Town Council assisted in facilitating access to information and with identifying stakeholders.

- 3.2 Open invitations were made to local councillors and residents to ensure as many people as possible who wanted to talk to the officers on the Board could do so. Some did so more than once. There were regular feedback sessions with the full Board on findings, issues and discussion points during the drafting of this report to you. In completing the review we spoke to over 25 different stakeholders, councillors and residents with a full spectrum of views, read numerous reports and documents, and attended Bingham Town Council meetings including an informal meeting with all Members before the formal publication of this report.
- 3.3 The Improvement Board's Action Plan is set out on Appendix 2 of this report. Some key messages for the Council are set out below:
- (i) Significantly, that Bingham has a vibrant community and local residents do want to do more, and local people are keen advocates for the development and promotion of their Town.
 - (ii) There needs to be a real sense of perspective/fitness for purpose of the Town Council itself - it is a third-tier authority with a limited set of functions; Members are responsible for a budget of £360,000; there are 7 posts on the establishment, it comprises 14 elected Members and yet has managed to exhaust itself with some protracted and very negative issues that have been well documented and tarnished the public image of the Bingham Town Council.
 - (iii) The Board seriously questions the appropriateness for a whipped political Group in these circumstances and the degree of political control exercised in such a small council of this size. This has been at the heart of the problems encountered, despite the fact that there are no substantial political decisions to be made. For example, there is no demonstrable divide on precept levels and expenditure, and there is also broad agreement on new facilities etc.
 - (iv) Whilst keen, residents who petition the Town Council to do A, B or C should not necessarily expect these things just to be carried out. Elected Members are responsible for the budget they democratically agree to set and are elected to do things within the statutory framework the Council operates. Some functions are outside the scope and capacity of Bingham Town Council and that clearly needs explaining to residents in a mature way so false expectations can be managed accordingly. If people are unhappy with what the Council is doing, or has done, that is a matter for the ballot box at local election(s). Nevertheless, returning to the first point above the Town Council can be a great advocate for Bingham, "the Place", in any forum.
 - (v) For the same reason if decisions are being made then written reports from, or via the Clerk, should be issued to all Members so they can have access to the facts behind the recommendations made and any decisions taken. Reports should be issued in advance and Members given the opportunity to ask questions in a democratic and transparent way. This contrasts with the practises that led to the situation with the previous Town Clerk. Had a more open and inclusive culture prevailed then other opinions could perhaps have led to a different outcome.

- (vi) There needs to be an understanding by officers that Members are elected and have a mandate to do what they feel best for the local area, and that is at the heart of this nation's democratic system. Similarly, Members need to have the emotional intelligence to take into account peoples' feelings, and their rights and responsibilities; in particular that officers are their employees and need to be treated accordingly, specifically:

“you must have regard to any relevant advice provided to you by Bingham Town Council's Proper Officer, Responsible Financial Officer and Rushcliffe Borough Council's Monitoring Officer, Section 151 Officer and Chief Executive where they are acting pursuant to his or her statutory duties”

Issues all stressed in Bingham Town Council's adopted Councillor Code of Conduct. There is simply no excuse for poor behaviour towards staff, and the degree of antagonism Members have encountered reflects the degree of injustice local people feel about the poor working culture of the Council and the arguments that ensue.

- (vii) A key part of this moving forward needs to be a common understanding of the term “Proper Officer” and the limits of this in a political context. Just because an officer has this designation does not mean they are there to run everything, Members are elected to set the strategy and direction of the Council, and this is why they put themselves forward for election. The Proper Officer is there to support Members in furthering their political aims. The National Association of Local Councils is very clear on agenda formation and the Proper Officer for example:

“To prepare, in consultation with appropriate members, agendas for meetings of the Council and Committees. To attend such meetings and prepare minutes for approval other than where such duties have been delegated to another Officer”.

Importantly, Members' roles are separate from officers, and they are not employees of the Council, and should not attempt to act in that capacity. It is for the Clerk, as the Proper Officer to publish the meetings' agendas and ensure the reports are there for the published agenda items. Members should not be tempted to do it themselves, duplicate officer's work, and in effect short circuit the process. This leads to confusion and has contributed to the unfortunate circumstances that Bingham has encountered. Hence the Board's firm recommendation about training. Similarly Members should not overload their officer team with too much work, email traffic or matters of trivia.

- (viii) The people the Board spoke to on all sides want to draw a line under this situation and move on. The continuing arguments have been time consuming, with significant opportunity costs in time and money for the Town Council, and the subsequent reputational damage has been significant. As a result, there is a feeling that the Council has lost its way and needs to reset what it wants to do, and how it goes about its objectives with significantly lower levels of animosity. A consequence of that behaviour is the concentration on process and procedural matters, instead of outcomes for the public. The most prominent example of this is the lack of progress of the new car park given the outdated parking capacity in the Town which has added to local frustration about the Council's fitness for purpose.

- (ix) The Council is also significantly over structured. Reducing the number of meetings will significantly help the current workload of the Clerk, and potentially save the Town Council time and staffing resources. The Council has two/three vacant posts - would they be needed if the Council streamlines itself to:

Full Council
Planning, and
Policy & Resources (“everything else”)

or

Monthly meetings of Full Council, with Planning or other meetings called as necessary.

With regard to HR, with seven posts on the establishment a formal HR subcommittee should meet as required. For example, two Members representative of both sides of the Council can easily conduct any appraisal of the clerk once a year with appropriate support from NALC or Rushcliffe Borough Council. (The Clerk as the Proper Officer is responsible for all staffing matters.)

Politics

- 3.4 The previous difficult situation will only resolve itself if Members want this to happen. The firm suggestion to Members is to step back from any potential flash points, and pause before either complaining or making adverse comments. Members are all mature people, their actions are continually in the public eye and far greater sense of give and take needs to be established; and more equity can be reached.
- (i) More than anything else Members’ attitudes and behaviours are the overriding issue to the resolution of the problems the Council has encountered.
- (ii) Fundamentally therefore this is up to everyone who wants to stand for election and succeeds on getting onto the Town Council.

This could be in a wider context of the political power balance on the Council (a matter for the electorate) and then if there is a majority Group how that works (any ruling Group’s dynamics after the election - power rests with the majority of Members in any majority grouping); or the establishment of some local standards for Member behaviour (good practice).

- 3.5 To emphasise the point - would one Group’s solution to the one-way traffic system be any different than another set of Members? If not, a more inclusive attitude would go a long way to moving the culture of the Town Council forward and restoring it as a functional and effective organisation which would in turn assist in regaining public trust.
- 3.6 It is important to note in the Town Council’s Self-Assessment prepared as part of this process:

“The Council wish to be the best for Bingham and manage its responsibilities for the Town. The Council agree that even with differing views, that Councillors are all working for Bingham.”

The Board considers this, and the positive achievements set out in the Council’s Self Assessment section in Appendix 1 of this report, is a significant piece of self-

awareness and all Members need to keep that aim uppermost in their minds about behaviour and actions. It should also be a touchstone for the future if there are any significantly differing views. Members are there to serve the public. The Chair also needs to take charge of meetings, and if all comments are addressed “through the Chair” then there will be a far more effective filter for any comments that are made.

“Bingham Deserves Better” Petition

- 3.7 Any change of control is potentially challenging for officers in any council context, but it is primarily the professional officer’s responsibility to make this relationship work. In a parish council like Bingham’s this is more acute as the Clerk is also the Proper Officer. However, the Clerk is an unelected position and Members do have a mandate from local voters to conduct the Council’s business. This is an important point that may have been lost in recent months and it is the Clerk’s responsibility to ensure they have the “trust and confidence” of the Members they are there to support. By the same token staff are not there to be abused or belittled, and are entitled to the respect all employees deserve.
- 3.8 Should Members be unhappy with an officer’s performance then there are appropriate frameworks like appraisals and structured meetings before entering either a dispassionate disciplinary route; or a mediated and agreed exit. This would be the optimum and appropriate method to deal with any issues. Once matters become heated and working relationships break down moves to restructure a small team of seven posts and to create redundancy situations are going to be difficult. This lack of experience, or attempts at any mediation, meant that this pivotal point was missed and the subsequent costs to local taxpayers have been highlighted. Such behaviour also generates a significant push back in terms of process and procedures, complaints, and accusations of poor transparency.
- 3.9 From our discussions it is quite clear that this has been personally costly to all sides, and also underlines the Improvement Board’s salient point about the proportionality of this happening in a small local town council. Some of the reports about the associated social media comments etc have been quite disturbing and the Police have been involved. The Board therefore strongly recommends that all Members desist from any negative commentary and behaviour about other Members on social media. It is already part of the Town Council’s Code of Conduct which it adopted from the Rushcliffe model code.

Governance

- 3.10 The Improvement Board’s report provides everyone with the opportunity to think about how Members want things to progress from this point. Dispassionately this is a quite straightforward process, but it is a fundamental question of attitude. The Improvement Board can make many recommendations, but it is the spirit of any adoption of them that is crucial. Do Members want to change and do so in a positive manner or continue to argue so extensively amongst themselves?
- 3.11 Our specific recommendations on this are:
- (i) The Council should agree and publish a medium-term plan about what it wants to achieve.
 - (ii) Within this there should be timescales and costings of what the resources are to meet them. Officer expertise (or gaps, such as project management for

example) and capacity need to be taken into account, but it should be clear to everyone what is sought to be achieved.

- (iii) The Council should consult the community on this draft plan and adopt an inclusive dialogue with local residents so there is sound two way communications with an interested and clearly engaged electorate.
- (iv) Once that exercise is completed then yearly milestones should be established and reports to Members flow throughout the year to make sure they happen, including any corrective action.
- (v) Reports should be produced by the Clerk, not Members, to comply with Forward Plan and Agenda publication timetables, with sufficient notice; and all Members should be provided with the reports by the publication date, without exception.

All Members are elected and are entitled to see reports setting out the reasons for any recommended course of action on their agenda. What Members subsequently vote on is a matter for the established democratic process. But, just because there may be a majority group (operating either formally or informally) there is no excuse to short circuit the decision making process, to exclude other Members who are not part of any such grouping from reports or decision making; or close down input from them with reliance on verbal updates.

This is a salient accountability issue under the Nolan Principles.

Similarly, if there are legitimate confidential items they should be considered in the confidential section of the agenda. Again, there should be reports for other Members to see and comment on in this confidential section.

(The fact that this could not happen with some HR advice recently is no excuse to deviate from this process. Hopefully with more public sector experience from the Council's new HR advisors all new HR advice from will be in a written form. If not, it should be requested, and if necessary, insisted upon).

- 3.12 In terms of culture, perhaps as a response to recent events, there is a significant concentration on process and debates about the application of standing orders rather than outcomes. In the midst of all the resultant procedural wrangling the object of serving the public seems to have been overlooked, and relationships strained:

- internally between Members
- between Members and staff; and then
- externally with the community.

The Board returns to the point about the proportionality of managing a small town council with limited resources; and the spirit of co-operation and respect for the common aim of public service, not any individual's aggrandisement.

- 3.13 At this point the Principles of Public Life, established by Lord Nolan, are set out for reference here. All of them still hold valid and are important for re-establishing the Town Council's public reputation.

Selflessness – Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest. Not themselves.

Integrity – Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

Objectivity – Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

Accountability – Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

Openness – Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

Honesty – Holders of public office should be truthful.

Leadership – Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour and treat others with respect. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

- 3.14 Bingham Town Council has signed up for the Local Council Award Scheme and will benefit from the peer challenge and endorsement that correct procedures are being followed. This process will also provide some reassurance for residents that their Town Council is being run effectively with independent evidence and assessment. Bingham also has embraced such innovations as online meetings, and also support packages for local people in need during the pandemic.
- 3.15 Tribute also needs to be paid to the current town clerk, the only remaining fulltime member of the Council's office staff. She brings a wide perspective to the post, is knowledgeable and is efficient with all the Council's procedures. Another positive is the current Clerk's networking with other local councils and Nottinghamshire Association of Local Councils. Members need to look after her welfare.

Training

- 3.16 From our discussions views on this have been mixed - that there is a training programme in place, but Members were either unaware of it or do not seem to take it up. Therefore, by the time the Improvement Board's report is formally submitted to you the Council should report back to the Council's Annual Meeting what training modules it has; what they cover; and what Members have been on them. Four salient points need to be covered:
- (i) Member code of conduct. The previous situation would not have happened as Members would have been aware of how they should treat their staff and each other. Importantly this needs to cover social media activity.
 - (ii) Decision making and greater awareness of the respective roles of the clerk and councillors.

- (iii) Make it clear to the Clerk that mentoring from the Society of Local Council Clerks is available if she wishes to take it up (we do not make this a firm recommendation given her current significant workload).
- (iv) The political leadership should engage with NALC about ongoing political mentoring support from another similar council.

Structure

- 3.17 The Council has established six committees as well as Full Council. This means that different combinations of the same 14 Members are meeting in a variety of different settings with a minimal amount of business to transact. County councils and district councils have a similar structure to the Town Council's with significantly more functions and resources.
- 3.18 Linking what has been set out in Paragraph 3.11 will assist Members in coming to an optimum outcome for them. This is very important as what needs to be considered is the staffing structure that underpins the Committee structure and the cost of the bureaucracy required to service such a wide range of committees.
- 3.19 The Town Council is serving a population of just c10,500 (2020 mid year estimate) but seems to be mirroring county council style norms. If the Town Council wishes to persist with the rigid party/group discipline that has been experienced in the last three years, then another key debate needs to take place. That is, some clarity between the role of the Mayor and the leading member of any ruling group, as in any balanced situation the Mayor has a vote, and then also a casting vote.
- 3.20 If the Leading Member is also the Mayor there can be no ambiguity about the leadership of the Council and where the power lies, rather than what is a traditionally ceremonial role and a separate political leadership. The convention elsewhere throughout Rushcliffe is that the Chairman is the leading town/parish member that they liaise with.

Human Resources Matters

- 3.21 The Council has recently retendered for its HR support and may now have a firm which has more public sector experience. The Council has changed its Member leadership on HR matters and needs to adhere to processes which cannot be criticised in any external forum.
- 3.22 The previous clerk may pursue a claim against the Council, which is a significant reference point that underlies this report and underlines the issues about Members' relationships with council staff.

Complaints

- 3.23 Part of the problem that Bingham Town Council has encountered is that it seems unable to manage its own conduct.
- 3.24 It should be for the Chair to manage poor behaviour and any disagreements or arguments at meetings in the first instance. For example, about seating arrangements or any disparaging comments. The Chair's function is to help the meeting to run smoothly and efficiently and oversee the proceedings in an impartial manner, with some firmness if order is not maintained.

- 3.25 Regular informal meetings between group leaders with the Clerk about forthcoming council business would also assist reduce the number of snagging points.
- 3.26 Since September 2019 Rushcliffe Borough Council has received over 25 complaints from various Bingham Town Council members, ex-Town Council members and residents about Bingham Town Council's activities. This is six times more than all the complaints from all the other 38 town and parish councils in Rushcliffe's area put together.
- 3.27 The majority of these complaints were considered in conjunction with Rushcliffe's designated Independent Person. One set of complaints against the Town Council was investigated by Rushcliffe's Standards Board which involved the engagement of an independent barrister (a further significant cost of public money).
- 3.28 The decision notice of that Standards Board exercise was to:
- (i) *Invite the Subject Members to apologise to the Town Clerk in writing.*
 - (ii) *The committee invites the Subject Members to reflect on the appropriateness of their membership of the HR committee.*
 - (iii) *The committee recommends that Bingham Town Council arrange HR performance management training for the subject members and all members of Bingham Town Council.*

At the time of writing the invitation to apologise to the previous Town Clerk has not been provided by two Town Council Members. In addition, these two individuals have been subsequently expelled from their political party. The recommendation to arrange HR performance management training to ensure that Members can manage the staff they have a duty of care to appropriately needs to happen as part of the Board's requirement in para 3.16.

Vision

- 3.29 Bingham is changing significantly with an additional 1,050 new homes in progress of being built in the decade between 2018 and 2028. The Town Council is an important local stakeholder, but if it wants a more prominent voice it needs to be far more open to partnership working and advocacy with other local players such as Rushcliffe Borough Council, Nottinghamshire County Council, parish council groups and local service providers.
- 3.30 Engaging with the community is also significant, but people are not going to want to do this is if their foremost impression of the Town Council concerns dysfunctionality and headlines about poor staff relations etc. Therefore, there needs to be an understanding about organisational reputation management and the implications for maintaining this.
- 3.31 However some people may want to portray it, the events of the last two years have been damaging, expensive and have stained the Council's reputation. Upholding good standards of behaviour is a continuous responsibility of all Members, which they need to undertake if they wish to serve residents effectively.
- 3.32 If this does not happen it needs challenging in any debates and not be supported in any subsequent votes.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 The Town Council has signed up to this improvement process and this is a positive important step. The problems faced by the Council have been protracted and expensive - not just in terms of reputation and time, but also cost (c£4.35 has been spent by Bingham Town Council for each of their local electors on the staffing reviews, HR advice and legal advice incurred as a result of the problems encountered. Rushcliffe Borough Council has also incurred a further c£2.20 on a similar basis.) This is a before any potential settlement expenditure with the previous Clerk. None of which has improved local services for local people. But the time, stress to both Members and officers, and the sheer opportunity cost of the resources that could have been deployed to improve local services has been significant. It should never have come to this.
- 4.2 A striking comment that was made to the Board was *“the arguments consume everything, and nothing happens”*. A by-product of this episode is that the Council had lost its way in meeting community needs and there have been a lot of Members who have served and resigned before their term of office ended. This is also a poor indicator of organisation health, which is costly in terms of the requirement for bye elections at a cost of c£6,000 per election.
- 4.3 There is much to do if the Town Council wants to more fully develop its community leadership role. Bingham as a town is set to expand significantly with lots of development and a transport infrastructure that is also under existing strain.
- 4.4 In the spirit of this the report tries to plug into enabling concept and the aim is, in one’s contributor’s view, *“if we stop fighting and start cooperating the future is rosy and we could become a beacon “*. This potential is in Members’ hands.
- 4.5 Whilst the Board can make recommendations it is only through Members adopting the report’s findings in both letter and spirit that will make the actual difference. As well as behaviour and Members’ attitudes, to some extent this comes down to numbers - the number that any political groupings’ various candidates secure, and then how members of any majority grouping behave. If there are instances of poor behaviour it needs to be challenged, during debates and discussions as well as when votes are cast. It is every Member’s responsibility to do this, and the Chair’s specifically to ensure proper conduct during Council proceedings.

5. Options, Risks and Reasons for Recommendations

- 5.1 Bingham Town Council has voluntarily signed up to the Bingham Improvement Board proposals in conjunction with Rushcliffe Borough Council, following the receipt of the *Bingham Deserves Better* petition delivered to it in 2021. It has also committed its own resources to this project. The Council now needs to embrace that change, reset the culture and strengthen its procedures so that any local concerns cannot continue. The Board has concerns that this may not be case, and the current Clerk could also face uncomfortable situations.
- 5.2 The Action Plan recommendations are voluntary, and whilst firm points have been made, the key ones that matter concern those of maturity, attitude, and perspective. The questions that need to be consistently asked are:
- Is what has been happening appropriate for a small town council?; and
 - Are the public being served?

Hopefully this report will provide a degree of closure for the events that have occurred, as will at some stage, the conclusion of any action by the previous clerk against the Council.

- 5.3 So, it is to the future that the Council needs to look and all the concomitant opportunities that brings in a burgeoning town with some issues that do need addressing. Codifying what is recommended on para 3.11 will provide a good basis for this, and the expectation is that other parts of the Action Plan will follow those as there will be a transparent, agreed and mutually owned way forward which will showcase Members' achievements for the benefit of local residents.
- 5.4 The Town Council's Self-Assessment on Appendix 1 of this report has provided an opportunity to do just that, and the Council needs to build on the work that is included in the Council Tax Precept Summary which is an example of good practice and something to build on in terms of service planning.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1 Bingham Town Council needs to re-establish its public reputation and should therefore sign up to the Action Plan on Appendix 2 without equivocation.

Bingham Town Council Improvement Board Self Assessment

As part of the Improvement Plan process, the Board will be talking to residents, stakeholders and individual councillors. What would also be helpful would be the Council's view of how it sees itself and what it wants to do for local people. To that end the Town Council is invited to set out some key points about its plans for the future by answering the questions below. Where this can be backed up with examples and evidence by such things as reports, minutes, strategies etc so much the better.

It needs to be stressed that what is sought here is self awareness, rather than something akin to a public relations exercise. Whilst it is an opportunity to showcase what the Council is/has achieved some appreciation of the challenges the Town Council faces will demonstrate it is self aware and also has a strategy plus the tools to achieve it to enable successful outcomes for its residents.

What is looked for is say up to 2 sides of A4/1,500 words on each of the following sections. The suggestion is that this exercise is completed by a cross party group, supported by the Town Clerk.

1) What is the Council trying to achieve?

Some useful points in this section would include:

- What does the Council want to achieve for Bingham?
- What are the challenges the area faces and how do Members want the Council to respond to them?
- How does the Council interact with partner organisations to achieve the maximum benefit for local people?
- Evidence of plans and strategies would be useful to support in this section.

"The Council publishes its statement of activity yearly when submitting the precept requirement to Rushcliffe Borough Council. This is included in the March edition of the Buttercross and is also available on the Town Council's website. Along with the maintenance responsibilities that the Town Council manage, the Council includes its list of plans and objectives for the forthcoming year.

The three-year reserves plan shows how the Council plan to manage its reserves when planning the projects and activities they have agreed. The Council collaborates successfully with many partner organisations including; The Friends of Bingham Linear Park, Bingham Community Events and Rushcliffe Borough Council led Growth Board.

(attached – three year reserves plan, statement of activity, programme of events supported for 2021 with Bingham Community Events)"

2) How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

Some useful points in this section would include:

- How robust are the Council's finances and what considerations do Members take into account when allocating resources?
- Does the Council have the right policies, procedures and democratic structures in place to ensure effective and transparent governance?
- What community consultation exercises does the Council undertake?

"The Council have no concerns over the finances of the Council and agree that they are in a strong position to deliver its ambitious plans. The regular financial reports to the Policy, Resources and Major Projects Committee show the Council's commitment to transparency and that the Council scrutinise the finances at very meeting of the committee.

The three-year reserves plan assists in forward planning for all projects outside of the budgeted expenditure of Council. The yearly internal auditors' reports are published and are considered at Full Council and the Council receive unqualified audits, showing their accounting procedures are fully compliant.

The Council adopts model documents provided from the National Association of Local Councils and from the Borough Council. Policies are reviewed annually and are prepared by the Proper Officer of Council.

Many consultations have taken place in recent years with residents to include; play area consultation resulting in the refurbishment of two play areas, community facilities at the new Bingham Arena and Wynhill and smaller consultations with benches at Shelford Drive to engage with the residents directly affected in that area."

3) What has the Council achieved to date?

Some useful points in this section would include:

- Cross this referencing with the first section, what milestones or achievements have the Council secured for residents?
- Are there any awards etc or external feedback that could be referenced here?

"The Council considered numerous achievements in recent years to include;

*Replacement of two play areas
New Linear Park Sign – Toot Hill School Students collaborated
Securing the future of Warners Paddock with a long-term lease
Yearly grant aid scheme for Community Organisations to access
Programme of Market Place events by working collaboratively with Bingham
Community Events
Support of a No Food Waste Shop at the Council premises
Humanitarian Grant Aid during the pandemic
Members of the Armed Forces Covenant
Ukrainian support statement"*

4) In the light of what the Council has learnt, what does it plan to do next?

Some useful points in this section would include:

- To what extent do Members think that the Council currently has effective policies, procedures in place?
- What are the key targets the Town Council wants to hit to achieve its aims?

“The Council wish to be the best for Bingham and manage its responsibilities for the Town. The Council agree that even with differing views, that Councillors are all working for Bingham.”

Bingham Town Council Improvement Board Action Plan

1) Governance:

- (i) All agendas should be drawn up by the Clerk on behalf of Members with sufficient notice to meet set publication deadlines.
- (ii) Reports for agenda items should be written by the Clerk, with appropriate input from Members so they can be circulated with the agendas.
- (iii) Reports should be produced by the Clerk, not Members, to comply with Forward Plan and Agenda publication timetables, with sufficient notice; and all Members should be provided with the reports by the publication date, without exception.
- (iv) Where verbal advice is given, then this needs to be codified in a report for the agenda to which it is linked and verbal updates, as occurred with the advice provided by the Council's previous HR firm avoided.
- (v) If there are legitimate confidential items, and HR matters are confidential items, they should be considered in the confidential section of the agenda. Again, there should be reports for other Members to see and comment on in this confidential section.
- (vi) All Members are elected and are entitled to see reports setting out the reasons for any recommended course of action on their agenda.
- (vii) What Members subsequently vote on is a matter for the established democratic process, but just because there may be a majority group there is no excuse to exclude other Members who are not part of any such grouping from access to reports, their background information or to undermine their position in the decision making process.

2) Structure

- (i) The Council can save money and streamline its decision making processes. The Improvement Board's independent view is that the Council is significantly over structured and could reduce the amount of bureaucracy to four main areas:
 - Full Council
 - An official HR Sub Committee reporting to Full Council on staffing matters
 - Planning
 - Policy & Resources which will incorporate all the other functions not reserved for Full Council or Planning

Or

 - Monthly meetings of Full Council, with Planning or other meetings called as necessary.
- (ii) Consideration be given to amalgamating the position of Chairman and the role of leading the majority group

3) Training

- (i) The Board have requested the Council's training programme be published at the evening's meeting so there can be no ambiguity to any Member about what training modules are available to them and who has been on what modules.
- (ii) All Members should receive social media training.
- (iii) New Members joining the Council should be required to undertake training sessions in planning, finance, and council administration.
- (iv) New Mayors, if they are to Chair Council meetings, should go on a suitable management of meetings training course and ensure that any behavioural problems are sorted out at the meetings they preside over.
- (v) NALC training be put in place about the roles and responsibilities of the Proper Officer so that everyone understands how this role should operate in a political environment like the Town Council. It is a unique role unlike many other jobs.
- (vi) Leading Members engage with NALC regarding peer reviews and political mentoring.
- (vii) The Improvement Board will review the progress the Council has made in June 2023.

4) Conduct

- (i) Members need to ensure they comply with the highest standards of behaviour when interacting with each other in formal settings (the Board did see this at the Council meeting its members attended).
- (ii) Any future unacceptable behaviour patterns by any Member with staff should be challenged and not supported by other Members in subsequent votes. (This includes with group discussions, If Members are unhappy with reports they should simply vote against reports or defer them until they are.)
- (iii) Importantly high standards of behaviour includes comments on social media which can be quite pernicious and lead to residents forming a poor impression of the Council.
- (iv) Complaints - tit for tat complaints about behaviour to the Monitoring Officer should be avoided, and any issue warranting a formal complaint only be made in extremis about substantive issues or potential illegality if they cannot be resolved locally by the Mayor or the Clerk in the first instance. If there are patterns of behaviour, recording separate instances of it, rather than any complaints about individual episodes, will assist.
- (v) The Chair also needs to take firmer control of meetings and rule out any poor behaviour or comments. Similarly at formal meetings Members should address all their comments through the Chair, thereby avoiding any charged personal exchanges.
- (vi) To demonstrate its commitment to improving standards Bingham Town Council should sign up to the national pledge on civility and respect promoted by the society of local council clerks and National Association of Local Councils:

To treat other councillors, Clerks and all employees, members of the public and representative of partner organisations and volunteers with civility and respecting their role.

<https://www.nalc.gov.uk/library/our-work/civility/3657-bullying-and-harrasment-statement-poster/file>

5) **Service Delivery and Community Engagement**

- (i) The Council should build on the “Statement of Activity” included in its council tax precept and agree and publish a Community Plan about what it wants to achieve in the short, medium and longer term. This will help manage local expectations.

It should be noted that Bingham have now approved a *Communicating Council Strategy 2022-2027* at Full Council on the 19th April, 2022.

- (ii) Within this there should be timescales and costings of what the resources are to meet them. Officer expertise (or gaps, such as project management for example) and capacity need to be taken into account, but it will be clear to everyone what is sought to be achieved.
- (iii) The Council should consult the community on this draft plan and adopt an inclusive dialogue with local residents so there is sound two way communications with an interested and engaged electorate.
- (iv) Once that exercise is completed then yearly milestones should be established and reports to Members flow throughout the year to make sure they happen, including any corrective action that may be required.

6) **Advocacy For Bingham:**

- (i) The Town Council cannot afford to complete all the things it aspires to with the resources it has either in reserves or through its current precept. The Council adopted a Bingham Strategy Report in 2015, almost all the issues in it have not changed. Sometimes these major tasks are beyond a lower tier council’s capacity and therefore the only way they are going to happen is through the work with others, as the Bingham Leisure Centre experience demonstrates.
- (ii) By assembling a coherent and linked Community Plan (see “Ambition & Community Involvement” above) Bingham will be able to engage with other stakeholders and lever in far more resources than it will be able to do so by itself with the limited capacity and expertise it has.
- (iii) This is a major opportunity for the Council and provides the ways and means to respond to such local demand as the *Brilliant Bingham* report, without increasing the local precept substantially.
- (iv) There is support of community through the giving of grants, but there could be a more active approach though co-production of developments - something akin to the development of the CLP or the Neighbourhood Plan but with the Town Council working with, and alongside residents. This would both develop and encourage greater engagement and meaningful discussion that goes beyond public attendance and engagement through, for example, the full council meetings.