



Sturminster Newton Town Council

DAPTC Structured Support November 2025 to July 2026

Final Summary Report and Recommendations, July 2026

This report provides a summary of the findings of more detailed analysis by DAPTC, the detail of which has been presented to councillors and officers iteratively, but is retained by DAPTC to respect confidentiality commitments given.

1. Executive Overview

- 1.1 Sturminster Newton Town Council commissioned the Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils (DAPTC) to undertake a comprehensive organisational review following a period of operational strain, public scrutiny, and internal pressure. This review examined governance, staffing, communications, councillor/officer relations, and overall organisational resilience. The aim was to identify areas for strengthening and to propose a structured path toward improved effectiveness.
- 1.2 The review found that while the Council has faced a number of challenges – including unclear strategic direction, capacity constraints, outdated policies, and inconsistent communication – there is a strong foundation of committed councillors and capable staff. The Council also demonstrates a clear desire to improve its internal culture, community engagement, and decision-making processes. The themes and recommendations within this summary reflect a balanced assessment of operational realities and constructive opportunities for enhanced performance.
- 1.3 The Council's recent difficulties were rooted not in a single issue but in a combination of governance gaps, communication weaknesses, training needs, procedural inconsistencies, and tensions in relationships. Addressing these areas comprehensively will allow the Council to strengthen public trust, support staff wellbeing, and ensure that future projects are delivered with clarity and confidence. This report sets out a forward-looking, action-based approach to achieving these goals, and incorporates recommendations, at section 7. DAPTC acknowledges that, subsequent to our initial analysis, the council has worked effectively to action matters that would otherwise have formed recommendations.



2. Governance Findings

The governance review identified several core areas requiring improvement, beginning with the absence of a current Strategic Plan. Without a unified set of objectives for the council term, decision-making becomes fragmented, priorities become unclear, and the organisation struggles to maintain consistent focus. A Strategic Plan will help councillors and officers align their efforts and will improve transparency for residents.

Our work also highlighted outdated or incomplete policies across a number of domains. Key governance documents – including HR policies, grievance and disciplinary procedures, grants frameworks, and information governance policies – required revision to meet current best practice. Some internal audit recommendations also remained to be actioned. Most of these governance ‘gaps’ have subsequently been addressed, and implementing the remainder will provide clarity, safeguard compliance, and streamline processes.

Committee structures were found to be functional in principle but less effective in practice. The Planning & Environment Committee’s size and scope reduce its effectiveness, and business being referred to Full Council undermines delegated decision-making. We found that clearer delegations and committee roles would allow decisions to be taken more efficiently and reduce unnecessary duplication. We are pleased to note that these matters have now been reviewed by the council.

A protocol governing member/officer relations is recommended to ensure mutual respect, clarity of responsibilities, and safeguarding of officer workloads. This is particularly important in councils where staffing resources are limited and councillors must act collectively rather than individually when requesting actions.

3. Staffing and Capacity

The staffing structure of the Council is broadly appropriate for its size, and staff received positive feedback for their professionalism and dedication. The Clerk has received particular praise from many councillors. However, capacity concerns were raised across several areas, some of which have subsequently been reviewed and action taken. The Clerk carries a particularly demanding workload, which has been further intensified by project pressures, public scrutiny, and the demands of councillor support. Following our initial analysis, the council appointed an Assistant Clerk and it is hoped this will help to alleviate the situation. However, we recognise that should the council approve the recommendations in this report, further short to medium-term support may be needed.

Completion of the CiLCA qualification remains a high priority, both for the Clerk's professional development and for enabling the Council to exercise the General Power of Competence – an important tool for flexibility and innovation in local governance. The council advises that at the time of publication, all five of the required learning units have been submitted for marking, with three returned as passes and two awaiting marking.

We recommend that consideration should also be given to additional project management support, either temporarily during periods of peak demand or permanently, depending on the final Strategic Plan.

The Council's Grounds Team was viewed positively, but there was mixed feedback on whether additional capacity might improve outcomes.

We also found that a more structured annual staffing review – separate from budget-setting – would help ensure that roles, responsibilities, and workloads remain properly aligned. We understand that arrangements for such a review are now in place.

Finally on the subject of staffing and capacity, we consider that greater internal delegation from the Clerk to other officers could also improve efficiency and resilience. Ensuring that staff have suitable training opportunities, mentoring support, and protected development time will help strengthen the Council's long-term capacity.

The council's HR adviser has been consulted on the findings and recommendations.



4. Communications and Engagement

The review found that communication has been a significant contributing factor to recent difficulties. Inconsistent public messaging, limited engagement, and reactive rather than proactive communications have contributed to misunderstandings and, at times, public tension. A comprehensive Communications and Engagement Strategy is therefore considered essential.

Such a strategy should establish clear principles for how the Council communicates with residents, stakeholders, and partner organisations. It should define roles and responsibilities, set expectations for councillor conduct on social media, and outline a plan for regular updates on Council activities. Improved communication will help residents understand what the Council does, how decisions are made, and how they can participate.

The Council also has an opportunity to expand its presence at community events, improve digital communications, and make greater use of public consultations and surveys. This will support transparency, encourage community input, and help build public trust. Internal communications can also benefit from more regular briefings, ensuring councillors and officers remain aligned on priorities and progress.



5. Conduct and Relationship Findings

The review found tensions in relationships that contribute to weaknesses already highlighted in this summary. Difficulties exist in relationships between councillors, between some councillors and officers, and in the council's liaison with some external stakeholders.

Such difficulties undermine decision making, personal wellbeing, and the Council's public reputation. Resetting conduct, and ensuring civility and respect are essential to all other improvements.

These issues can be addressed with a combination of leadership, personal recognition of the impact of conduct on the council's business, and appropriate training. Among the actions recommended are the publication of recordings of meetings, and a programme of training framed around civility and respect.

Separately, the review identified a significant and increasingly strained relationship between the Town Council and the Dorset Council ward member, which has become publicly visible and centred largely on disagreements relating to certain specific initiatives. During the course of our review, the council requested that DAPTC should meet with the ward member and the Monitoring Officer. This meeting took place and the outcomes have been incorporated into our recommendations.

Discussions with councillors and the ward member highlighted communication difficulties, blurred boundaries between the ward member's different roles, and a lack of clear mechanisms for engagement outside formal meetings. While all parties acknowledge that the situation has become unhelpful, there has so far been little or no progress towards resolution. We consider that clearer council priorities, improved communication structures, and opportunities for more informal and structured dialogue could help to reset the relationship. A series of practical steps was recommended, including facilitated discussions, clearer agenda planning, and agreed representation on external organisations, alongside a shared commitment from all involved to adopt a more constructive and collaborative approach going forward. Some of these recommendations have already been taken forward.



6. Conclusion and Next Steps

The review concludes that while Sturminster Newton Town Council faces a number of organisational challenges, these are neither uncommon nor insurmountable. With structured improvements, clearer governance, strengthened communication, enhanced working relationships, and commitment, the Council is well positioned to deliver effectively for its community.

Key recommended actions include:

- Developing and adopting a Strategic Plan.
- Updating core governance and HR policies (largely now complete).
- Strengthening committee structures and delegations (a review has been carried out).
- Supporting the Clerk through CiLCA (now part-completed) and other development opportunities.
- Enhancing staffing resilience through structured reviews (arrangements now agreed) and targeted support.
- Delivering councillor and staff training in key areas including roles, conduct, communication, and conflict resolution.
- Establishing a proactive Communications and Engagement Strategy.

The Council should also look to the future. In particular it should consider how it might attract new councillors, as there may well be some who do not seek re-election in 2029, and whilst regrettable, resignations can and do happen during a council term. The culture and environment for new councillors to join will be important. That legacy is in the gift of the current councillors and team to shape for the local community.

Implementing these recommended actions will help build a more cohesive and resilient organisation, improve public confidence, and ensure that councillors and officers can carry out their work effectively and respectfully. The Council has shown a clear commitment to improvement, and with continued focus, it can create a stable foundation for strong local leadership in the years ahead.

7. Recommendations from DAPTC

Recommendation	Priority H/M/L
Governance	
Council to agree a strategic plan incorporating objectives, priorities and agreed actions for the remainder of the council term.	H
Incorporate into the strategic plan conclusions in respect of support or otherwise for community organisations, and the future of youth club provision.	H
Develop a framework for a Medium Term Financial Plan, and incorporate this into future budget-setting.	H
Declare eligibility to exercise the General Power of Competence as soon as practicable.	H
Update IT and Freedom of Information policies incorporating governance of GDPR and FoI-compliant councillor communications.	H
Draft and approve a protocol governing relationships between councillors and officers.	H
Approve an (already drafted) updated grants/funding policy, including provisions for larger/long-term funding agreements.	H
Record and publish video of meetings (and a supporting policy if not in place) for transparency/learning.	H
Consider appointing councillor representatives to all significant community organisations, with the agreement of the organisations themselves.	H
Approve an (already drafted) up-to-date suite of HR policies and associated staff handbook, in conjunction with the HR Adviser.	M
Develop and approve role descriptions for the Chair/Mayor and Deputy, and committee chairs.	M
Approve a redrafted Scheme of Delegation to ensure it clarifies the limits of delegation, and provides for transparency.	M
Review arrangements for election of Mayor and Deputy including, if desired, election of a Mayor Elect and Deputy Mayor Elect.	M
Staffing	
Consider project management and any other staffing capacity requirements arising from an agreed strategic plan.	H
Consider supplementary time-limited support and mentoring to the Town Clerk, to allow resource for training, development, and implementation of this plan.	H
Develop capacity for community engagement and communications.	M
Finalise a decision on Ground Team capacity.	M

Recommendation	Priority
Communications	
Develop and approve a Communications and Engagement Strategy.	H
Consider providing 'live' virtual access to meetings as an engagement opportunity.	L
Staff Training and Development	
Complete CiLCA qualification for the Clerk (completed pending marking).	H
Communications and engagement training for appropriate staff.	H
Training in handling difficult situations for appropriate staff (already delivered in part).	H
Review training needs of the Clerk to support further development.	H
Review appraisal and line management procedure where carried out by a councillor.	H
CiLCA qualification for Assistant Town Clerk.	L
ILCA short course for appropriate staff (Clerk, Assistant, and Receptionist already qualified).	L
Review existing Training Policy, and add an annual training plan.	L
Councillor Support and Development	
All councillors to attend a programme of training framed around the previously adopted civility and respect pledge.	H
Provide training to existing and prospective chairs (and potentially other councillors), on chairing meetings effectively.	H
Provide refresher training on interests, to all councillors.	H
Provide line management training to the Chairs of Finance & Policy and Amenities Committees	M
Provide training for all councillors, the Clerk, and other officers as appropriate, on councillor recruitment.	M
Agree arrangements for an annual review of member training.	M
Document induction arrangements for councillors.	L

DAPTC acknowledges and welcomes advice from the council that a number of other recommendations have already been actioned or part-actioned since we carried out our initial analysis, including:

Governance

- Committee Terms of Reference have been reviewed, including number of committees, numbers on committee, scope and delegations.



- Working Group protocol discontinued in favour of reviewed working group terms of reference. DAPTC acknowledges that guidance issued by us in 2023 was a contributor to the need for this change.
- Staffing Committee scope and delegation reviewed and agreed including annual staffing review.
- A risk management policy has been incorporated into the council's annual corporate risk assessment.
- Outstanding internal audit recommendations have been actioned.

Staffing

- New position of Assistant Town Clerk established and recruited to.
- Senior and office staff training in handling difficult situations completed.
- One officer has completed the ILCA qualification, in addition to two that were already qualified
- Scheme of Delegation reviewed and redrafted in conjunction with other key documents for clarity, for council approval (to follow)

Communications

- The Council has subscribed to external support for community engagement matters, which should facilitate the production of a Communications & Engagement Strategy.

Staff Training & Development

- The Town Clerk has made significant progress towards completion of the CiLCA qualification.
- All required HR policies, and an updated staff handbook, have been drafted for council approval.

Dorset Association of Parish & Town Councils

7 July 2026