

CABINET – 15 OCTOBER 2019

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE FEEDBACK REPORT

Report by the Corporate Director - Customers and Organisational Development

RECOMMENDATION

1. **Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to:**
 - (a) **Consider the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report (Annex 1)**
 - (b) **Accept the recommendations set out within the report**
 - (c) **Agree the proposals set out at paragraph 17 for incorporating the report's recommendations into corporate, business and transformation planning**

Executive Summary

2. During March 2019, the Council commissioned the Local Government Association (LGA) to carry out a Corporate Peer Challenge.
3. The feedback report from the LGA was received in July 2019. It was reported to the Performance Scrutiny Committee for comment in September. Cabinet is now asked to consider the report, accept the recommendations made, and agree that these should be incorporated into the council's business planning.

Introduction

4. Peer challenge is a core element of the Local Government Association's sector-led improvement offer to local authorities. A peer challenge involves experienced councillor and officer peers from across the local government sector undertaking a 'health-check' of a council and how it operates. Peer challenge is designed as an improvement tool, intended to critically assess participating councils and make suggestions for improvement, based on the analysis and experience of the peer team. The review is not an inspection process.
5. The County Council commissioned a Corporate Peer Challenge to take place in late March 2019 with the intention being to develop a clear and independently verified assessment of our strengths and weaknesses during a period of ongoing change and development across the council.

Themes of the Peer Challenge

6. The national peer challenge process is structured around the following five core questions on the overall health of the organisation:
- **Understanding of the local place and priority setting:** Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
 - **Leadership of place:** Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
 - **Organisational leadership and governance:** Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?
 - **Financial planning and viability:** Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
 - **Capacity to deliver:** Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?
7. In addition, Oxfordshire asked the peer team to address an additional two issues:
- **Partnership working:** Is there a culture of partnership-working in the council with improving outcomes for citizens as the central aim? Does the council take an appropriate leadership role in the county and wider region and what barriers are in place? Do stakeholders consider the council to be an effective partner in terms of agreeing and delivering shared objectives?
 - **Work on the growth agenda:** Is there a clear narrative on the growth agenda that is shared across the council and understood by stakeholders and citizens? Is the council sufficiently leveraging its leadership role in the interests of improved outcomes for citizens across the widest growth agenda? How embedded and understood is our commitment to the wider growth agenda?
8. The peer challenge process and the subsequent report has been structured around these seven themes.

The Peer Challenge Process

9. The Corporate Peer Challenge was undertaken from 19-22 March 2019. In preparation the Council carried out extensive staff engagement and engaged

widely with elected members and partners, including in the production of a Position Statement document.

10. Over the course of four days onsite, the peer team spoke to more than 200 people in more than 60 meetings, site-visits and focus groups. Full details of the Peer Challenge methodology, including the membership of the review team, are set out in section three of the feedback report.
11. On the final day, the team presented to a large audience of staff, members and partners at the Said Business School. The summary presentation and a video of the event have been subsequently widely shared with all participants, councillors, staff and stakeholders.

Feedback and Recommendations

12. The LGA Feedback Report is attached as Annex 1. An Executive Summary in section one summaries the review team's conclusions.
13. Section two makes 11 recommendations:
 - i. Co-develop the vision for Oxfordshire
 - ii. Improve engagement with existing and new communities
 - iii. Address and understand the impact of the Growth Agenda on the whole organisation
 - iv. Establish and communicate the corporate narrative
 - v. Address resource and skills capacity issues
 - vi. Establish effective external and internal communications
 - vii. Establish a stable management team
 - viii. Grow and embed the organisational culture
 - ix. Agree the Investment Strategy and maximise assets and business relationships
 - x. Continue to develop the innovative model between the County and district authorities
 - xi. Develop new approaches to locality boards
14. From section four, the report is then structured around the seven themes (five national and two local) as set out above.
15. Following receipt by the Council in July, this report was circulated to councillors, staff, participants in the process and other stakeholders.

Implementing the Recommendations

16. This report recommends that the recommendations set out within the Feedback Report are adopted by the council and incorporated into corporate, business and transformation planning.
17. The table below sets out how each recommendation will be delivered and considers who will need to be involved.

i. CO-DEVELOP THE VISION FOR OXFORDSHIRE

What have we already done?

The Council's vision for "Thriving Oxfordshire" is articulated in the Corporate Plan, setting out how this overall vision is supported by a thriving economy, people, and places.

Engagement with service users is strong, and the council gathers and analyses data to support priority-setting. This includes qualitative feedback in consultations, a coproduction approach with representative groups, and public meetings around major strategies (such as Local Transport Planning) and significant budget changes, which can directly impact proposals.

How will we go further to deliver this recommendation?

Working to build an engaged coalition of partners, we will seek to co-develop a compelling shared vision for Oxfordshire. This should be a vision that can be shared by staff, partners, residents, business and civic society. It should clearly articulate the future of the County in a way that can drive and coordinate positive change in the interests of residents. It should be developed through an open and engaging public process led through partnership. Such a new vision will need to connect to active public engagement already underway in connection with the development of the Joint Statutory Spatial Plan, to local plans and other vision and strategic documents.

Who will need to be involved?

- Elected members
- District and City Councils
- Towns, parishes and other civic organisations
- Statutory partners (including Health and Thames Valley Police)
- Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)
- Business, employers and cultural organisations
- Partnership boards and bodies (including OxLEP, Growth Board, Health and Wellbeing Board and Community Safety Partnership)

ii. IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT WITH EXISTING AND NEW COMMUNITIES

What have we already done?

We have worked more closely with town and parish councils in recent years, to identify local activity which can be more effectively delivered at the very local level, particularly around the street scene.

We have also worked with a range of local community groups to find ways of sustaining services which would not be viable as a wholly taxpayer-funded activity, such as community libraries, transport projects, and open-access children's provision.

Our engagement with new communities has been focused on our role in delivering major infrastructure such as roads, schools and other community facilities. Most often this is in partnership with district councils and developers.

We are also significant partners in planning for improvements to existing communities, and effective design of urban extensions, whether through infrastructure funding, or wellbeing programmes such as Age Friendly Banbury and Bicester Healthy New Town.

How will we go further to deliver this recommendation?

There are many positive examples of collaborative community building within Oxfordshire. However, working with partners, we need to be equipped to deliver community engagement consistently and at scale.

To deliver this recommendation, we will work with partners to ensure that a community development approach and appropriate capacity is designed into delivery arrangements for growth.

Who will need to be involved?

- Political and managerial leaders
- Growth Board partners
- Towns, parishes and other civic organisations
- VCS role in understanding and engaging with communities
- Service users, carers, and representative groups
- The public and media
- Broad representative groups of local stakeholders

iii. ADDRESS AND UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT OF THE GROWTH AGENDA ON THE WHOLE ORGANISATION

What have we already done?

Oxfordshire is recognised nationally as a leading area in engaging with the potential of growth – maximising the benefits, mitigating the challenges, and engaging effectively with partners and central government to secure the best use of joined-up funding and shared planning to bring good growth.

While frequently operating at pace and focused on delivery, opportunities have been taken to share the work on growth with those more broadly affected, including through partner conferences, and online information, as well as through specific projects such as the healthy place-shaping work mentioned below.

Relationships with local and regional partners have been improved through shared recognition of the potential of the Growth Deal and Housing Infrastructure Fund, and engagement as regional leaders for England's Economic Heartland and the Oxford-Cambridge corridor.

How will we go further to deliver this recommendation?

The development of a healthy place shaping approach to growth is being taken forward to focus community centred planning. Services are being challenged to incorporate full consideration of the implications of growth pressures in service and business plans and in transformation plans for the shape of the future organisation.

All services within their business planning cycles need to consider the internal and partnership impact of growth and develop 'managing growth' as a business objective. Corporately, clearer cost models and impact analysis need to be developed linked to business intelligence and population modelling.

Prevention and demand management strategies, identified as a focus within corporate transformation, need to consider the impact of growth and how 'good growth' (for example healthy place shaping) can reduce future demands on services.

Who will need to be involved?

- All services
- Corporate support teams including finance, transformation and organisational development
- District and City Councils

iv. ESTABLISH AND COMMUNICATE THE CORPORATE NARRATIVE

What have we already done?

Within the organisation significant work has been done to join up activity and business planning in a way which makes best use of resources, and embeds corporate priorities into individual and operational objectives, and links these to financial plans.

Regular events for all staff, and for senior managers, are designed to ensure a clear and consistent message is communicated from the top of the organisation, reinforced by active internal communications through e-mail newsletters and daily intranet headlines.

Service areas also organise director roadshows and briefings, as well as “back to the floor” activities for senior managers, councillors and partners such as ‘practice weeks held in children’s education and social care teams

Upgraded communications including regular bulletins (such as ‘The Buzz’) and consistent messaging and use of compelling graphics (for examples those used in the Council Tax leaflet) are helping to communicate the corporate narrative.

How will we go further to deliver this recommendation?

The Peer Challenge report suggests that a clearer narrative can add a unifying and compelling sense of common purpose within the organisation, supporting a resident-focussed culture. This should be linked to recommendation to Co-develop the vision for Oxfordshire.

Cabinet has noted that there are short and medium-term opportunities for improving our corporate planning framework which will support the communication of the corporate narrative:

Firstly, for the business cycle ahead, the Corporate Plan and supporting documents will be refreshed to incorporate new and prioritised issues. This will be supported by the development of a highly visual plan on a page that will re-articulate and communicate the corporate narrative.

Secondly, it is proposed to undertake a full refresh of the Corporate Plan to be in place during 2021/22. Planning is in place for how this strategic review can be undertaken and this will include developing and communicating the corporate narrative.

Who will need to be involved?

- Political and managerial leaders
- All elected members

- Staff
- Partners and key stakeholders
- Residents

v. ADDRESS RESOURCE AND SKILLS CAPACITY ISSUES

What have we already done?

The council has a strong approach to service redesign and restructuring which aims to maximise retention and redeployment, minimising turbulence for staff and costs of redundancy. For staff feeling pressure, including as a result of change and uncertainty, the council has a “Well at Work” programme, with a particular focus on mental health.

Skill and capacity shortages are also mitigated through effective joint working with partners, and securing external funding for particular projects which can enable resource to be bought in. The council has an extensive classroom and online training catalogue available to staff, as well as more bespoke offers including coaching for senior managers.

Significant progress has already been made through the transformation programme towards delivery of this recommendation including moving to new structures and ways of working across Finance, Strategic Capability, and the provision cycle.

How will we go further to deliver this recommendation?

A revised workforce strategy is now planned that will set the approach to workforce development and management to meet the needs of a changing county and revised model of delivering HR will support workforce management at the service level.

The next phase of the council’s transformation programme will include a much greater focus on staff development, engagement, learning and training, including looking at the long-term skills of our workforce.

A further phase of transformation activity will focus on demand management, preventative services, customer contact and how we assess our residents’ needs, to tackle resource and capacity issues by reducing need before it reaches our acute services.

Who will need to be involved?

- All service areas, staff and managers
- Human Resources

- Elected members , including through the Cabinet Advisory Group and through the Joint Sub-Committee

vi. ESTABLISH EFFECTIVE EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

What have we already done?

During the spring and summer, a review of strategic communication and engagement has been carried out as part of the council-wide transformation programme.

A new model for how the function will work with services and partners, its processes and ways of working, and an implementation plan have been agreed. This will ensure that good practice is adopted and widely shared across the council, and resources are directed to the council’s corporate plan priorities.

There will be also be a greater emphasis on enabling councillors and staff to engage effectively with residents, service users and community-based organisations.

Improvements already made to the council’s communication and engagement capability include:

- Embedding an insight-driven approach to campaign planning based on best practice in local and central government communications
- Improving the use of video and graphic design as a way of engaging residents and other stakeholders more effectively
- Better use of digital tools to monitor issues and opportunities of relevance to the county council’s priorities, including national policy debates.

How will we go further to deliver this recommendation?

The proposals set out above will now be implemented fully.

Who will need to be involved?

- All services
- Staff impacted

vii. ESTABLISH A STABLE MANAGEMENT TEAM (SETTLE THE S113 ISSUE)

What have we already done?

The ongoing use of a section 113 agreement as the framework to enable joint working with Cherwell District Council and appointments to joint posts (which is specifically raised in the report), was agreed at Cabinet in April.

A range of roles have recently been formalised within the council and between the two councils, including permanent and joint appointments.

This includes the appointment of the Corporate Director of Public Health, Corporate Director of Adult Services, Corporate Director of Customers and Organisational Development, Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety, Deputy Director Human Resources and a number of other senior sub-director appointments.

Further interim arrangements have been put in place to stabilise the management team and new strategic posts were established by Council in July.

How will we go further to deliver this recommendation?

A stable management team is now in place. We will go further through appointments to permanent and joint appointments and with the establishment of new posts where required.

Who will need to be involved?

- Senior managers
- Elected members

viii. GROW AND EMBED THE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

What have we already done?

The council already has a well-established management development programme, and plans to renew the human resources and organisational development offer to staff more broadly are well underway.

How will we go further to deliver this recommendation?

Plans to renew our HR and OD offer are well underway. The next phase of the transformation programme will include a much greater focus on staff development, engagement, learning and training. This will include consideration of the long-term skills of our workforce. Culture development will touch all members of staff, ensuring the County Council remains an employer of choice, where passionate staff find motivation and satisfaction in delivering the best outcomes for residents.

In addition, over the coming year the management development programme will be aligned more closely with the aims and objectives of the council's transformation plans, including supporting the growth and embedding of culture.

Who will need to be involved?

- Staff
- Members
- Trade unions
- Managers
- Service users
- Training and development providers

ix. AGREE THE INVESTMENT STRATEGY AND MAXIMISE ASSETS AND BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

What have we already done?

Council confirmed Cabinet's recommendation of a revised Investment Strategy in September 2019.

This strategy sets out how the council will commit, through its investment and property portfolio, to:

- support growth, regeneration, and help deliver the Council's strategic objectives;
- reinvest income in line with agreed targets to ensure growth of the portfolio and maximise long term returns/income;
- ensure the portfolio is governed and administered in a way that supports long term sustainability for the Council and residents of Oxfordshire.
- reinvest equivalent funding whenever we release key property and investment assets to ensure the portfolio size is maintained and increased over time (subject to commitments to the capital programme)

How will we deliver this recommendation?

The Investment Strategy will now be fully implemented, and appropriate governance arrangements put in place to realise the ambitions it contains and maximise opportunities identified.

A revised risk and opportunity strategy is due for consideration by Cabinet in October 2019 which helps sets the context for structured management of commercial activity, assets and investment. If agreed, this will also be embedded across the council to support the implementation of the Investment Strategy and embed appropriate attitudes to and management of risk and opportunities across the council.

Who will need to be involved?

- Service departments with commercial and investment opportunities and support and strategic services including property, transformation and finance
- Elected members through revised governance arrangements
- Partners

x. CONTINUE TO DEVELOP THE INNOVATIVE MODEL BETWEEN THE COUNTY AND DISTRICT AUTHORITIES

What have we already done?

The current partnership between Cherwell District and Oxfordshire County councils is recognised as innovative at a national level, and significant work has taken place both to embed joint roles, link up shared functions, and reset Oxfordshire's transformation work in the context of the partnership.

We have also taken opportunities to align more closely with other councils in Oxfordshire, such as bringing Oxford's Park and Rides under joint management through Oxford City Council, devolving a range of responsibilities to towns and parishes, and working together with districts at a strategic level on particular challenges such as domestic abuse, waste, and homelessness.

How will we go further to deliver this recommendation?

We will continue to identify opportunities for broader and deeper joint working with Cherwell, which will be a key part of the next phase of transformation. We will also continue to identify opportunities for joint working across local government in Oxfordshire and beyond, as well as with other key partners including health.

We will continue to share learning from Oxfordshire nationally, and to learn from other areas to support Oxfordshire's ongoing work.

A key aspect of joint working is also ensuring the continued success of the Oxfordshire Growth Board, and working to ensure that this delivers the key priorities for partners, businesses, and residents of Oxfordshire – not only on joined-up planning for future growth, but also ensuring that the benefits of that growth are genuinely felt by existing and new residents.

Who will need to be involved?

- City and district councils within Oxfordshire
- Service areas
- Key partner organisations

xi. DEVELOP NEW APPROACHES TO LOCALITY BOARDS

What have we already done?

Oxfordshire County Council has an existing model of 9 local area meetings for elected councillors (2 per district, 1 in Oxford City), meeting 4-6 times per year.

These meetings engage councillors and officers to engage on a range of issues including local highways and infrastructure maintenance and planning, community involvement, school place planning, developer negotiations, and relationships with local partners.

These meetings are well attended and valued by Councillors.

How will we go further to deliver this recommendation?

Developing new and extended approaches to locality working have the potential to support the delivery of other recommendations from the Peer Review, including improved community engagement and progressing joint working with district councils and other local bodies.

We will therefore develop proposals for future locality working and area boards, linked to our ambitions for more effectively engaging with residents, bringing decisions closer to communities and providing a focus for place-based leadership. We will engage with councillors, service areas and partners to identify objectives, and to design and deliver a new model for council consideration.

We will also develop clear organisational leadership around the future of locality working, and ensure that effective locality focus and governance are fully incorporated in the transformation programme.

Who will need to be involved?

- Elected members
- District and City Councils
- Towns, Parishes and other civic organisations
- Service areas
- Statutory partners (including Health and Thames Valley Police)
- VCS

Next Steps

18. If agreed, recommendations from the Peer Challenge now need to be incorporated into corporate and service plans across the Council. Reporting on progress will also need to be incorporated into mainstream business reporting and relevant to each recommendation.

Financial and Staff Implications

19. There are no direct financial or staffing impacts arising from this report. Resources required to meet any future proposals for change developed from the Corporate Peer Challenge will be identified through service and resource planning process in the usual way.

Equalities Implications

20. There are no direct equality implications arising from this report. Where any changes are subsequently developed that involve changes to service or service delivery, equality implications will need to be considered throughout the development process and formally, through Service and Community Impact Assessments as required.

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Annex 1: Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report, July 2019

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September 2019