

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 5 SEPTEMBER 2019

Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report

Report by the Assistant Chief Executive

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Committee is RECOMMENDED to:**
 - a) **note the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Report;**
 - b) **consider and comment on the recommendations made within the report; and**
 - c) **consider whether specific recommendations should be included in the Performance Scrutiny Committee forward plan for more detailed consideration**

Executive Summary

2. During March 2019, the Council commissioned the Local Government Association to carry out a Corporate Peer Challenge.
3. The feedback report from the LGA was received in July 2019 and is being shared with the Performance Scrutiny Committee at the earliest opportunity for feedback and comment ahead of Cabinet consideration in October 2019.

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.

Prioritised activity and next steps

16. During the period that the feedback report was developed by the LGA team, progress has been made against several recommendations. The following recommendations have been prioritised so far:

- iii. Address and understand the impact of the Growth Agenda on the whole organisation*

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.

- v. Address resource and skills capacity issues and vi. Establish effective external and internal communications*

Significant progress has been made through the transformation programme towards delivery of recommendations tackling communications and resource, skills and capacity. Progress on the Transformation Programme is reviewed by the Joint Audit & Governance and Performance Scrutiny (Transformation) Sub-Committee, most recently in July.

- xii. Establish a stable management team and x. Continue to develop the innovative model between the County and district authorities*

The stabilisation of the senior management team has continued through a number of permanent and joint appointments and with the establishment of new posts. These include the appointment of the Director of Public Health, Director of Adult Services, Chief Fire Officer, 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. 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.

- ix. Agree the Investment Strategy and maximise assets and business relationships*

In July, following consideration by the Performance Scrutiny Committee, Cabinet endorsed a new investment strategy and revised governance arrangements which will be recommended to Council in September 2019.

17. The next step for the Peer Challenge Feedback report is for the full recommendations to be considered by Cabinet for acceptance and

prioritisation with further activity required in all areas if the recommendations are agreed. At this point, Cabinet will also be asked to consider where new and additional activity will be required to deliver recommendations and if agreed, that these actions should be incorporated into corporate planning, including where appropriate service and resource planning and the transformation programme.

Financial and Staff Implications

18. 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

19. 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.

Annex 1: Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report, July 2019

CLAIRE TAYLOR
Interim Assistant Chief Executive

Background papers:

Contact Officer: Robin Rogers, Strategy Manager
September, 2019