

Gloucester City Council

Meeting:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Date:	24 April 2023
	Cabinet		3 May 2023
Subject:	Corporate Peer Challenge – Report and Action Plan		
Report Of:	Leader of the Council		
Wards Affected:	All		
Key Decision:	No	Budget/Policy Framework:	No
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Appendices:	1. Corporate Peer Challenge Report		
	2. Action Plan		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 The purpose of this report is to share the report and recommendations resulting from the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) undertaken by a team of Local Government Association (LGA) peers in November 2022, and to publish the Council's response in the form of an Action Plan, setting out how the Council proposes to meet the recommendations.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to consider the information contained in the report and make any recommendations to the Cabinet.

2.1 Cabinet is asked to **RESOLVE** that:

- (1) The Corporate Peer Challenge report and recommendations be welcomed.
- (2) The report be circulated to Members, Officers and partners involved in the Corporate Peer Challenge and made available to the public via the council's website.
- (3) The Action Plan prepared in response to the recommendations be approved.

3.0 Background and Key Issues

3.1 As part of its approach to sector led improvement, the Local Government Association (LGA) offers a fully funded corporate peer challenge (CPC) every four to five years. The Council's last CPC took place in 2017.

- 3.2 The LGA offers the following description of the CPC process: *“By bringing together political and managerial leadership, through the use of member and officer peers, a peer challenge provides robust, strategic and credible challenge and support to councils. Peer challenge also enhances the capacity of the sector and helps to avoid insularity within councils.”*
- 3.3 A CPC involves a team of elected Member and Officer peers from other councils, who come together for a short period of time to review and challenge practice of the host authority. The peer team was selected for their relevant expertise in the areas that the Council chose to focus on. The peers were:
- Huw Bowen – Chief Executive, Chesterfield Borough Council
 - Cllr Linda Haysey – Leader, East Hertfordshire District Council
 - Jon-Paul Hedge – Director, Exeter City Council
 - Emma Foy – Director of Corporate Services, West Lindsey Borough Council
 - David Cowan – IT Manager, Copeland Borough Council
 - Helen Wilkinson – LGA Shadow Peer
 - Kathryn Trant – LGA Peer Challenge Manager
- 3.4 The CPC process is not an inspection; rather it is about continuous improvement. There is an expectation that councils share the feedback report widely to demonstrate openness and transparency about how they are led and managed.
- 3.5 The peer team considered the following five themes, which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges and are critical to councils’ performance and improvement:
1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council’s priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
 2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
 3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
 4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
 5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?
- 3.6 In addition, the Council asked the peer team to provide feedback on:
- How the council responded to the cyber incident.
 - Whether the work undertaken by the council to tackle inequalities is improving outcomes for residents.
- 3.7 The peer team prepared for the process and familiarised themselves with Gloucester by reviewing a range of information. The team spent three days on site, gathering information from more than 40 meetings and speaking with more than 50 people, including elected Members, Officer and a variety of partners and stakeholders.

3.8 The report at Appendix 1 provides a summary of the team's findings and feedback on areas where the Council could focus improvement activity.

3.9 The peer team praised the Council's understanding of and ambitions for its place and people, commending our comprehensive Council Plan, which sets a clear vision and places emphasis on tackling inequalities and climate change as cross cutting themes. The team's feedback highlighted the following strengths:

- The Council is fortunate to have high quality staff, who are both proud of and passionate about the work they do.
- Governance arrangements and council committees work well. There is a collective desire for political consensus where it is in the best interests of the City and its people., and there is a good working relationship between the political leadership and SMT.
- The Council is recognised as well led and is well respected by its partners, who are primed to collaborate and support the political and organisational leadership to deliver the Council Plan.
- The Council's enviable track record of strengths-based community development work and positive relationships with Gloucester's passionate voluntary and community sectors.
- The leadership and co-ordination role undertaken by the Council during the Covid-19 pandemic which saw essential support provided to individuals and the business community.
- The Council's impressive track record of organisational and place leadership and its ambitious growth agenda, noting the scale of regeneration already achieved and the resulting economic benefits.
- The Council has achieved notable success, including funding and awards for its cultural venues, retention of the Purple Flag for provide a safe evening economy, Green Flags for three parks and a silver award in the Visit England Awards for Excellence 2022.
- The Council's ability to continue delivering facilities and services following the cyber incident, through creative workarounds and solutions.
- Examples of the Council's work to tackle inequalities in the City, coupled with a positive approach to collaboration and partnership working.

3.10 The peer team highlighted the challenges it considers the Council to be facing and made a number of key recommendations in support of continuous improvement, which are set out in the Action Plan at Appendix 2, along with the Council's response.

4.0 Social Value Considerations

4.1 The peer team highlighted and commended the Council's social value work through procurement, as part of its work on tackling inequalities, and recommended that a new strategic priority framework and corporate resource plan for tackling inequalities be developed.

5.0 Environmental Implications

5.1 The peer team noted the Council's commitment to acting on climate change, which, along with tackling inequalities, are the two key cross cutting themes that run through the Council Plan.

6.0 Alternative Options Considered

6.1 The LGA expects councils to produce and publish the CPC report and an action plan, therefore no alternative options are available.

7.0 Reasons for Recommendations

7.1 The peer team's findings and recommendations are welcomed. Publication of the report demonstrates the Council's desire to be open and transparent and approval of the Action Plan will ensure that further improvements are made.

8.0 Future Work and Conclusions

8.1 The report and Action Plan will be shared with elected Members, Officers and partners who were involved in the process. They will also be published on the Council's website.

8.2 Delivery of the Action Plan will be monitored by Cabinet and SMT and, in 6 months' time, a check-in meeting will take place with the LGA to explore progress and discuss next steps and any challenges.

9.0 Financial Implications

9.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report, however, the resource implications of implementing the Action Plan will be assessed and considered as each element is progressed.

9.2 While not part of the main recommendations, the peer team made the following suggestions regarding the Council's financial planning and management:

- To consider carrying out a self-assessment of compliance with the CIPFA Code of Financial Management to help identify key areas to focus on in the recovery from the cyber incident.
- To consider using Internal and External Audit to support the Finance Team and provide additional assurance.
- To consider continuing to strengthen the Council's financial resilience to further protect itself from various risks.

These recommendations will be reviewed in consultation with relevant stakeholders.

(Financial Services have been consulted in the preparation this report.)

10.0 Legal Implications

10.1 There are no legal implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report.

(One Legal have been consulted in the preparation this report.)

11.0 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications

11.1 Effective engagement with sector led improvement is an important part of good corporate governance. The findings of the peer challenge have provided us with assurance and its recommendations will enable further improvement of the council's processes, practice and service delivery.

12.0 People Impact Assessment (PIA) and Safeguarding:

12.1 The PIA Screening Stage was completed and did not identify any potential or actual negative impact, therefore a full PIA was not required.

13.0 Community Safety Implications

13.1 There are no community safety implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report.

14.0 Staffing & Trade Union Implications

14.1 There are no staffing and trade union implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report, however staff and trade unions have been consulted on the Senior Management Team restructure undertaken in response to the recommendation regarding the need to increase strategic capacity.

Background Documents: None