Gloucester City Council

Meeting:	**Cabinet**	**Date:**	**10 January 2024**
Subject:	**Peer Challenge Progress Review**		
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 Progress Review Report**		
	2. Progress Update on Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1.0   Purpose of Report

1.1   The purpose of this report is to share the findings of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Team's feedback report, following on from their visit in October 2023 to review the Council's progress towards the implementation of the recommendations from the Peer Challenge that took place in November 2022. An update on the recommendations as of October 2023 is included in the Action Plan appended to this report.

2.0   Recommendations

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

2.2   Cabinet is asked to **RESOLVE** that the:

(1)   Corporate Peer Team Progress Review report be welcomed;

(2)   progress 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)   Action Plan updates prepared for the Peer Team ahead of their October 2023 visit be noted.

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.

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   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.

3.4   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
2. Organisational and place leadership
3. Governance and culture
4. Financial planning and management
5. Capacity for improvement

3.5   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

3.6   As required by the CPC process, a ten-month progress review after the initial corporate Peer challenge took place on 6 October 2023. The progress review is designed to provide space for the Council's senior leadership to:

- Update Peers on the early progress made and to receive feedback on this including how the action plan aligns to the CPC's recommendations.
- Consider Peer's reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the Peer Team were 'on-site' including any further support needs.
- Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date

3.7   The progress review was attended by the following Peers:

- Huw Bowen, Chief Executive, Chesterfield Borough Council
- Linda Haysey, former Leader, East Hertfordshire District Council
- Kathryn Trant, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

3.8   The report at Appendix 2 outlines the Peer Team's feedback on the Council's progress towards implementing the recommendations as set out in the Peer Team's report.

3.9   Within the progress review report, the Peer Team highlighted the challenges facing the sector and the Council since the Peer Review in October 2022. This included the revenue budget gap, significant issues with temporary accommodation provision arising from the cost-of-living crisis, and the unexpected liquidation of Aspire, the

Council's previous leisure provider. The Peer Team acknowledged that the challenge around homelessness is common across the sector and not unique to Gloucester. The Peer Team also considered progress against the Council's Action Plan along with the outcomes of meetings held during the day.

3.10   Some key points from the report are detailed below and the full reported is at Appendix 1.

3.10.1 The Peer Team saw evidence of, and were encouraged by, our evolved approach to the Council's performance management framework through a Council Plan update that was presented to Members in early 2023.

3.10.2 The Peer Team welcomed the increase in senior management capacity through the appointment of a Head of Transformation and Commissioning and noted that they would lead on the recommended reviews of delivery arrangements for external communications and HR delivery. The Team also noted positive comments regarding HR advice being provided and feedback from managers that external communications had improved.

3.10.3 With regard to the development and maintenance of robust project governance arrangements, the Peer Team noted that the Council responded with confidence to questions regarding the Forum development and saw evidence that the review of the business case is now embedded in the Major Projects reporting framework.

3.10.4 The Peer Team noted that a permanent Monitoring Officer had been appointed and recognised that the architecture of good governance was in place. However, they also noted that not a lot has changed in terms of Member behaviour, with a minority of Members behaving badly. The Peer Team was concerned that staff and managers had become conditioned by this behaviour and looked to the 2024 Member Induction as an opportunity for a reset.

3.10.5 The Peer Team noted that, at the time of their visit, the whole organisation review of the cyber incident was underway. They repeated their previous comments that the Council has come through the cyber incident well, and staff did very well to sustain services. They noted that engagement in the staff survey had been positive, and advised that it would be important for the Council to act on the feedback to support staff morale.

3.10.6 Finally, regarding the development of a strategic priority framework for tackling inequalities, the Peer Team noted that some progress had been made and highlighted the importance of adequate staff resource to be able to link together the Growth Strategy, Council Plan, and framework for tackling inequalities.

4.0   Social Value Considerations

4.1   A new strategic priority framework and corporate resource plan for tackling inequalities is being developed, which includes social value considerations.

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 progress review 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.

8.0   Future Work and Conclusions

8.1   Continued delivery of the Action Plan will be monitored by Cabinet and SMT.

9.0   Financial Implications

9.1   There are no financial implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report.

(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.

Background Documents:
LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Report November 2022