

Local Government Association: Corporate Peer Challenge

Report of the Leader

Recommended:

1. That Cabinet notes the LGA Peer Challenge Team's findings, as set out in the Feedback Report attached in Annex 1 to the report.
2. That Cabinet approves the proposed Action Plan in Annex 2 to the report, which addresses the recommendations highlighted in the Feedback Report.
3. That the Feedback Report and Action Plan are published on the Council's website.

SUMMARY:

- This report summarises the key findings and recommendations from the LGA Peer Challenge that the Council participated in during October 2018.
- The report seeks approval of the draft proposed Action Plan in response to the recommendations highlighted by the Peer Team.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to publish the Feedback Report and the Council's response to the Corporate Peer Challenge undertaken by the LGA during October 2018.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Council participated in an LGA Peer Challenge in October 2018. Peer Challenge is a core element of the Local Government Association's sector-led improvement offer to local authorities. Peer Challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. The scope of a Peer Challenge is agreed with the Council and tailored to reflect local needs and specific requirements. It is important to stress that the Peer Challenge was not an inspection. It is focused on improvement and tailored to the needs of the Council.
- 2.2 The make-up of the peer team reflected the Council's requirements and the focus of the Peer Challenge. The peers who delivered the Peer Challenge were:
 - Jack Hegarty, Chief Executive, Malvern Hills District Council and Managing Director at Wychavon District Council
 - Cllr Peter Fleming OBE, Leader, Sevenoaks District Council

- Gemma Barron, Head of Sustainable Communities and Wellbeing, South Cambridgeshire District Council
- Jane Eaton, Director of Corporate Resources, Horsham District Council
- Helen Sheppard, Business Change Commissioning Manager, Leicester City Council
- Paul Thomas, Strategic Director – Growth, South Kesteven District Council
- Kevin Kewin, Programme Manager, Local Government Association

2.3 The focus of the Peer Challenge was based around five core questions:

- 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?

2.4 In addition to the five core questions, the Council asked the team to consider the Council's approach to inclusive growth and development, particularly within the principal towns of Romsey and Andover.

2.5 The team spent three days on site during which they:

- Spoke to more than 230 people including a range of council staff together with councillors, external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings, and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 250 hours to determine their findings.

2.6 Following the on-site visit, the Peer Team has produced a feedback report to summarise the findings resulting from the Peer Challenge. It is proposed that the Council publishes the feedback report on the website along with an accompanying action plan to demonstrate how it will take forward the recommendations highlighted by the Peer Team.

3 Summary of findings

3.1 An executive summary of the findings can be found on page one of the Peer Challenge Feedback Report attached in Annex 1. The report highlights the following:

- Test Valley Borough Council is a well-led and effectively managed authority. The Council benefits from very good working relationships between officers and members. There are also good relationships between members and examples of constructive working across the political groups. This culture provides a solid foundation for strong political and managerial leadership going forward.
- The Council can be proud of its strong track-record of good investments and delivery. This includes Project Enterprise, which has delivered a strong rate of financial return to the council through property investment, and recent work to develop new contractual arrangements for leisure services that will significantly improve facilities in the borough.
- The Council's current financial position is comparatively strong and there is a focus on longer-term financial planning to ensure financial sustainability. There has also been an effective use of New Homes Bonus to deliver local priorities, including place-based working and the community councilor initiative.
- The Council is a respected partner locally and regionally. The Peer Team received positive feedback from a wide range of organisations within Test Valley about the Council's ambitions and work for the area. In addition, partner organisations outside of the borough highlighted the council's leadership role across Hampshire, including when working with other councils and discussing controversial issues such as devolution.
- There is a strong commitment to, and emerging plans for, Andover and Romsey – both members and officers recognise that there is a once in a generation opportunity for the borough's principal towns. The importance of delivering a clear vision and working closely with communities is recognised, and there is already a focus on delivery in Andover.
- The Council's self-awareness is growing and there is an appetite to improve. This is evidenced by a willingness to work with others, including other local authorities and national bodies, to assess progress and develop new solutions.
- The Council has a focus on sound financial investments and a significant economic growth agenda. It is an opportune time for the Council to develop an overarching investment strategy and narrative aligned with the corporate plan and its priorities, including the relative importance of securing a financial return to address future funding challenges, supporting economic growth and achieving other social and community benefits.
- The Council could communicate its achievements more effectively, including its role in community projects and developments. Communications, including social media use, should be at the heart of the Council's approach to better engage residents and stakeholders about the Council's vision and delivery

successes. There may also be additional opportunities for the council to better communicate with parish councils.

- The scale of change in Test Valley – and in particular local regeneration activity in Andover – will mean the Council will need to explore different approaches, secure additional capacity in some areas and benefit from new skills. A joint venture partnership should be considered in order to bring relevant expertise, and extra resources, to support the regeneration of Andover town centre.
- The Council's work on the development of a people strategy is a positive step and will support a strategic approach to workforce issues. The Council is also considering aspects of its governance, including arrangements for planning decisions.

3.2 As a result, the Peer Team identified eight recommendations within the Feedback Report that the Council could develop further as part of its onward commitment to improvement. These are as follows:

1. Communicate consistently the Council's excellent investments and community leadership on leisure, economic and community projects.
2. Explore different funding models, including joint ventures, to deliver further investment and economic growth opportunities.
3. Develop a strong narrative that sets out the linkages between the Council's proactive growth and regeneration role set out in Andover Vision and Romsey Future and the Council's approach to investment.
4. Continue to be a strong voice for Test Valley in Hampshire.
5. Develop, and co-design with staff, a workforce strategy for the Council, including a focus on the skills and behaviours needed to meet changing demands.
6. Reconsider decision making arrangements for planning informed by the forthcoming PAS review.
7. Maintain support and resources for the community councillor initiative beyond May 2019 and explore further opportunities for parish council engagement and information sharing on service and policy issues.
8. Continue to improve communications, including the use of social media. Communications should be at the heart of the decision making process and seen as everyone's agenda.

4 Response to the findings and recommendations of the Peer Team

4.1 In response to the eight recommendations identified by the Peer Team, a draft proposed action plan (attached in annex 2) has been developed and is recommended for approval by Cabinet.

- 4.2 In addition to the eight recommendations that the action plan responds to, the Peer Team also highlighted two further areas within the main body of their report for consideration. These are namely; the comments on page 9 of the Peer Challenge Feedback Report in respect of the current timings of committee and council meetings, and page 10, regarding further exploration of the common causes of underspends within the council's budget. It is proposed these issues are addressed and developed further under section 9 of the Action Plan - "other issues".

5 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

- 5.1 Peer Challenges are improvement focused and tailored to meet the needs of the Council, they form part of the LGA's Sector-Led Improvement programme and are voluntary processes. The Council is committed to continuous improvement which forms a core part of the Operating Model as set out in the Corporate Plan 2015-19.
- 5.2 The additional areas of focus that the Council asked the Peer Team to review form a key part of making progress against the current corporate priorities Live, Work, Enjoy and Contribute.
- 5.3 As the new Corporate Plan is prepared in 2019, the findings from the Peer Challenge will form part of the evidence base that will be used to shape the Council's next plan.

6 Consultations/Communications

- 6.1 Throughout the Peer Challenge the team spoke to more than 230 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.

7 Options

- 7.1 Cabinet has the options to approve the Action Plan, approve with amendments or not approve.

8 Risk Management

- 8.1 An evaluation of the risks indicates that the existing controls in place mean that no significant risks have been identified at this time. Actions identified within the Action Plan will be subject to risk assessment as part of the council's performance and project management framework.

9 Resource Implications

- 9.1 None

10 Legal Implications

- 10.1 None

11 Equality Issues

11.1 None

12 Other Issues

12.1 Wards/Communities Affected – All

13 Conclusion and reasons for recommendation

13.1 The Corporate Peer Challenge process forms a key part of the Local Government Association's Sector-led improvement programme. The Peer Challenge was not an inspection; it focuses on improvement and is tailored to the needs of the Council which will support the onward delivery of key strategic priorities.

13.2 The Action Plan enables the Council to demonstrate how it will practically take forward the improvement areas identified by the Peer Team and provide a basis on which to measure progress.

Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)
Feedback Report and Action Plan

Confidentiality

It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.

No of Annexes:	2	File Ref:	N/A
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(Portfolio: Leader) Councillor North

Officer:	James Moody	Ext:	8130
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Report to:	Cabinet	Date:	16 January 2019
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