

# Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan

Report of the Leader

## Recommended:

**That the Action Plan, as shown in the Annex to the report, in response to the nine recommendations of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge be approved.**

### SUMMARY:

- This report provides details of the outcomes of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge and presents an action plan, responding to each of the nine recommendations.
- A collaborative process has been undertaken to draft the action plan, involving officers, Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny members.

## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report provides the details of the outcomes of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge and presents an action plan developed by the council which to each of the nine recommendations highlighted by the Peer Team.

## 2 Background

- 2.1 The Local Government Association (LGA) was invited to carry out a Corporate Peer Challenge with the Council in November 2024. The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge took place from 19 - 22 November 2024. The feedback report was received by the council on 7 January 2025 and was published via the council's website on 13 February 2025.
- 2.2 Corporate Peer Challenge forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of finance, performance and governance to provide robust, strategic and credible challenge and support.
- 2.3 All Corporate Peer Challenges consider the following five themes:
- (a) **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
  - (b) **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?

- (c) **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
  - (d) **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? What is the relative financial resilience of the council like?
  - (e) **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?
- 2.4 In addition to the five core elements outlined above, the council also asked the peer team to focus on how the council can further embed its place-based approach throughout the organisation.
- 2.5 Ahead of the review itself, significant background information was submitted as part of a position statement which brought together views and insights from council officers and councillors to present an accurate and reflective picture of the council and its work with communities and partners.
- 2.6 The review was carried out over three and a half days in November 2024 and the team spoke to over 100 people including council officers, councillors and partners. Conversations took place in one to ones, small focus groups and larger group discussions, showcasing and testing the different ways in which officers and councillors work together to deliver for our communities.
- 2.7 The council was required to publish the feedback report within three months of the review and prepare and publish an action plan responding to the recommendations within five months of the review.

### **3 Outcomes of the Corporate Peer Challenge**

- 3.1 The report describes the council as ‘a high-performing council that delivers effectively for its residents, with a commendable community-first approach and a strong sense of pride throughout the organisation’. It highlights notable strengths around leadership, the development of its workforce to work in a place-based way, its approach to partnership working and its robust governance arrangements and financial management.
- 3.2 The report sets out nine recommendations for the council to consider as part of its onward development. These are as follows:
- (a) **Recommendation 1: Place Leadership.** Continue strengthening your leadership role with partners across the region. Consider how the well respected and well-regarded reputation of the Leader and Chief Executive within and beyond the County could facilitate agreed policy positions on key issues impacting residents and businesses
  - (b) **Recommendation 2: Housing Delivery.** The changes to the National Policy Planning Framework (NPPF) and national housing targets will be a challenge for the Test Valley communities through the Local Plan process. The Council needs to build on the success of its community engagement and bolster those robust and honest conversations at pace.

- (c) **Recommendation 3: Transformation.** The council is beginning its transformation journey and taking time to reflect; however, an articulation of what transformation means for the Council is paramount for clarity, whilst twin tracking some quick wins around digitalisation and IT.
- (d) **Recommendation 4: Community Councillor Approach.** Continue to build on the success of the Community Councillor approach through review and shared learning, whilst exploring longevity of funds available to community councillors.
- (e) **Recommendation 5: Audit.** Strengthen audit through the appointment of an independent member along with increased use of third-party internal audit services, such as the Southern Internal Audit partnership to develop skills, resilience and capability.
- (f) **Recommendation 6: Performance and Data.** Strengthen the use of performance and data to better inform continuous service improvement, evaluation of impact, benefit and value for residents.
- (g) **Recommendation 7: Digitalisation.** Expedite your digitalisation strategy to improve service delivery.
- (h) **Recommendation 8: Communications.** Communications is at the heart of all Council activity and success. Consider an LGA Led Communications review to build on this.
- (i) **Recommendation 9: Workforce.** Continue to build on your current investment in the workforce to grow the leaders of tomorrow, today.

3.3 The review has provided valuable insight along with clear feedback and recommendations which have now been considered and form the basis of the action plan included as an annex to this report. The action plan has been prepared collaboratively, involving Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny members and officers from across the council to explore the practical things that can be undertaken to address the recommendations highlighted by the peer team.

3.4 The action plan must be published within five months of the review (22 April 2025). The LGA will carry out a further review of progress made against the action plan in October 2025.

## 4 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

4.1 The Council's Corporate Plan sets out a clear vision to work collaboratively to deliver high quality services that support all communities in Test Valley to thrive. Our five strategic priorities: Sustainability, Prosperity, Inclusion, Connection and Environment set the focus for how we will do this. Our priority on sustainability focuses on delivering lasting benefits for our communities which requires the council to take a long-term view, and invest its energy, skills and resources in the right way to achieve our vision. This includes ensuring that all our plans are financially viable, and that we continue to develop as an organisation in order to deliver results.

4.2 The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge has undertaken a robust and thorough review of the council and its ability to deliver against its corporate priorities. The recommendations it has provided and the resulting action plan will support the council in its onward development.

## **5 Consultations/Communications**

- 5.1 The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge feedback report has been published via the council's website.
- 5.2 The nine recommendations have been considered by senior officers, Cabinet members and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Suggestions and ideas to take these recommendations forward have been collated into the action plan, showing milestones and dates they will be achieved.

## **6 Options**

- 6.1 The attached action plan has been prepared in consultation with councillors and officers. The proposed actions respond to each of the nine recommendations and seek to drive forward delivery against key strategic objectives. To encourage openness and transparency in the Peer Challenge process, the LGA require that the action plan is published by 22 April 2025. Progress against these actions will be reviewed by the LGA peer team when they revisit the council on 1 October 2025.
- 6.2 Option 1. Cabinet approve the proposed action plan with no changes. The action plan has been prepared in consultation with officers and councillors and the areas identified will ensure good progress is made against each recommendation, within a realistic and achievable timeframe.
- 6.3 Option 2. Cabinet propose an amendment to the action plan and approve on that basis. Any minor changes required to the action plan can be incorporated. This is unlikely to affect the council's ability to respond to the recommendations within the required timescales.
- 6.4 Option 3. Cabinet request that further work is done on the action plan and request this is brought back at a later date. The council is required to publish the action plan by 22 April 2025. Any major revisions at this stage would potentially affect the council's ability to meet this deadline. Key stakeholders have been involved in the preparation of the proposed action plan therefore it is unlikely any significant additional or different actions would be identified.

## **7 Risk Management**

- 7.1 An evaluation of the risks indicates that the existing controls in place mean that no significant risks have been identified at this time.

## **8 Resource Implications**

- 8.1 It is anticipated that progress against the action plan will, in the main, be delivered within existing resources and through the council's service planning process.
- 8.2 Where additional resource is required, for example to deliver some of the digital and transformation actions, established reserves and budgets will be utilised. Where appropriate, additional budget approvals will be sought in accordance with the council's financial procedure rules.

## 9 Legal Implications

9.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this recommendation.

## 10 Equality Issues

10.1 There are no direct equality issues at this time, should any arise during the delivery of progress against the action plan, these will be appropriately considered and Equality Impact Assessments carried out where necessary.

## 11 Conclusion

11.1 This report provides details of the outcomes of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge and the nine key recommendations for the council to consider and respond to.

11.2 A collaborative process has been undertaken to draft the responding action plan, involving officers and councillors. The action plan is included as an annex to this report for Cabinet to consider and approve.

11.3 The proposed actions have been designed to respond to the recommendations from the review but also to further embed the council's place-based work with communities.

11.4 The LGA peer team will review progress against the action plan when they return to the council on 1 October 2025.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
None			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
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:	1	File Ref:	N/A
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Report to:	Cabinet	Date:	9 April 2025