

Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 13 April 2021

Report Title: Cheshire East Council Corporate Peer Challenge Report – One Year On

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Jill Rhodes, Public Health and Corporate Services

Senior Officer: Jane Burns, Executive Director of Corporate Services

1. Report Summary

- 1.1** In January 2020, Cheshire East Council hosted its first Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC). Facilitated by the Local Government Association (LGA), a peer team consisting of councillors and senior officers from local authorities around the UK examined the Council's leadership, governance, financial planning and capacity to deliver its priorities. This is part of a commitment to local government leading its own improvement.
- 1.2** The team spent four days on-site in Cheshire East, during which they:
- Spoke to over 180 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders.
 - Gathered information and views from more than 40 discussions, focus groups and observing regular meetings as well as additional research and reading.
 - Visited key sites of the borough to look at practice in action and engaged with staff at other locations.
 - Collectively spent c. 270 hours on-site to determine their findings, the equivalent of one person spending eight weeks in Cheshire East.
- 1.3** A final report of their findings was received and reported to Cabinet in June 2020.

- 1.4** The CPC Peer Team, in its feedback presentation when on site and in a written report (Appendix A), delivered the following key observations and recommendations:

2. Key recommendations:

- 2.1** Continue with the Council's commitment to staff culture and wider workplace wellbeing.
- 2.2** Develop and launch a new Corporate Plan.
- 2.3** Provide clarity regarding the process, decisions and timelines for the introduction of the Committee System.
- 2.4** Finalise technical and political decisions that will underpin the new Committee System.
- 2.5** Consider the strategic and operational context in which the Committee System will be operating.
- 2.6** Refine the council's approach to strategic finance and create dialogue regarding collective appetite to risk.
- 2.7** Communicate priorities for working in a partnership environment and learn the lessons of historic practice and approaches.
- 2.8** Refine the work programme and focus of Scrutiny Committees to support internal challenge and improvement.
- 2.9** Develop new approaches to engage councillors in neighbourhood working.
- 2.10** Review the findings of the 2019 Resident Survey to inform future relations with residents.

3. Recommendation

- 3.1** That Cabinet note the progress to date, and the delivery of key actions to respond to the Corporate Peer Challenge recommendations.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1** The recommendations made by the Corporate Peer Challenge Team reflect what the Council fed back at the time on the LGA's 'healthcheck' on our overall strategic direction and planning. They have been used to reflect on the future direction of the Council and to inform the refresh of the council's Corporate Plan for 2021-2025.

5. Other Options Considered

- 5.1 None. The Council welcomed the opportunity to host a Corporate Peer Challenge visit and would want to demonstrate positive action to respond to the recommendations.

6. Background

- 6.1 Since 2012 the Local Government Association (LGA) has provided, as part of its support to the sector, the facilitation of Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) reviews whereby senior members and officers from other local authorities, supported by LGA staff, visit the Council with the objective to provide constructive feedback to inform improvement plans and support corporate learning.

- 6.2 The peer team considered the following five lines of enquiry which form the core components of all CPCs. These are the areas believed to be critical to councils' performance and improvement:

- **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?
- **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?
- **Political and managerial leadership:** Does the Council provide effective political and managerial leadership through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
- **Governance and decision-making:** Is political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change to be implemented?

- 6.3 In addition to these, the Council asked the peer team to provide feedback on the workforce culture, as well as the organisational approach to internal assurance.

- 6.4** This has been subsequently followed by a formal report (Appendix A), summarising the peer team's feedback with their recommendations for improvement. There was a delay between the date of the visit and the receipt of the report because of the impact of COVID-19.
- 6.5** During the last 12 months, the Council has made considerable progress on all of the key recommendations, as follows;

6.5.1 Recommendation 1: Continue with the council's commitment to staff culture and wider wellbeing.

The following extract from the report provides a helpful summary:

The Corporate Peer Challenge Team spent four days on site in Cheshire East. During this time the Team spoke to a broad range of stakeholders, including staff, councillors, and partner organisations. The team received a broad range of feedback and were struck by the positivity of the staff working for the organisation, and the remarkable progress that has been made in improving workforce culture in a relatively short space of time. The importance of this work was illustrated by clear leadership and commitment, including the determination of councillors to drive and prioritise improvement. These messages were received from multiple levels within the organisation and this improvement has been embedded across multiple teams and locations. These improvements in culture have also supported the council to advance their internal assurance, with officers stating their comfort to 'call out' and 'professionally challenge' practice when appropriate. Alongside this cultural shift, the Team recognised the practical actions that have been taken, including improved management oversight and the development of supporting assurance frameworks and action plans.

- All of the recommendations set out in the LGA culture review have now been addressed and work continues to embed the vision for workplace culture, values, behaviours and employee deal across the Council.
- The Council has done a considerable amount of work to support wellbeing and a large proportion of the workforce working remotely. A Pulse survey of staff carried out in July 2020 was positive for example 83% of staff agreed communications has been effective and 75% agreed the Council has provided effective wellbeing support. <http://moderngov.cheshireeast.gov.uk/ecminutes/document/s/s79451/Covid%20Report%20-%20app%202.pdf> A second Pulse survey is underway which will give further insight.
- The wellbeing of staff has been an essential part of the Council's Covid-19 response. This has included weekly Talk Listen and Chat (TLC) meetings and weekly Manager Support calls. These forums have fed into the workplace workstream to inform the planning towards new ways of working and has also resulted in the

development of a workplace wellbeing conversation toolkit for staff, additional e-learning and virtual training and the introduction of 'Golden Practices' 1 and 2, which focus on staff wellbeing.

- The Brighter Future Champions continue to support the other work streams within the Brighter Future Transformation Programme. Virtual meetings of the Champions have continued to be held on a monthly basis throughout the Covid pandemic with the Chief Executive, providing a valuable source of staff engagement.

6.5.2 Recommendation 2: Develop and launch a new Corporate Plan.

- The Cheshire East Council Corporate Plan for 2021-2025 has been developed following consultation and engagement between 1 October 2020 and 27 November 2020. The feedback was positive, with the clear support for the Council's proposed vision and the main priorities.
- In February 2021, both Cabinet and full Council approved the Corporate Plan for 2021-2025. By developing the Corporate Plan alongside the MTFS, we have ensured that the plan is resources. The full engagement reports on both documents were published. The new Corporate Plan promotes a vision of an Open, Fairer, Greener Cheshire East.
- The Corporate Plan will now provide the foundation and basis for all business planning and will inform the development of a new performance framework to measure the success of the plan and support the delivery of the new committee structure of governance.

6.5.3 Recommendations 3, 4 & 5: Provide clarity regarding the process, decisions and timelines for the introduction of a committee system.

- On 19th November, a special meeting of Council took place, specifically convened to consider recommendations from the Council's Constitution Committee, relating to a proposed change of governance arrangements, from the existing Leader and Cabinet model of decision-making, to a Committee System of decision-making.
- Council agreed the Constitution Committee's recommendations, and also agreed that the new

arrangements will be implemented with effect from the Council's Annual General Meeting in May 2021.

- Preparations are happening at pace to secure implementation which will be considered by Council on 19 April. Members and officers will undertake training and further work will be undertaken to ensure that the Council's Constitution is suitably amended in line with the wishes of Council.

6.5.4 Recommendation 6: Refine the council's approach to strategic finance and create dialogue regarding collective appetite to risk.

- 2020/21 has seen unprecedented financial challenges for all councils, including Cheshire East. The financial implications of COVID-19 started to emerge in March 2020 and have been regularly tracked and monitored since then. Regular reports have been brought to Cabinet, Corporate OSC and the Audit and Governance Committee.
- Within year budget forecasting and reporting demonstrates that the council has lived within its budget for the first time in many years.
- A new four-year balanced Medium-Term Financial Strategy has been developed and approved by Cabinet and Council in February 2021. This aligns to the new Corporate Plan and reflects investment in services to support those most in need, vital infrastructure and essential services. It has a focus on modern and efficient working practices.

6.5.5 Recommendation 7: Communicate priorities for working in a partnership environment and learn the lessons of historic practice and approaches.

- The local response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been a partnership response which has strengthened working across Cheshire East and the wider sub-region. This has been vital to the delivery of the borough-wide response to protect our residents.

- There continues to be regular communication and engagement with partners on their priorities and opportunities for support and joint working.
- The new Corporate Plan clearly articulates the ambition and the vital importance of for partnership working to deliver priorities as they are laid out.

6.5.6 Recommendation 8: Refine the work programme and focus of Scrutiny Committees to support internal challenge and improvement.

- Overview and Scrutiny Committees have continued to set and drive their own agendas. A full report was presented to Council on 21 October 2020.
- Scrutiny arrangements in the new Committee System will focus on a single scrutiny committee covering statutory scrutiny functions.

6.5.7 Recommendation 9: Develop new approaches to engage councillors in neighbourhood working.

- This has been identified as a priority in the new Corporate Plan. Further work will be taken forward through the new committee system.
- Council on 17 February 2021 agreed to devolve Ward Member Budgets for highways-related activities in 2021/22.

6.5.8 Recommendation 10: Review the findings of the 2019 Residents Survey to inform future relations with residents.

- The Residents Survey concluded in November 2019 with a 46% response rate, (an improvement on the 2017 survey). The results of the survey have been shared with relevant service leads, including planning, customer services, highways and countryside rangers.
- The key findings have all been considered and have been included as areas for action in the refreshed **Corporate Plan 2021-25**.

- In addition to this, the Cabinet has recently approved a **Customer Experience Strategy**. The strategy shows a clear link to the Residents survey and how we can improve the customer journey and the overall experience and expectations of the council.
- We will continue to measure resident satisfaction and experience across our services to drive change and improvement.

6.6 The ten key recommendations from the CPC reflected back the issues of the day. Since then, the unprecedented circumstances of and response to Covid-19 has highlighted a need for further improvement which have informed the development of the Council's newly published Corporate Plan for 2021-2025.

6.7 Corporate Peer Challenges would ordinarily be followed up after 18-24 months. Again, Covid-19 has impacted on that expectation. Discussions are ongoing with our LGA Principal Adviser about appropriate arrangements in the circumstances.

7. Implications of the Recommendation

7.1. Legal Implications

7.1.1 Engaging in the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge and acting on the feedback is not mandated. The actions taken and progress to date, will however, assist the Council to meet its duty to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness (s 3 LGA 1999).

7.1.2 As work continues and actions are identified, any direct legal implications which will be considered individually and in line with the actions required.

8.2 Finance Implications

8.2.1 The cost of the Corporate Peer Challenge was included within the authority's annual subscription to the LGA. Other costs are internal and related to officer time. The cost of implementing the actions resulting from the recommendations continue to be met from current budgets (unless separately identified and agreed as part of the budget setting and approval process).

8.2.2 There is no direct impact on the council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) arising from this report.

8.3 Policy Implications

8.3.1 The findings from the Corporate Peer Challenge supports continue to be used to drive improvement and are reflected in the new Corporate Plan.

8.4 Equality Implications

8.4.1 The CPC feedback report was published on the council's website ensuring compliance with the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018.

8.5 Human Resources Implications

8.5.1 Implementing the required actions has required the support and contribution of several officers and members, including the Brighter Future Champions, equality champions and named officers linked to ongoing programmes of work such as the implementation of the committee system and the culture programme. This has been achieved within existing resource with management arrangements in place to consider skills and capacity.

8.5.2 The feedback report has clearly recognised the positive contribution of the council staff and members in engaging with the workforce culture programme, and a key recommendation is to ensure that this progress is continued and sustained.

8.6 Risk Management Implications

8.6.1 The Corporate Peer Challenge report did not identify significant risks.

8.7 Rural Communities Implications

8.7.1 Implementing any required actions will have indirect implications for our rural communities, which will be considered individually and in line with the actions required. For example, the Corporate Plan 2021-2025 includes priorities and commitments which will impact rural communities. These impacts will be considered and reported through individual work programmes as they are developed.

8.8 Implications for Children & Young People/Cared for Children

8.8.1 Implementing any required actions will have indirect implications for children and young people/cared for children, which will be considered individually and in line with the actions required. For example, the Corporate Plan 2021-2025 includes priorities and commitments which will impact children and young people/cared for children. These impacts will be considered and reported through individual work programmes as they are developed.

8.9 Public Health Implications

8.9.1 Implementing any required actions will have indirect implications for public health which will be considered individually and in line with the actions required. For example, the Corporate Plan 2021-2025 includes priorities and commitments which will impact the wider public health of the borough. These impacts will be considered and reported through individual work programmes as they are developed.

8.10 Climate Change Implications

8.10.1 Implementing any required actions will indirectly support the Council to reduce its carbon footprint and achieve environmental sustainability. For example, the Corporate Plan 2021-2025 includes priorities and commitments which will directly and specifically support environmental priorities and initiatives.

9.0 Ward Members Affected

9.1 Developing new approaches to engaging local members has been identified as a priority in the new Corporate Plan. Further work will be taken forward through the new committee system.

10.0 Consultation & Engagement

10.1 In preparing for the Corporate Peer Challenge the Council engaged with all officers and members, not only to raise awareness and understanding of the challenge week, but to seek representation and support to attend the 1-1 and focus group discussions.

10.2 As reported by the LGA over 180 people were spoken with during the four-day visit, and feedback sessions were offered to those that attended the meetings.

10.3 The Council will continue to consult, engage and collaborate with residents, officers and key stakeholders to determine the scope and focus of the work to be delivered over the short to medium term.

11.0 Access to Information

11.1 Further information on the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge programme can be found at:

<https://local.gov.uk/our-support/peer-challenges>

12.0 Contact Information

12.1 Any questions relating to this report should be directed to the following officer:

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