

OPEN

Council

17 July 2024

Corporate Peer Challenge Report

Report of: Rob Polkinghorne - Chief Executive

Report Reference No: C/8/24-25

Ward(s) Affected: All

Purpose of Report

- 1 To provide Council with the Corporate Peer Challenge report following the recent Local Government Association (LGA) review and opportunity to comment on the findings.
- 2 To provide Council with the approval route for the emerging draft action plan being developed in response to the LGA's recommendations to enable publication of the plan by 28 August 2024.

Executive Summary

- 3 Cheshire East Council invited the LGA to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge in March 2024.
- 4 The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges, and are key to councils' performance and improvement:
 - Local priorities and outcomes
 - Organisational and place leadership
 - Governance and culture
 - Financial planning and management
 - Capacity for improvement

- 5 Following a Corporate Peer Challenge, a report outlining the key findings and recommendations from the peer team is shared with the council and is required to be published. Cheshire East's report was published on the council and LGA websites on Monday 8 July 2024 and is at Appendix 1. Publication was delayed as the LGA did not publish any Corporate Peer Challenge reports in the lead up to the General Election.
- 6 Councils are required to develop and publish an action plan addressing the recommendations in the report within five months of the peer team being onsite so no later than 28 August 2024. The draft action plan in response to the 18 recommendations within the report is at Appendix 2.
- 7 Delivery of the Corporate Peer Challenge action plan is one of four critical improvement and transformation priorities requiring a council-wide response at this time, the others being ensuring financial sustainability, organisation wide transformation and Children's Services improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council is recommended to:

1. Note and comment on the [Corporate Peer Challenge report](#) at Appendix 1.
2. Agree the draft Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan.
3. Delegate authority to the Chief Executive to finalise the Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan and arrange for its publication by 28th August 2024 as required by the LGA.

Background

- 8 Cheshire East Council invited the LGA to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge in March 2024. The peer team, made up of cross-party Members and officers from other councils and representatives of the LGA, were onsite from 25-28 March 2024.
- 9 The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges, and are key to councils' performance and improvement:
 - Local priorities and outcomes
 - Organisational and place leadership

- Governance and culture
 - Financial planning and management
 - Capacity for improvement
- 10 Following a Corporate Peer Challenge, a report outlining the key findings and recommendations from the peer team is shared with the council and is required to be published. Cheshire East's report was published on the council and LGA websites on Monday 8 July 2024 and is at Appendix 1. Publication was delayed as the LGA did not publish any Corporate Peer Challenge reports in the lead up to the General Election.
 - 11 The peer team heard examples of good services that are appreciated by residents and that there is a willingness for improvement which is seen as a priority across the organisation. However, they also recognised that the council urgently needs to focus on significant challenges, including the financial position and longer-term transformation.
 - 12 The report includes 18 recommendations which have been prioritised by the peer team on the grounds of urgency, sequencing, and importance.
 - 13 Councils are required to develop and publish an action plan addressing the recommendations in the report within five months of the peer team being onsite so no later than 28 August 2024. The draft action plan is at Appendix 2 and progress is being made at pace in many areas.
 - 14 The action plan also includes two additional actions relating to Children's Services improvement while not specific recommendations are significant issues referenced within the report and which the council is taking action to address closely linked to the overall transformation programme.
 - 15 Development of the action plan is ongoing. The plan will be shared with the Assurance Panel (see separate agenda item) in August before publication as required by the LGA.
 - 16 Progress against the action plan will be reported to the Assurance Panel and will be central to the LGA and peer team's Progress Review expected to be completed in winter 2024.

Consultation and Engagement

- 17 The peer team spoke to approximately 165 people including a mixture of Councillors, officers, partners and residents during the peer challenge process to inform the report and recommendations.

- 18 The draft action plan has been informed by activity that is already planned and in progress. Engagement with Corporate Leadership Team and the Wider Leadership Community. The plan will be further informed by the feedback from the Member briefing sessions on 10 and 12 July.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 19 To provide Council with the Corporate Peer Challenge report and emerging action plan in line with LGA expectations and good practice following the recent review.
- 20 To enable a decision route for approval of the action plan before publication on 28 August 2024 as required by the LGA.
- 21 Recommendations 1 and 2 ensure the Council is fully conversant with the information that will be published to meet the LGA's expectations by 28 August 2024. There is no Corporate Policy Committee meeting prior to that date. Unless Full Council wishes for final member approval via committee (example a potential date on 21 August 2024) the final document must be approved by the Chief Executive.

Other Options Considered

- 22 No other options considered due to the need to meet the LGA's requirements of a Corporate Peer Challenge.

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 23 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report and whilst there is no statutory requirement to undertake a peer review the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge is seen as a valuable improvement and assurance tool.
- 24 The action plan contains proposed activity to improve governance and compliance, which will require advice and support from both Legal and Democratic Services as the final plan is confirmed and during implementation.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 25 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. The action plan contains activity to address the council's serious financial situation, many of which are already actively in progress. Addressing the Corporate Peer Challenge recommendations through delivery of the action plan will be an important part of demonstrating the council's compliance with Best Value principles.

Policy

- 26 No direct impact. Addressing the recommendations will support the delivery of the council's overall vision and aims within the Cheshire East Plan 2024/25.

An open and enabling organisation.	A council which empowers and cares about people.	A thriving and sustainable place.
---	---	--

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 27 No direct impact. The report recognises the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion and need to ensure the council supports and embeds this agenda.

Human Resources

- 28 No direct impact. The report and action plan makes reference to work to ensure capacity and capability for change and improvement.

Risk Management

- 29 No direct impact. The action plan contains proposed activity to further ensure effective risk management.

Rural Communities

- 30 No direct impact.

Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

- 31 No direct impact. The action plan includes additional actions relating to Children's Services improvement while not specific recommendations in the Corporate Peer Challenge report are significant issues referenced within the report which the council is taking action to address.

Public Health

- 32 No direct impact.

Climate Change

- 33 No direct impact.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Karen Wheeler, Interim Director of Policy and Change karen.wheeler@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Corporate Peer Challenge Report Appendix 2 – Draft Action Plan
Background Papers:	None