

## LGA Corporate Peer Challenge: Findings and Initial Response

Date: 14<sup>th</sup> December 2022

Report of: Chief Executive

Report to: Executive Board

Will the decision be open for call in?  Yes  No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?  Yes  No

### Brief summary

This report provides Executive Board with the findings and recommendations of the recent Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge which took place in November 2022. Most councils have a Peer Challenge approximately every five years, with the last one in Leeds taking place in 2016.

The on-site period was 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> November 2022, with a Peer Challenge team of six, led by Georgia Gould (Leader, Camden Council) and Pat Ritchie (former Chief Executive, Newcastle City Council). In addition to a position statement from Leeds and extensive background information, the Peer Challenge team held in the region of 60 meetings and met more than 160 colleagues and partners. The timing of the Peer Challenge was helpful as part of assessing progress against the Best City Ambition, given the financial challenge and as part of the post-Covid reset and recovery.

The Peer Challenge report has only just been received, so action planning is underway rather than complete. Their headline findings were that there is *passion and ambition for the city, with the move to the Best City Ambition helping to further galvanise the city with partners feeling well supported and committed, and that finances are well-managed, but the scale of the challenge is significant, with staff being stretched and priorities requiring even greater focus.*

We fully accept the findings and recommendations and will report an Action Plan to the next Executive Board meeting. The approach to action planning will be to use the findings to refresh the Best City Ambition and our organisational and financial planning, leading into a follow-up visit from the Peer Challenge team in summer 2023.

### Recommendations

Members of Executive Board are asked to:

- a) Note the findings and recommendations of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge report.
- b) Note the approach to action planning and the timing of the follow-up visit.

## What is this report about?

- 1 This report provides Executive Board with an overview of the Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Challenge of the council that took place in November 2022. The report summarises the scope of the Peer Challenge and the approach taken by the Challenge team, the findings and recommendations, the council's initial response and the further work planned.
- 2 Earlier this year, the council requested the LGA lead an independent Corporate Peer Challenge to help assess progress towards our Best City Ambition, the financial challenge and post-pandemic recovery and recommend where we could improve further. The [Local Government Association \(LGA\) Peer Challenge Framework](#) covers five core components to measure a council's performance and improvement, with the option to examine other areas identified with the individual councils.

### LGA core components

- Local place and priority setting
  - Organisational and place leadership
  - Governance and Culture
  - Financial planning and management
  - Capacity for improvement
- 2 In addition, through discussion with the LGA and the development of our position statement, the following additional review areas were agreed: partnership working; the localities model; and the council's relationship with the West Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority.
  - 3 The Challenge team consisted of six peers: Georgia Gould (Leader, Camden Council); Pat Ritchie (former Chief Executive, Newcastle City Council); Sarah Reed (Executive Director of Corporate Services, West Northamptonshire Council); Mark Fowler (Corporate Director Population Wellbeing, Luton Borough Council); Jon Rowney (Executive Director Corporate Services, Camden Council); and Judith Hurcombe (LGA).
  - 4 The team prepared for their time in Leeds by reviewing the council's position statement together with supporting documentation to familiarise themselves with the council, the challenges it faces and its ambitions. During their four-day visit the team spoke to over 160 people, including Elected Members, colleagues from across the council and a range of partners through approximately 60 meetings.
  - 5 Full details of the team, its scope and focus, and the process followed can be found in the Corporate Peer Challenge feedback report, included as Appendix 1 to this report.

## What impact will this proposal have?

### Key Messages from the Peer Challenge

- 6 The full report is attached as Appendix 1 and will be unpacked in more detail when the Action Plan comes forward to Executive Board in the New Year. However, as a broad overview below are some of the headline findings and observations the peers made:
  - There is passion and ambition for the city, with the move to the Best City Ambition helping to further galvanise the city with partners feeling well supported and committed.
  - Partnership working is seen as a big strength both within the city and beyond, with excellent buy-in with Anchor organisations and a strong collaborative approach, especially with the voluntary and community sector.
  - A smooth transition on political leadership and collaborative can-do leadership style is seen across the council and city.
  - There are the ingredients required for a great locality-based system, with the buy-in of local community organisations in particular being recognised, but one that needs bringing together.

- Progress on low carbon agenda is excellent and we are delivering outstanding people-based services across the city.
- Finances are well-managed, but the scale of the challenge is significant, with staff being stretched and priorities requiring even greater focus along with a focus on wellbeing.

### Recommendations from the Peer Challenge

7 The Peer Challenge team have made 15 recommendations which can be found listed in the attached report at Appendix 1. For the purposes of our future action planning, the recommendations are grouped around five themes, which can be found below.

#### **Values, Culture and Workforce**

- Keep being Leeds, keep being ambitious and living the values of collaboration, compassion and convening.
- Be mindful of the risk of staff burnout and provide clarity about priorities especially as budgets further reduce. Capacity at some levels is stretched and some employees are worried about the health and wellbeing of their colleagues.
- Build on the success of the EDI champions network and strengthen corporate champions at the senior level to support the further development and embedding of EDI in the council.

#### **Locality Working**

- Review locality working to improve clarity and coherence for the council, partners and communities:
  - Ensure shared understanding of priority areas, underpinned by work on indices of deprivation.
  - Map out services and existing assets, and through a collaborative process, review locality arrangements to potentially cluster and consolidate where this would add value and efficiency.
  - Review and align service provision geographies with health, education/clusters, and the voluntary sector.
  - Consider how to further strengthen place-based networks.
  - In this context, review and develop the community committees and draw on the work of the Social Progress Index to measure progress.
- Invest in member development on strengths-based community development. Councillors' ambitions for their communities are clear but as the council's resources reduce members have an important role to play in supporting communities to be able to do more for themselves.

#### **Financial Planning**

- Consider a more outcomes focused and evidence-based approach to medium-term financial planning. As budgets reduce the development of a more consistent and clearer set of guiding principles and criteria to drive the budget process is needed to help bring consistency across the council.
- Prepare for the financial challenges ahead Although there is some awareness of future budget pressures, it is not yet widely understood in terms of the scale and impact on council and its ability to deliver. The council needs to develop a clear and robust plan and process to address the council's budget gap, which further mitigates risk.
- Take best practice on specialist commissioning and robust financial management from the Adults and Health directorate into the Children and Families directorate.

#### **Transformation approach as an organisation**

- Develop capacity for transformation and change Incorporate a stronger user design focus, bringing existing teams together horizontally across the council and bringing in new capacity and skills. Further develop an evidence-led approach, supported by insight for prioritisation.
- Use the opportunity of the digital transformation to co-produce with middle managers a system that is more agile and responsive to their needs on the ground.

- Use the opportunity of the new leadership team to review and develop strong practice in Children's and Families in light of the MacAlister review and strengthen collaboration between Children's and Families and Adults and Health services in communities.

### **Work beyond the city**

- As the Mayoral Combined Authority develops use the Leader's and Chief Executive's leadership roles to help further strengthen relationships. Some stakeholders feel a peer challenge would be a helpful catalyst at this stage.
- There is an opportunity to be a new national exemplar for community-led integrated public service delivery. For example, starting with a new model of home care and a wide range of community services and activities, and net zero projects
- Leeds is undoubtedly a beacon of best practice across the country. Continue to influence and improve policy and practice in partnership with national and local government.
- Leeds could work with anchors and city partners to strengthen further their campaigning and lobbying on the financial challenge and the need for investment in the Leeds transport infrastructure to maintain their major contribution to the city and the economy.

### Action Planning and Reporting

- 8 The work to develop an Action Plan will be quick so we can maintain the momentum garnered by the Peer Challenge, but also engaging to ensure strong ownership amongst officers, members and partners. It will be focused on the five themes of the Peer Challenge recommendations and include engagement with Chief Officers, broader colleagues and key partners such as Anchor institutions and the Third sector. Reporting against the Action Plan will largely take place through existing reporting routes, for example the Corporate Annual Performance report and Equality Improvement Priority reporting.
- 9 Where possible, the recommendations are already informing work that is underway rather than waiting for the Action Plan. In other areas we are moving forward in the most sensible and pragmatic way, for example the recommendations about financial planning will be progressed after the Budget has been agreed at Full Council in February 2023. Our action planning will provide renewed emphasis and drive to support another push on relaunching the current version of the Best City Ambition, building on the positive feedback the peers provided. Many of the big opportunities identified in the Challenge report are trailed in full or in part in the Ambition, particularly around the Team Leeds approach. We will look to strengthen this further soon, as outlined below.

### Responding to the Recommendations in our Strategy and Planning

- 10 Several of the Peer Challenge recommendations support the direction of travel set out in the Best City Ambition and provide guidance on how the council and our partners can strengthen this further. These written recommendations were supplemented by the verbal feedback received from peers while they were on-site. In 2023 we will refresh the Ambition in full, providing an opportunity to embed the recommendations into our future planning. In the interim we will continue to focus on how to further embed, communicate and build broader ownership around the Ambition.
- 11 Alongside the Best City Ambition the Peer Challenge recommendations – particularly those around values, culture, transformation and financial planning – will inform the next stage of internal organisational planning. The intention is to produce a refreshed plan outlining our detailed response and priorities in these areas by April 2023, in time to feed into appraisals and objective setting.
- 12 Preparation of the two pieces of work outlined above will run alongside the Peer Challenge Action Plan and together culminate in the peers' return visit in summer 2023.

## How does this proposal impact the three pillars of the Best City Ambition?

Health and Wellbeing

Inclusive Growth

Zero Carbon

13 The focus of the Peer Challenge was on the Best City Ambition, with the on-site phase including a focused group discussion on each of the three pillars and the position statement providing background information as well as links to more detailed individual strategies and performance reports. The recommendations will also impact on work to progress the three pillars, including the strategy refresh process that is underway for the Health and Wellbeing and Inclusive Growth strategies, with further detail of this will be in the Action Plan to be reported to the next Executive Board meeting.

## What consultation and engagement has taken place?

Wards affected:

Have ward members been consulted?

Yes

No

14 Preparing for the Peer Challenge involved drafting a position statement about strengths and areas for development, based on key documents such as the Annual Performance report, other Executive Board papers and contributions from colleagues, for example case studies. Briefing material about the nature of a Peer Challenge and the LGA Framework was provided to those meeting the Peer Challenge team, along with a copy of the position statement. Reference to the Peer Challenge process was included in staff, member and partner communications in recent months.

15 The Peer Challenge team had various engagement and consultation as part of their visit. The team were accessible to staff from all levels and proceeded to seek views from as many people as possible. During the four days on-site the team:

- Spoke to more than 160 people, which included council staff, councillors, external partners, and stakeholders.
- They also met with a range of councillors, including some Group Leaders, Scrutiny Board Chairs and Community Committee Chairs.
- Gathered information and views from more than 60 meetings, four workshops (which were based on the three pillars and an additional one on the cost of living), along with additional documentation provided at the team's request.

16 The Peer Challenge report is being shared with colleagues, members and partners along with a note setting out that Executive Board will be considering the approach to action planning and that we will keep colleagues and stakeholders updated.

## What are the resource implications?

17 There are no specific resource implications from the Peer Challenge report at this stage. Any subsequent implications will be picked up as part of the regular budget planning, monitoring, and reporting cycle.

## What are the key risks and how are they being managed?

18 As the Action Plan is progressed, risks will be a consideration in line with the regular approach to risk management and reporting.

## **What are the legal implications?**

19 There are no specific legal implications arising from the Peer Challenge report at this stage. Any that arise will be picked up as part of progressing the recommendations through the council's regular governance routes.

## **Options, timescales and measuring success**

### **What other options were considered?**

20 LGA Corporate Peer Challenges are carried out approximately every five years and this was undertaken under the normal framework, although it was slightly delayed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Leeds could have chosen not to have a Peer Challenge but given that the previous one provided valuable insight that was not considered the best option. As a learning organisation, many colleagues, members and partners embraced the Peer Challenge and engaged with the team to get valuable insight and recommendations.

### **How will success be measured?**

21 Developing a clear Action Plan is the first stage of success, leading into the refresh of the Best City Ambition and organisational and financial planning. The follow up visit in summer 2023 will be a further method of assessing progress with the recommendations. Success will then be measured by regular reporting through the Annual Performance report.

### **What is the timetable and who will be responsible for implementation?**

22 The Action Plan will be reported to Executive Board in February 2023, with the next Best City Ambition report also being reported on that agenda, and the Annual Performance report being reported in summer 2023. The result of the follow up Peer Challenge visit is likely to be reported to Executive Board in September 2023, depending on the timing of the visit and follow up report.

## **Appendices**

- Appendix 1 – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Leeds City Council feedback report.

## **Background papers**

- None.