

# Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Date: 11 December 2023

Report of: Head of Democratic Services

Report to: Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board

Will the decision be open for call in?  Yes  No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?  Yes  No

## Brief summary

In February 2023 Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board received a report providing details of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge carried out in November 2022, the action plan established in response to the 15 recommendations that were made with a view to providing the input of scrutiny into the Council's overall LGA Peer Challenge response. This followed a recommendation made by Executive Board in December 2022 that scrutiny should consider the findings of the recent Corporate Peer Challenge report and recommendations.

Following consideration of this item the Chair of the Board wrote a letter to the Leader of Council setting out the Board's discussion, highlighting and welcoming the focus on locality working contained in the LGA report, emphasising the importance of EDI and staff networks, calling for greater freedoms linked to budgets at locality level where appropriate and committing to bringing back a monitoring report later in 2023/24 to take account of progress against the Peer Challenge Action Plan and the planned follow up visit from the LGA Peer Challenge Team.

An item on the LGA Peer Challenge return visit was considered by the Executive Board in October 2023 and within that report was a commitment to bring the progress update back to the December meeting of the Strategy and Resources Board. This item is therefore brought to the Board to follow up on the February scrutiny board meeting and the October Executive Board recommendation to seek further scrutiny input into the ongoing development of the response to the Peer Challenge findings.

## Recommendations

The Board is asked to:

- a) Note the findings of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Progress Report, following the Peer Challenge team's revisit on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2023 and provide scrutiny input into the Council's ongoing response.
- b) Note the progress made against the original LGA Peer Challenge recommendations from November 2022 and the findings of the peers following their revisit in September 2023 contained in the appendices to this report.
- c) Note and comment on the proposed next steps developed in response to the findings of the peers following their revisit in September 2023, set out in Appendix 3.

## What is this report about?

1. This report provides an overview of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Progress Review report, which includes the findings of the follow-up visit by the Peer Challenge team on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2023. The revisit followed the Corporate Peer Challenge which took place in November 2022.
2. Following their visit in November 2022, the Peer Challenge team made 15 recommendations, these were grouped into five themes (Values, Culture and Workforce; Locality Working; Financial Planning; Transformation approach as an organisation; and Work beyond the city). The [Corporate Peer Challenge report](#) was considered by Executive Board in December 2022, with the action plan developed in response to the recommendations considered by [Executive Board](#) and [Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board](#) in February 2023.
3. The Progress Review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. Taking place approximately 10 months after the Corporate Peer Challenge, it is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on early progress made and to receive feedback on this, including how actions align to the peers' recommendations; consider peers' reflections to any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the Peer Challenge team were "on-site", including any further support needs; and to discuss any early or learning from the progress made to-date.
4. The Peer Challenge team for the follow-up visit consisted of four peers: Pat Ritchie (former Chief Executive, Newcastle City Council and Chief Executive Peer); Sarah Reed (Executive Director of Corporate Services, West Northamptonshire Council); Jon Rowney (Executive Director Corporate Services, London Borough Camden); and Judith Hurcombe (LGA Peer Challenge Manager). The team prepared for their time in Leeds by reviewing the council's updated position statement which outlined the progress made against the November 2022 recommendations. During the one-day revisit the team spoke to over 60 people, including Elected Members; Scrutiny Chairs; senior officers; groups of middle managers, front line staff and Staff Network Chairs.
5. Full details of the Peer Challenge team, its scope and focus and the process followed can be found in the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Progress Review report, which is included as Appendix 2 to this report.
6. Given the role of scrutiny as a critical friend and with a remit to check and challenge outcomes this report is brought to the Board to gain further comments and feedback on the progress made since scrutiny first reviewed the 15 recommendations in February 2023 and to consider the next steps in taking the recommendations forward.

## 7. What impact will this proposal have?

### Key Messages from the Peer Challenge Revisit

8. As a broad overview, below are some of the headline findings and observations made by the Peer Challenge Team following their revisit on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2023:
  - Building on a strong approach to improvement, tangible progress has been made on the recommendations, with the council building further on its many strengths over the past 10 months.
  - Members and officers are energetic and enthusiastic about shaping and planning further improvement to deliver the council's clearly stated values and ambitions for their city, whilst being realistic about the challenges ahead.
  - The concepts of Best Council, Best City and Team Leeds are widely recognised and understood on a day-to-day basis, by elected members, staff and partners underpinned by clear and consistent internal communications and engagement which are regarded by recipients as open and honest. This is supported by a strong sense of belonging and loyalty to the council and the city.

- The success of the Be Your Best manager development programme was recognised, and consideration could be given to providing this to a wider cohort of staff to support resilience and workforce retention.
- Continued focus and progress on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), with the Be Your Best EDI training programme having wide reaching impact across the organisation.
- Staff survey showing very positive results with the workforce very loyal and readily identify with Team Leeds, however capacity and resilience need ongoing attention. The scale of transformation required will be challenging and will test this resilience further.
- The peer team heard a variety of views about the Community Committee review and suggest that there is further work to do on clarifying what the review is aiming to achieve and what is in and out of its scope, and how it relates to transformation.
- Progress on developing locality working approaches has been made through a distributed leadership model, however, to gain more traction and impact consideration could be given to treating the programme as a more explicit change programme.
- There is positive energy around transformation and change with an increase in horizontal capacity and working.
- Children's Services pressures in Leeds are high, and consistent with the demand-led pressures in other upper tier councils. Enhancing capacity in Children's Services, based on strong evidence-based approach with strong executive level leadership and buy-in with social care workforce, should help to deal with this challenge.
- Strong national leadership on children's social care, growth, housing and the future of local government. Further consideration is needed on whether the council is maximising its membership and role within the West Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority.
- There is collective political and officer leadership of the budget and its challenges, with an openness about the scale of the budget gap and the need for collective efforts to address it, including new ways of working dealing with demand, delivering services differently and whether the traditional role of local government is still feasible within the resources available. The council will need a very clear plan for balancing the budget, with clear accountabilities for delivery across the organisation.

9. A summary of progress against the 2022 recommendations, feedback from the 2023 revisit and proposed next steps in response to the further feedback are attached in the appendices to the report.

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

- Health and Wellbeing
- Inclusive Growth
- Zero Carbon

10. The terms of reference of the scrutiny boards continue to promote a strategic and outward looking Scrutiny function that focuses on the Best City Ambition.

11. The Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board has considered a number of items linked to the Best City Ambition in the current municipal year including the initial steps in the refresh of the Best City Ambition and with plans to consider the full update d of the Best City Ambition in the January cycle of meetings.

12. In addition, the Board has had a particular focus on staff well being in the municipal year to date considering items on the Organisational Plan, Mental Health, Well Being and the recent staff survey. In addition, and in line with the Board's remit, financial sustainability and resilience has also been a key feature of the work programme with items on the financial health of the authority and Medium-Term Financial Strategy being key recent items considered. This work has in part been informed by the recommendations made in the LGA Peer Challenge with these report items touching on some areas highlighted in the original Peer Challenge visit not least on recruitment and retention, staff workloads and the possibility of staff burnout and financial sustainability and ongoing financial challenge.

## What consultation and engagement has taken place?

Wards affected:

Have ward members been consulted?       Yes       No

13. Executive Board and Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board in February 2023 checked and challenged the action plan developed in response to the initial Corporate Peer Challenge visit and recommendations at that time it was agreed that the Board would consider the Peer Challenge in its work programme for 2023/24.
14. The newly formed Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board for municipal year 2023/24 agreed for this item to be included in the Work Programme for 2023/24 when setting out its priorities in June and July 2023 through consideration of the Sources of Work agenda item and subsequent follow up through regular consideration of the Work Programme.

## What are the resource implications?

15. There are no specific resource implications associated with this report.

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

16. There are no specific risks associated with this report.

## What are the legal implications?

17. There are no specific legal implications arising from this Peer Challenge report.

## Options, timescales and measuring success

### What other options were considered?

18. There is an expectation that councils having a LGA Corporate Peer Challenge will commit to a return visit to see what progress has been made against the original recommendations therefore, the follow-up visit was always intended when the council entered into this process. The initial correspondence from the Chair of the Board to the Leader of Council also set out the intention to consider an update or monitoring report on this subject as part of the Board's work programme in 2023/24 an approach that was supported when initial priorities for the Board's work programme were agreed in June 2023.

### How will success be measured?

19. The follow-up visit is a further method of assessing progress against the recommendations of the Peer Challenge in 2022. Success will be measured by regular reporting through the Annual Performance report, as well as through the refresh of the Best City Ambition and ongoing financial planning and monitoring. Scrutiny input into this process will widen feedback and enable check and challenge of the Council's response to the Peer Challenge.

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

20. The Director of Strategy and Resources is responsible for implementation, which will happen through the refresh of the Best City Ambition and council's Being Our Best organisation plan in Spring 2024, as well as through the Financial Challenge work. All of these work areas have also been key elements of the Board's work so far in the municipal year.

## Appendices

- Appendix 1 – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Executive Board report from 18 October 2023.
- Appendix 2 – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Progress Review report, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2023.
- Appendix 3 – LGA Peer Challenge recommendations, progress update and next steps.

## Background papers

None