

LGA CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE

Improvement & Innovation Advisory Committee - 7 October 2021

Report of: Chief Executive

Status: For Consideration

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary: This report informs Members of the Council's proposal for a Corporate Peer Challenge to be held between 29 November and 1 December this year.

It summarises the core components of a Peer Challenge, sets out the additional focus areas for the review that are reflective of local priorities and provides information on the process for preparing and undertaking a Peer Challenge.

Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Peter Fleming

Contact Officer: Lee Banks, Ext. 7161

Recommendation to Improvement & Innovation Advisory Committee:

That the proposal to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge in November this year is noted.

Reason for recommendation: To ensure that Members of the Advisory Committee are informed of the proposal to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge between 29 November and 1 December 2021.

Introduction and Background

- 1 Corporate Peer Challenges are provided by the Local Government Association (LGA). They are a core element of the sector-led improvement offer to local authorities.
- 2 Peer challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. They are improvement focused and the scope is agreed with the council and tailored to reflect local needs and specific requirements.
- 3 Since the Council's last Peer Challenge the methodology and level of assurance required has been reviewed. It continues to provide a robust and effective improvement tool and Peers remain at the heart of the challenge process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.
- 4 The council's specific needs, the areas it wants to focus on and the makeup of the Peer team are all discussed and agreed in advance.

Sevenoaks District Council Peer Challenge

- 5 The Council's last Corporate Peer Challenge took place in December 2013. There were a significant number of positive messages in the Peer Challenge Teams findings. They concluded that the Council's success was built on a strong foundation from a planned, determined and sustained focus on doing the right things very well.
- 6 It was initially planned to invite a Peer Challenge Team in to the Council during September 2020. However, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic led to a pause in the conduct of the reviews. A Peer Challenge Team will be welcomed to the Council for three days, from 29 November to 1 December.
- 7 Each Corporate Peer Challenge has five core components, which focus on the following areas:
 - **Local priorities and outcomes:** Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities and achieving improved outcomes for all its communities?
 - **Organisational and place leadership:** Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
 - **Governance and culture:** Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of respect, challenge and scrutiny?
 - **Financial planning and management:** Does the council have a clear understanding of its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a clear plan to address its financial challenges?
 - **Capacity for improvement:** Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?
- 8 Two further focus areas have been requested to support the Council to deliver on its ambitions. These are housing delivery and Economic Development & Regeneration.

Peer Challenge Team

- 9 The Peer Challenge Team will be led by a Chief Executive from another Council and will be supported by a Peer Challenge Manager from the team at the LGA.
- 10 Additionally the team will include two Councillor Peers, who are Leaders of their own Councils; and a Council Director with significant experience in Regeneration.
- 11 The final member of the Peer Team is still to be confirmed, but is expected to be a Director working in the Civil Service.

- 12 Subject to any changes in the guidance surrounding the pandemic, it is expected that the time will be onsite at the Council Offices during each day of the Peer Challenge.

Preparing for and undertaking a Peer Challenge

- 13 In advance of arriving at the Council the Peer Challenge Team will be provided with information about the Council, its priorities and its progress. This will be in the form of a position statement and an information and data pack, some of the contents of which are recommended by the LGA. Examples of the type of information requested includes the Council Plan, Annual Governance Statement, External Audit Letter and performance indicator information.
- 14 Whilst onsite the Peer Team will meet with a number of Members, Officers, partners and other stakeholders. Approximately 25 sessions will be arranged, and these will be a combination of one-to-one meetings and small focus groups. Where face to face sessions are not possible, remote meetings will be arranged.
- 15 These discussions will inform the Peer Teams' view on the Council's progress and enable them to identify the Council's strengths and areas where they could recommend actions for improvement.
- 16 On the final day (1 December) the Peer Team will deliver verbal feedback of their findings and give the opportunity for clarification and questions. This will be followed by a report detailing the issues considered, the strengths of the council, areas for improvement and key recommendations.
- 17 The council will receive the draft report within three weeks of the Peer Challenge. The Council must then develop a detailed action plan that responds to the report's findings.
- 18 The Peer Challenge report must be published on the Council's website within six weeks of finalisation. The LGA will also publish the report via its website. It is expected that the Council's action plan will be published within eight weeks of the report's publication.
- 19 Six months after the Peer Challenge, the LGA will organise a check-in. This session provides the opportunity to update Peers on progress against the action plan and discuss next steps. The LGA will produce a short note which reflects the council's progress and there is an expectation that this note will also be published.

Other options Considered and/or rejected

None.

Key Implications

Financial

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement

There are no legal and risk implications arising from this report.

Equality Assessment

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Conclusions

This report informs Members of the Council's proposal for a Corporate Peer Challenge to be held between 29 November and 1 December this year.

The Peer Challenge provides a 'critical friend' and practitioner perspective to highlight the Council's strengths and identify areas for improvement.

Following the three days of the review a report will be published and the Council will develop an action plan to ensure it maximises the benefit of the improvement opportunities that arise from the Peer Challenge.

Appendices

None

Background Papers

LGA Peer Challenge Letter - December 2013

<https://cds.sevenoaks.gov.uk/documents/s15626/14%20-%20Appendix%20A%20-%20%20LGA%20Peer%20Challenge%20Letter.pdf?J=5>

Dr. Pav Ramewal
Chief Executive