

LGA CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE

Cabinet - 17 March 2022

Report of: Chief Executive

Status: For Consideration

Also considered by:

- Council - 26 April 2022

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary: This report informs Members on the outcome of the Council's Corporate Peer Challenge, which was held between 29 November and 1 December 2021.

It provides the full report received from the Peer Challenge Team, which includes the recommendations they have made to the Council and highlights the next steps following the conclusion of the review.

Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Peter Fleming

Contact Officer: Lee Banks, Ext. 7161

Recommendation to Cabinet:

- Members note their thanks to the LGA Peer Challenge Team for giving their time and expertise in undertaking the peer review of the Council; and
- Members note the findings of the Peer Challenge and the nine recommendations set out in this report.

Recommendation to Council:

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Reason for recommendation: To ensure that Members are informed on the outcome of the Council's Corporate Peer Challenge and the recommendations arising from the work of the peer review team.

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 Peer Challenge took place across three days, between 29 November and 1 December 2021 and the Peer Challenge team have now issued their final report. The report summarises the main findings and sets out the recommendations that have arisen from the work of the peer challenge team.

Sevenoaks District Council Peer Challenge

- 5 The Peer Challenge was conducted by a team of seven elected Member and Officer Peers, drawn from across the local government sector. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the Peer Challenge, with the peer team bringing considerable experience and expertise.
- 6 The peers were:
 - Cllr Darren Rodwell, Leader of London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
 - Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen, Leader of Breckland Council
 - Damian Roberts, Chief Executive, Surrey Heath Borough Council
 - Emma Cooney, Director of Regeneration and Business Development, Southend on Sea Borough Council
 - Judith Atkinson, Strategic Director, Local Partnerships
 - Kevin Kewin, LGA Peer Challenge Manager
 - Georgia Goddard, LGA Graduate Trainee
- 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 The Council asked that two further focus areas were included within the Peer Challenge to support the Council to deliver on its ambitions. These were affordable housing delivery and economic development & regeneration.
- 9 The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.
- 10 The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days at Sevenoaks District Council, during which they:
- Gathered information and views from more than 40 meetings, in addition to further research and reading; and
 - Spoke to more than 100 people including a range of Council Members, staff and external stakeholders.
 - Visited strategic development sites in both Swanley and Sevenoaks.

Peer Challenge Report and Recommendations

- 11 The final report from the Peer Challenge Team is provided as Appendix A to this report.
- 12 Overall the Peer team concluded that the council is a well-led and an effectively managed authority with a strong track-record of effective delivery and innovation. This, they say, is reflected in strong performance outcomes across a range of areas; excellent residents' survey results; and a highly committed and talented workforce.
- 13 The Peer team reported that there are good member / officer relations and good relationships between members and that these underpin the council's success.

- 14 They also concluded that the council's current financial position is comparatively strong, that the 10 year budget is an example to the sector and that the council is a valued and respected partner locally.
- 15 The Peer Team noted that community engagement on projects and initiatives is effective, but there is potential to complement this with more open, bottom-up, conversational approaches.
- 16 In considering the Council's additional focus areas, the Peer Team acknowledged that the council has invested in its own housing and regeneration capability. However, a key issue at this point is the balance between the council's scale of ambition and the financial resources available.

- 17 Arising from the Peer Team's work, are nine key recommendations to the Council. These are:

Recommendation 1: Build on recent place leadership work - consider developing a renewed, partnership-led, long-term vision for the district, residents and businesses

Recommendation 2: Complement the council's existing project-based community engagement work with more open, bottom-up, conversational approaches

Recommendation 3: Use service data and community networks to enhance the council's understanding of its diverse and emerging communities

Recommendation 4: Consider the optimum balance between the council's scale of ambition and availability of resources

Recommendation 5: Explore the scope for a managed increase in Quercus Housing's affordable housing delivery outputs

Recommendation 6: Consider the full range of options for additional modest-scale market value and affordable housing activity - 'massive small'

Recommendation 7: Review the external specialist skills to challenge viability appraisals and negotiate S106 agreements with developers

Recommendation 8: Use the council's influence to optimise the outcomes from the district's strategic development sites

Recommendation 9: Consider developing a proposition for inward investment and development as part of the emerging economic development strategy.

Next Steps

- 18 On receipt of the final Peer Challenge report, it must be published on the Council's website within six weeks. Reporting the final report to Cabinet has ensured that publication of the Peer Challenge Report has been achieved within that timescale. The LGA will, in the coming weeks, also publish the report on its own website.

- 19 It is expected that the Council will develop an action plan in response to the findings and recommendations made in the final report, and that the action plan will be published within eight weeks of the report's publication.
- 20 Six months after the Peer Challenge concluded, the LGA will organise a check-in. This session will provide the Council with the opportunity to update Peers on progress against the action plan and to discuss any further 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

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge, held between 29 November and 1 December last year, has provided both positive feedback on the Council and its performance as well as identifying recommendations for further improvement, for the benefit of our residents and local businesses.

The Peer Challenge has provided a thorough assessment of key business areas, and some reflections on the Council's own focus areas from the skills and experience brought by the Peer Team.

The final report being published in full ensures transparency of the process and the findings. An accompanying action plan will be produced and continually monitored to ensure the recommendations made by the Peer Team are delivered.

Members may wish to join colleagues in noting their thanks for the work of the Peer Team, who have generously given their time and experience to assess how the Council performs and how it could continue to improve in the future.

Appendices

Appendix A - LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback report

Background Papers

None

Dr. Pav Ramewal
Chief Executive