

LGA CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE - PROGRESS REVIEW

Improvement & Innovation Advisory Committee - 28 February 2023

Report of: Chief Executive

Status: For Consideration

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary: This report updates Members on the Progress Review that has been carried out by the Local Government Association's Peer Team following the Council's Corporate Peer Challenge, which was initially held between 29 November and 1 December 2021.

It provides a summary of the feedback received from the Peer Challenge Team following the Progress Review which was undertaken on 24 November 2022 and appends a copy of their report issued at the end of January 2023, which highlights the positive progress made by the Council and notes some particular challenges the Council may face in delivering its objectives.

Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Peter Fleming

Contact Officer: Lee Banks, Ext. 7161

Recommendation to Improvement & Innovation Advisory Committee:

Members note the findings of the Peer Challenge Progress Review and the progress made in delivering the recommendations made by the Peer Review team.

Reason for recommendation: To ensure that Members of the Advisory Committee are updated on the outcome of the Progress Review following the Council's Corporate Peer Challenge.

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 The Council's Peer Challenge took place across three days, between 29 November and 1 December 2021. The Peer Challenge team issued their final

report in February 2022. Overall the Peer team concluded that the council is a well-led and managed authority with a strong track-record of effective delivery and innovation, and that there are good member / officer relations and good relationships between members.

- 4 They concluded that the council's current financial position is comparatively strong and that the council is a valued and respected partner locally.
- 5 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.
- 6 The Peer Team also acknowledged that the council has invested in its own housing and regeneration capability. However, a key issue at the time was the balance between the council's scale of ambition and the financial resources available.
- 7 Arising from the Peer Team's work, were nine key recommendations to the Council. These are set out in the full in the background paper to this report, which can be seen at www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/peerchallenge.

Peer Challenge Progress Review

- 8 The Progress Review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. It is programmed to take place approximately twelve months after the initial peer challenge and is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:
 - Update peers on the early progress made and to receive feedback on this including how the action plan aligns to the peer challenge recommendations;
 - Consider peer's reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site' including any further support needs; and
 - Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.
- 9 The Progress Review was conducted by four members of the initial Peer Review team. The Progress Review 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
 - Judith Atkinson, Strategic Director, Local Partnerships
- 10 On 24 November, the peer team met virtually over the course of four and a half hours with Leader of the Council, the Chief Executive and senior officers of the Council. The discussions were informed by the documents and Committee reports that the peer team had reviewed prior to the Progress Review and individual discussions that had been had with officers

to gather further information on the progress against the recommendations that had been made.

Progress Review Report

- 11 Provided at Appendix A is the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge - Progress Review report as issued to the Council in late January 2023.
- 12 Overall the Peer team concluded that “the Council has really embraced the recommendations made in the original CPC in November 2021” and “saw evidence of some significant progress as an organisation and the creation of real momentum along a transformational journey rather than simply a tick box approach to actions.”
- 13 The Peer team also recognised that the “Council has also brought forward a number of new initiatives and key strategies and plans since the CPC including the Local Plan 2040, a new Community Plan and the Sevenoaks “So Much More” campaign.”
- 14 The report at Appendix A also highlights the new, empowered style of community engagement that is being developed, planned improvements in the use of data, and the strength of the Council’s ‘Here to Help’ project which aims to support people with the challenges arising from the increases in the cost of living.
- 15 In the area of economic development and regeneration the Peer Team acknowledged the delivery of a new long term Economic Development Strategy and found that the “Council has clearly embraced the “Massive Small” agenda, by seeking to maximise available developable land by analysing sites one by one.
- 16 Progress in capital projects and the delivery of affordable housing through Quercus Housing and projects with other partners is also highlighted.
- 17 In finalising their feedback the Peer team reflect on their experience of the organisation and its culture, saying ‘there is a tangible sense of energy around the Council going forward which together with a positive organisational culture and modern working practices, will help to retain valuable skills despite the temptations from the private sector and larger Councils.’”

Next Steps

- 18 The conclusion of the Progress Review brings to a close the formal elements of the Council’s Peer Challenge. Officers will continue to monitor its progress against the initial recommendations for a further 12 months.
- 19 The Progress Review also highlighted some areas that it felt could be ‘particular challenges’ for the Council looking forward. These include engagement with health sector colleagues, and the impact of financial challenges on the County Council, in delivering a strong preventative health agenda.

20 Ensuring that these challenges continue to be evaluated as the Council develops its plans and priorities for the years ahead will be embedded in future policy making and monitoring.

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.

Net Zero

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the council's ambition to be Net Zero by 2030. There is no perceived impact regarding either an increase or decrease in carbon emissions in the district, or supporting the resilience of the natural environment.

Conclusions

The Progress Review has provided positive feedback on the Council and its performance in delivering the nine recommendations set out through the Corporate Peer Challenge.

The Progress Review final report will be published in full ensuring transparency of the process and the findings.

The action plan published in response to the initial recommendations will continue to be monitored for a further 12 months to help ensure progress is maintained.

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 Peer Challenge - Progress Review report

Background Papers

LGA Peer Challenge report - www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/peerchallenge

Dr. Pav Ramewal
Chief Executive