

STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL

THURSDAY, 19 MAY 2022

Report Title	LGA CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE FEEDBACK REPORT			
Purpose of Report	To inform members of the feedback from the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge team, which revisited the Council between 8 and 10 March 2022.			
Decision(s)	Council RESOLVES to: Welcome the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge feedback report. An action plan based on the recommendations will be considered by the Strategy & Resources Committee on 9 June 2022.			
Consultation and Feedback	The Peer Challenge process involved meetings with the Leader, Group Leaders, committee chairs, a number of other members, the CE, senior management and a cross-section of staff, as well as external partners and agencies, including the LEP, LSP, Health Service, County and neighbouring District Councils and the Police.			
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Options	The Local Government Association encourages all local authorities to undergo a Corporate Peer Challenge every 4-5 years. Peer challenges are improvement-focused and tailored to meet an individual council's needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. A Peer Challenge team visited the council in March 2019, following which an action plan based on the recommendations in the feedback report was agreed and implemented. Normally the team would have carried out a light-touch revisit to assess progress within 2 years but as this was delayed because of the pandemic, a fuller Peer Challenge revisit has been carried out this year, 3 years on.			
Background Papers	A copy of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge team's feedback report is attached at Appendix A.			
Appendices	Appendix A – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report 2022			
Implications (further details at the end of the report)	Financial	Legal	Equality	Environmental
	No	No	No	No

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1** The Local Government Association (LGA) gives all local authorities the opportunity to participate in a Corporate Peer Challenge as part of its sector-led improvement programme. The Council undertook a Peer Challenge three years ago in March 2019, as the new Chief Executive and Leader considered that an ideal time to take up the offer to review how the council was doing and how best to tackle current and future challenges.
- 1.2** The 2019 Peer Challenge feedback was very positive and was reported to Council in May 2019. Four short-term and four medium-term recommendations formed the basis for an action plan agreed by Strategy & Resources Committee in July 2019. Progress on those actions was subsequently regularly reported to the committee, with the short-term recommendations quickly achieved and the medium-term ones largely integrated into the council's Fit for the Future modernisation programme.
- 1.3** The peer team would normally have carried out a light-touch revisit within two years of their original visit, but this was delayed by the pandemic and so a fuller review was undertaken this year, three years on from the team's original visit.
- 1.4** The review took place between 8 and 10 March 2022 and was conducted by a team of elected members and senior officers from other local authorities, together with advisors from the LGA. They were invited to give us the benefit of their experience of working with and leading similar organisations.
- 1.5** Every corporate peer challenge considers 5 core components:
- a) **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
 - b) **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
 - c) **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
 - d) **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
 - e) **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?
- In addition to these questions, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on its response to Covid-19 and support to the community and reflections on the new Council Plan and delivery ambitions.
- 1.6** The team prepared by reviewing the range of documents and information, including the council's key documents, submitted as part of our self-assessment / position statement to familiarise themselves with the council, the challenges we are facing and the progress we have made since the last Peer Challenge visit in 2019. Pre-engagement calls took place, and a focus group was held with town and parish council representatives in advance of

travelling to the district. The team then spent two and a half days on site at Ebley Mill during which they gathered information and views from a wide selection of staff, councillors, stakeholders and partners and carried out further research and reading. The team held some 29 meetings and met with more than 80 people.

2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

2.1 The peer team presented their findings on the last day of their visit and have now submitted their feedback report, attached at Appendix A. It is important to note that peer challenges are improvement-focused, they are not inspections. The peer team provide feedback as critical friends, based on their experience and knowledge of local government. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals.

2.2 The peer team's findings are clearly set out in the report and although the focus is on areas for development and improvement, they also highlight the areas in which the council has made significant progress since the 2019 Peer Challenge.

2.3 The headlines from the feedback report are:

- SDC is a good council, progressing well towards its ambition of being a great council. Following the 2019 Peer Challenge, the council's action plan ensured that strong foundations were put in place on which the council can continue to build.
- The council should be proud of what it has achieved over the last 3 years and of its response to the pandemic. The council worked very hard to support its residents, tenants and businesses as well as its own staff.
- The developing 'One Council' ethos, which is about Members and officers working well together across teams, is driven from the top by the council's political and managerial leadership and can now be embedded across the organisation.
- The plans and strategies that the council has put in place – the Council Plan, the 2030 Strategy and the Fit for the Future modernisation programme in particular – provide a clear framework for delivering the council's ambitions and can now be more closely interwoven.
- Following the 2019 Peer Challenge, a framework of strategic meetings was successfully established to develop those plans and strategies and we should now review the need for these and focus more on delivery.
- Becoming a new councillor during the pandemic has been challenging. Greater member involvement in member training and development is recommended, to help shape members' needs and requirements and aid understanding of the specific roles and responsibilities of members and officers.
- Great progress has been made with IT (Information Technology) and everyone is looking forward to the new digital platform that will improve the council's digital offer to residents and businesses, and its case management and back office systems.
- There is a clear and positive intent on community engagement and some good work started to work with communities to agree expected outcomes and co-ordinate this across services.

2.4 The key recommendations are set out in section 2 on pages 4 to 6 of the feedback report.

3. NEXT STEPS

- 3.1** Members and officers now have the opportunity to reflect on the Peer Challenge team's findings and recommendations and determine how we wish to take things forward. As before, we will develop an action plan based on the recommendations. The LGA is available to offer advice in developing the action plan and its implementation. The intention is to bring an action plan to Strategy & Resources Committee for agreement on 9 June.
- 3.2** The peer team and the LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge process. The process includes a check-in session in six months' time, which provides an opportunity for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

4. IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Financial Implications

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report. Where decisions are taken as part of the action plan these will be subject to appropriate financial appraisal and included in the MTFP as required.

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4.2 Legal Implications

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

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4.3 Equality Implications

There are no equality implications arising from the feedback report itself. The report makes a series of recommendations which will form the basis of actions to be considered by Strategy & Resources Committee on 9 June 2022.

4.4 Environmental Implications

There are no environmental implications arising from the feedback report itself.