

STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

STRATEGY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

THURSDAY, 24 NOVEMBER 2022

Report Title	LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan			
Purpose of Report	To provide an overview of the work that has taken place to address the recommendations in the LGA Peer Challenge Action Plan.			
Decision(s)	The Committee RESOLVES to note the progress made with addressing the recommendations in the LGA Peer Challenge Action Plan prior to the Peer Challenge Team’s revisit in January 2023.			
Consultation and Feedback	The Peer Challenge process involved meetings with the Leader, Group Leaders, Committee Chairs, other Members, the CE, senior management and a cross-section of staff as well as external partners and agencies. The Action Plan has been developed in consultation with senior managers and members of this Committee.			
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Options	The Local Government Association encourages all local authorities to undergo a Corporate Peer Challenge every 4-5 years. The Council undertook one in 2019 and in ordinary circumstances the peer team would have carried out a ‘light touch’ revisit within 2 years to assess progress, but as this was delayed by the pandemic and 3 years have now elapsed, a fuller review took place in March 2022. Peer Challenges are designed to complement and add value to the Council’s own performance and improvement focus. The preparation of an Action Plan to address the recommendations set out in the feedback report is optional and will help guide improvement.			
Background Papers	Report to Council on LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report 19 May 2022. LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report 2022 (Appendix 1 to that report). Report to Strategy & Resources on LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan 9 June 2022			
Appendices	Appendix 1 – LGA Peer Challenge Action Plan			
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 then 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.
- 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 in 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 five 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 a range of documents and supporting information, including the Council's key documents and a position statement, which included the challenges we are facing and the progress we have made since the last Peer Challenge visit in 2019. The team held a focus group with town and parish council representatives and spent 2.5 days 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.

- 1.7 The Council received the Peer Challenge team's feedback report in April 2022 and reported it to Council on 19 May 2022. Council unanimously welcomed the findings of the peer team, who provided feedback as critical friends, based on their knowledge and experience of local government. The report to Council identified the headlines in the feedback report, which include reflecting on the good progress that the council has made in the last three years in respect of the 2019 Peer Challenge recommendations, our excellent response to the pandemic, and the ambitious delivery framework that we have put in place stemming from the adoption of the Council Plan and underpinning strategies. The peer team stressed that to ensure successful delivery of these, we would need to concentrate on delivering agreed objectives and actions and avoid 'mission creep', that is, adding in new priorities which we were not resourced to deliver.
- 1.8 The Peer Challenge team set out eight key recommendations in respect of areas for development and improvement on pages 4 to 6 of the feedback report.
- 1.9 The Peer Challenge team is due to revisit the Council in January 2023 to consider the progress the Council is making.

2. LGA PEER CHALLENGE ACTION PLAN

- 2.1 The Action Plan at Appendix 1 sets out the eight recommendations in full and the actions identified to address them. Progress has been made in all areas and the Action Plan includes details of the work already started, the next steps to address the recommendation in full, as well as the anticipated timescale and lead officers identified.
- 2.2 Some highlights of the progress made so far are:

Recommendation 1. PACE OF ACTIVITY: Ensure there is sufficient corporate and strategic capacity, focus on reviewing progress to date and plan effectively for the delivery of agreed plans and strategies. Focus on the delivery of what you have agreed are your priorities to ensure that what you do is done well and your activity is outcome driven.

- The Chief Executive and SLT work closely with the Leader, Deputy Leader, Group Leaders and Chairs of the policy committees to ensure that the Council stays focused on agreed priorities, holding regular 121s and meetings.
- The Policy and Governance Team produce quarterly dashboards to SLT and LMT to provide up-to-date business intelligence to enable corporate oversight and decision making.
- A new performance management system has been procured and will be implemented in the next quarter, with comprehensive training for all staff and members to enable real time dashboard reporting.

Recommendation 3. CREATE A MEMBER DEVELOPMENT GROUP: To coordinate and prioritise a programme of ongoing member training and support new members to find their place in the council and understand and embrace the member officer protocol. If Members own this agenda, they can shape it to what they need.

- A Member Development Working Group has been established with the Terms of Reference and Work Programme agreed by the Alliance Leadership Team (ALT).

- The working group have held two meetings so far and are developing a Member Training and Development Strategy and a new and enhanced Member Induction Programme for 2024 as well as a review of the support provided to Members

Recommendation 6. OPPORTUNITY TO RESET CUSTOMER SERVICES: Making it more efficient, corporate, and centralised. If Customer Services (or Community Contact) is carried out to its highest level, you can free up resource by answering and responding to queries at first point of contact. Good customer service leads to a highly regarded council. (Related to Council Plan objective CW3.2).

- The Council's new 'Our Service Standards' were developed in conjunction with a member working group and adopted by Full Council on 21 July 2022.
- These are being rolled out to staff together with wider training on Values and Behaviours as part of the 'One Council' ethos which is being embedded across the Council as part of the Fit for the Future programme (Recommendation 4).

Recommendation 8. WORKING WITH TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS: Consider working more effectively with town and parish councils to maximise the developing relationships – whilst developing the Working Together project to put a protocol in place for engagement, continue and enhance the regular forums that are in place already (for example they could be theme based e.g., how towns and parishes can engage in planning policy, or planning consultations and see the results of their engagement).

- A Draft Charter has been developed in collaboration with Town and Parish Councils involved in the Working Together working group. Following input from SDC managers and consultation with Members, it is now out for consultation with all Town and Parish Councils and will be adopted by full Council.
- A Town and Parish Council 'Hub' website similar to the Members' Hub is being built to share information and resources specifically tailored for Town and Parish Councils, and an annual schedule of events including important dates and training opportunities has been prepared.

2.3 Recommendation 5. ACTION PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENT TO HOUSING SERVICES: Continue to work on your action plan for improvement for housing services making sure the teams within that service understand their corporate responsibilities and feel that they are an integral part of the council. Ensure a clear plan to put tenants at the heart of what they do.

- The timescale for recommendation 5 has been affected due to delays in the recruitment of Strategic Head of Housing; although an Interim Head of Housing is in post and will be developing this recommendation.

3. NEXT STEPS

3.1 The Peer Challenge team will conduct a 'check-in' session in January 2023, which will provide an opportunity for the council to update peers on progress against the action plan as set out in Appendix 1 and discuss next steps.

4. IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Financial Implications

There are no financial implications arising directly from the report. Actions included within the plan can be accommodated within existing budgets, including those allocated to the Fit for the Future programme.

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4.2 Legal Implications

There are no legal implications arising from the content of this report.

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4.3 Equality Implications

There are no equality implications arising from the report itself. The equality implications of actions taken will be considered by Committee as appropriate.

4.4 Environmental Implications

There are no environmental implications arising from the report itself.