

STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL

THURSDAY, 27 APRIL 2023

Report Title	LGA Corporate Peer Challenge revisit and feedback report			
Purpose of Report	To inform Members of the feedback from the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge progress review, which took place on 17 January 2023.			
Decision(s)	Council RESOLVES to note the feedback report prepared by the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge and the progress made against the Action Plan.			
Consultation and Feedback	The Peer Challenge progress review involved focus groups with Members, officers, and Parish and Town Council Clerks and Councillors. The Action Plan arising from the Peer Challenge visit in 2022 was developed in consultation with officers and members and approved by Strategy and Resources Committee.			
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Options	N/A			
Background Papers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Report to Council on LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report 19 May 2022• LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report 2022• Report to Strategy & Resources Committee on LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan 24 November 2022			
Appendices	Appendix A – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Progress Review for Stroud District Council			
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 in March 2019 as the then new Chief Executive and Leader considered it 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 Ordinarily the Peer Challenge team would have carried out a light-touch revisit within two years of the original visit, but this was delayed by the pandemic. As a result, a fuller review was undertaken in March 2022.

- 1.3 The 2022 review 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.
- 1.4 The Peer Challenge team reviewed a range of documents and supporting information, including a position statement prepared for the Peer Challenge, which included the challenges the Council faces, and the progress made since the last Peer Challenge visit in 2019. Over their 2.5 day visit they also held focus groups with representatives from Parish and Town Councils, staff, councillors, stakeholders and other partners.
- 1.5 Following the Peer Challenge team's visit in 2022 they prepared a report that was submitted to Council on 19 May 2022. This included eight key recommendations in respect of areas for development and improvement (see [pages 4 to 6 of the feedback report](#)).
- 1.6 In response to the recommendations in the feedback report, an Action Plan was prepared which included actions identified to address the recommendations, the anticipated timescale and lead officers responsible for delivery of each action. This was developed in consultation with senior managers and members of Strategy & Resources Committee, and progress against the Action Plan was reported to Strategy & Resources Committee on 24 November 2022 ([see report to Strategy & Resources Committee](#)).
- 1.7 The Peer Challenge team undertook their revisit of the Council in January 2023, which considered the progress the Council has made against the Action Plan.

2. JANUARY 2023 PROGRESS REVIEW

- 2.1 The progress review is an integral part of the Peer Challenge process. Taking place approximately six months after the Council published the Peer Challenge Action Plan, it 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 team's recommendations;
 - Consider peers' reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team's 2022 visit, including any further support needs; and
 - Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.
- 2.2 The Peer Challenge team stated that it was clear from the Action Plan prepared by the Council that progress had been made against every recommendation from the Peer Challenge feedback report. The Peer Challenge team selected four areas they felt appropriate for a deeper dive as their focus for the progress review. These were:
 - Working with town and parish councils
 - Create a Member Development Group
 - Action Plan for improvement to Housing Services
 - Clarity on embedding the One Council ethos.
- 2.3 To undertake the review, the peer team visited the Council on 17 January 2023. As part of this they met with the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT), attended a focus group of councillors, a focus group of staff and spent time touring the district and some of the major sites and areas of significance. Ahead of their visit they also held a focus group with representatives from Parish and Town Councils.

- 2.4 The progress review ended with the Peer Challenge team presenting their initial findings to a meeting of political Alliance leaders and SLT. This led to a wide-ranging and positive conversation about the significant progress to date and challenges ahead.
- 2.5 The Peer Challenge progress review (Appendix A) sets out the Peer Challenge team's comments and conclusions.

3. PROGRESS REVIEW REPORT

3.1 The Peer Challenge team noted that the Council has made significant progress in a number of areas since the March 2022 visit, and a number of projects clearly demonstrate the Council's ambition for place. Some of the highlights from the report are below:

- Stroud is in many ways a unique place with a strong industrial heritage, but with a real focus on the future and ensuring both the development but also sustainability of the district. This shines through both in the value base of the council and indeed its communities and the stakeholders we met with. The peer team found that what underpins all of this is strong partnerships between the council and its communities and both staff and council members who are real advocates for the council and the district.
- The district council was credited for driving forward the work with town and parish councils and the work developing the Parish and Town Council Charter was singled out for praise.
- The political Alliance continues to work as an effective leadership model and whilst there have been some changes since the peer team last visited, those changes have not affected the ability of SDC to carry out its responsibilities for the people of Stroud.
- The focus group spoke very positively about the Member Development Group. The group reflected real enthusiasm for the opportunity to take ownership of the member development programme. The peer team felt that this also reflected positively on member officer relationships at SDC; councillors were very complimentary about the calibre of staff working for the council.
- The peer team felt there was a willingness amongst staff who want to do the right thing, and it was clear they [Housing Services] were now a team looking forward with positivity; this bodes well for the future.
- Staff reflected to the peer team that they can see the values being lived out by the senior leadership team. The positive working relationships between members and officers is further evidence of that One Council ethos becoming embedded.
- There is an overwhelming sense from those that the peer team spoke to of working for an organisation that does not just care about staff but wants staff to care about each other. The peer team heard that SDC has its heart in the right place, it has staff who want to work for an organisation that cares, that has a sense of purpose and is doing the right thing, a good employer and provider of services for the right reasons.

3.2 The Peer Review process is about continuous improvement and in addition to the highlights included in the report, there were several suggestions made regarding ways in which we can improve across all the recommendations. These will be considered and any remaining actions from the original action plan will be included in the relevant service area's Service Plan for 2023/24.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 The Peer Review process has been a very positive one for the council. It has helped us focus on particular issues to address but it has also highlighted the many areas of good practice, the commitment and dedication of the council's officers and members and the work undertaken by the council.

5. IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

There are no financial implications to this decision.

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5.2 Legal Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.

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5.3 Equality Implications

There are not any specific changes to service delivery proposed within this decision.

5.4 Environmental Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.