

Cheltenham Borough Council

Cabinet - 07 November 2023

LGA Peer Challenge Report

Accountable members:

Cllr Rowena Hay, Leader of the Council

Accountable officers:

Gareth Edmundson, Chief Executive

Ward(s) affected:

All

Key Decision: No

Executive summary:

Cheltenham Borough Council invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to conduct a Peer Challenge Review of the Council in July 2023.

Peer Challenges form part of sector-led improvement in local government and are part of the core offer of the LGA. Peer teams include peers from across the sector comprising of both councillors and officers. Each Peer Challenge is tailored to the needs of each individual local authority but all challenges retain a core focus on leadership, governance, corporate capacity and financial resilience.

This report contains the full LGA Peer Challenge Report in **Appendix 2** as well as the Council's action plan to respond to the recommendations made by the LGA within the report.

Recommendations: That Cabinet:

1. notes the LGA Peer Challenge Report in Appendix 2;
2. approves the Peer Challenge Action Plan in response to the recommendations within the Peer Challenge Report as set out in Appendix 3;

3. welcomes a further visit by the LGA Peer Team, expected in early 2024, to review the progress in delivering the action plan.

Implications

1.1 Financial, Property and Asset Implications

None directly as a result of this report, however, financial implications will be provided where applicable if further reports or decisions are required in order to deliver actions as set out in the report.

Signed off by: Gemma Bell, Director of Finance and Assets (Deputy Section 151 Officer), gemma.bell@cheltenham.gov.uk

1.2 Legal Implications

None directly as a result of the decisions within this report but legal implications will be provided where appropriate for any decisions required in the delivery of the action plan as detailed in the report.

Signed off by: Claire Hughes, Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer, claire.hughes@cheltenham.gov.uk

1.3 Environmental and Climate Change Implications

Environmental and climate change implications, including necessary climate impact assessments will be conducted where needed throughout the implementation of the action plan set out in this report.

Signed off by: Paul Jones, Executive Director for Finance, Assets and Regeneration, (Section 151 Officer), paul.jones@cheltenham.gov.uk

1.4 Corporate Plan Priorities

This report and the action plan contained within it contributes to all of the Corporate Plan 2023-2027 Key Priorities:

- Enhance Cheltenham's reputation as the cyber capital of the UK
- Working with residents, communities and businesses to help make Cheltenham net zero by 2030
- Increasing the number of affordable homes through our £180m housing investment plan
- Ensuring residents, communities and businesses benefit from Cheltenham's future growth and prosperity
- Being a more modern, efficient and financially sustainable council

Signed off by: Ann Wolstencroft, Head of Corporate Services, ann.wolstencroft@cheltenham.gov.uk

1.5 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Implications

Equality impact assessments will be completed where appropriate and required in the delivery of the action plan contained within this report.

Signed off by: Claire Hughes, Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer,
claire.hughes@cheltenham.gov.uk

1.6 Performance Management – Monitoring and Review

The action plan contained within this report, particularly those relating to organisational culture change, will support the council in developing a stronger performance culture where tracking and monitoring performance data to improve and maintain services is increasingly embedded within the organisation.

Signed off by: Ann Wolstencroft, Head of Corporate Services,
ann.wolstencroft@cheltenham.gov.uk

2 Background

- 2.1 Peer Challenges form part of sector-led improvement in local government and are part of the core offer of the LGA. Peer teams include peers from across the sector comprising of both councillors and officers.
- 2.2 The peer team use their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they meet, things they see and material that they read. The peer team prepare by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing.
- 2.3 In Cheltenham's case, following this review of documentation and information the team spent three days onsite in July 2023 during which they:
 - Gathered information and views from more than 36 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
 - Spoke to more than 85 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.
 - At the end of the on-side visit a meeting inviting all CBC officers and members was arranged to hear the initial findings and recommendations of the peer team.
- 2.4 The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:
 - Cllr Sarah Butikofer - Chairman North Norfolk District Council
 - Cllr Simon Minas-Bound - Conservative Group Leader Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council

- Jason Gooding – Former Chief Executive, Carlisle City Council
- Gabrielle Mancini – Service Director Transformation, West Berkshire Council
- David Shepherd – Strategic Director for Growth and Regeneration, Kirklees Council
- Kathryn Trant – LGA Peer Challenge Manager

2.5 The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

- **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
- **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 challenge and scrutiny?
- **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?
- **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

In addition, CBC specifically asked the peer team to provide a view and some recommendations for improvement on the council's approach to building sustainable communities and ensuring residents, communities and businesses benefit from Cheltenham's future growth and prosperity.

2.6 Overall, the Council welcomed the peer challenge process and offers its thanks to the LGA and the dedicated Peer team who took the time to prepare for the challenge, visit Cheltenham and engage with so many members, officers and stakeholders in order to develop the report and the recommendations within it. The full Peer Challenge Report and recommendations can be found in **Appendix 2**.

3 Action Plan

3.1 An action plan has been developed to respond to the recommendations contained within the Peer Challenge Report. In addition to the actions, a progress update has also been included to monitor delivery since the Peer Team's visit to CBC. The full action plan is included in **Appendix 3**.

4 Key risks

4.1 These are shown in **Appendix 1**.

Report author:

Gareth Edmundson, Chief Executive

Appendices:

1. Risk Assessment
2. Peer Challenge Report
3. Action Plan

Appendix 1: Risk Assessment

Risk ref	Risk description	Risk owner	Impact score (1-5)	Likelihood score (1-5)	Score (1 - 25)	Risk response	Controls / Mitigating actions	Control / Action owner	Deadline for controls/ actions
PR1.	If CBC do not respond proactively to the points made in the review then an opportunity to learn and develop will be wasted.	Gareth Edmundson	3	3	9	Reduce	<p>Presentation completed with all staff.</p> <p>Leadership team engaged in outcomes.</p> <p>Member support for the actions.</p>	Gareth Edmundson	November 23
PR2.	If CBC do not achieve the actions within the Peer Review plan then it may impact on CBC's finances, people & reputation.	Gareth Edmundson	3	3	9	Reduce	<p>Monitor progress.</p> <p>Deadlines in place.</p>	Gareth Edmundson	Ongoing
PR3	If CBC do not act on the feedback from the Peer Review then the Council may suffer reputational damage from the LGA.	Gareth Edmundson	3	2	6	Reduce	Feedback progress to Peer review team.	Gareth Edmundson	Ongoing