

Title of Report	LGA PEER REVIEW	
Presented by	Keith Merrie MBE Infrastructure Portfolio Holder	
Background Papers	N/A	Public Report: Yes Key Decision: No
Financial Implications	None directly relating to the Peer Review feedback, however, the Council will need to assess any specific resource implications where applicable to addressing the recommendations contained in the report.	
	Signed off by the Section 151 Officer: Yes	
Legal Implications	None directly relating to the Peer Review feedback. Where actions to address the recommendations in the report require changes to the constitution, these will be addressed through the Council's annual constitution review, which is currently ongoing.	
	Signed off by the Monitoring Officer: Yes	
Staffing and Corporate Implications	None arising from this report.	
	Signed off by the Head of Paid Service: Yes	
Purpose of Report	To seek Cabinet approval for the proposed action plan in response to the Council's Corporate Peer Challenge Review Feedback report from the Local Government Association.	
Reason for Decision	For Cabinet to consider the report from the Local Government Association's Peer Review Team on its Corporate Peer Challenge and Action Plan that has been prepared to address the recommendations made.	
Recommendations	<p>THAT CABINET:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) NOTES AND ACCEPTS THE LGA PEER REVIEW TEAM'S FEEDBACK AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COUNCIL FOLLOWING ITS CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE IN JUNE 2024. 2) APPROVES THE ACTION PLAN PREPARED IN RESPONSE TO THE PEER REVIEW FEEDBACK. 	

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is an improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by local government for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of sector led improvement put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. CPC assists councils in meeting part of their Best Value Duty, with the UK Government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years. It involves a team of senior local councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance and governance information of the Council. North West Leicestershire District Council was subject to its last CPC in June 2019. However, since 2019 there have been a series of high-profile local government failures; and this has been recognised in a strengthened CPC assessment to provide more assurance to government that councils are being managed effectively.
- 1.2 The review process was an intensive but positive experience for members, staff and key stakeholders and the outcome will help shape the Council's improvement over the coming years. A copy of the full report is attached at Appendix 1 to this report with a proposed Action Plan at Appendix 2. Many of the recommendations made had already been identified by the Chief Executive and her Corporate Leadership Team and were already in train at the time of the review.

2.0 PEER REVIEW PROCESS

2.1 The Council's CPC took place from 26-28 June 2024. The Peer Review team, who spent three days with the Council, comprised:

- **Cllr Abi Brown, Chair of LGA Improvement & Innovation Board & Leader, Stoke on Trent City Council, 2019-23**
- **Tony Dale, Cabinet Member for Economy & Tourism, Car Parking & Transformation, Cotswold District Council**
- **Larissa Reed, Chief Executive, Swale Borough Council**
- **Adam Broome, LGA Finance Associate**
- **Paul Bellotti, Executive Director of Communities and Environment and Deputy Chief Executive, East Riding of Yorkshire Council**
- **Becca Singh, Regional Adviser, East Midlands Regional Team, LGA**
- **Katie Goodger, Regional Adviser, South East Regional Team, LGA**

The five key areas that were covered by the review are set out below:

- **Local Priorities and Outcomes**

Are the Council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the Council delivering effectively on its priorities? Is there a robust organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with regular monitoring, reporting on and updating or performance and improvement plans?

- **Organisational and Place Leadership**

Does the Council provide effective local leadership? Are there strong and effective relationships with partner organisations and local communities?

- **Governance and Culture**

Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of openness, transparency, challenge and scrutiny?

- **Financial Planning & Management**

Does the Council have a clear understanding of its financial position? Does the Council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges? What is the relative financial resilience of the Council like?

- **Capacity for Improvement**

Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the Council have the capacity to improve?

In addition, the LGA was also asked to look at Regeneration and Housing (particularly Repairs) within these five themes.

2.2 Ahead of the CPC, the Council provided the peer team with a self-assessment of its current position which contained key facts, figures and background information. The process was very robust with the peer team carrying out 110 interviews during the three days they were on site. They spoke to a whole range of key partners and stakeholders across Leicestershire, community and voluntary sector and other partners in addition to staff and councillors. They also looked around the Council's offices and scrolled through the intranet / internet, reading key documents, policies and strategies.

2.3 The initial informal feedback following the review was very positive with the peer team highlighting a number of recommendations for the Council to consider. By its very nature, the CPC was a snapshot in time and it is recognised that some of the feedback may be about things the Council was already aware of and was in the process of addressing.

3.0 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 The Peer Review team felt that there is a renewed energy in the Council after the peer challenge in 2019 with a new Chief Executive and a refreshed and partly new group of senior officers, new headquarters and a new approach to communication. They felt that staff were positive about the new Council offices and staff reported it was a good place to work and were motivated and enthusiastic about delivering good work.

3.2 The Peer Review team also recognised that the district had experienced some political changes after the 2023 election following a long period of stable administration and whilst the Alliance was working well together, and member/officer relationships were good, it had been a period of adjustment for both members and staff alike as the new arrangements bedded in.

3.3 In addition, the Peer Review team recognised:

- Good relationships with district councils in Leicestershire, with Leicestershire County Council with other partners
- A good record of engagement with local businesses
- Positive engagement with parish councils by the Community Focus Team
- Conditions for growth in the district are outstanding
- Great progress has been made on the development of Coalville and the emergence of a district-wide regeneration programme
- Strong engagement with residents and members on the waste review
- Highly valued leisure provision with improvements to existing facilities and new facilities are well received.
- Ambitious targets for affordable homes
- Good performance against benchmarking data for council tax collection, planning and recycling and other key metrics.

- No major current risks on financial sustainability with good levels of income
- Good engagement with members on corporate and service risk management with Corporate and Service risk registers in place
- Ambitions for reaching net zero and the plans in place to ensure that these are fully costed and form part of the Medium Term Financial Plan.
- Commitment to apprentices, learning and development, ambitions to be a gold accredited Investor in People and a graduate from the LGA's new graduate development programme.
- Recognition that the Council is on an improvement journey in its Housing Service.

3.4 The following are the Peer Review team's key recommendations to the Council:

Recommendation 1 - Build relations between councillors, and between councillors and officers through a programme of development workshops to build trust and openness - The Alliance could be strengthened through top team development to enable councillors in the Cabinet to better step up to their role and provide a collegiate front for the Council. Building on the developing relationships between the political leadership and the Corporate Leadership Team, there could be further development sessions helping to introduce more honest conversations about ways of working, so that councillors and officers all recognize and accept their specific role in the Council moving forwards.

Recommendation 2: Use the Risk Register and the Annual Governance Statement to raise situational awareness and future concerns - These documents could be better used to manage the Council's risk appetite. Review the approach to both and consider the sector's best practice to make both documents work for you, as well as a strategic communications tool.

Recommendation 3: Ensure that financial transactions and contracts are under consistent and robust review - This includes fees, charges, the Leisure contract and commercial property investments. Regular robust reporting at Corporate Scrutiny of all major financial transactions, or actions that will have an impact on finance (such as the Transformation Programme and the Finance Improvement Programme) will help ensure that councillors are fully abreast of financial, commercial and savings matters when looking to establish corporate strategies. The Council uses PowerBI as a benchmarking tool, but the Peer Team was not shown how this was being used to inform strategic and operational planning.

Recommendation 4: Establish a thorough two-way Corporate Communications and Engagement Plan – The Chief Executive communicates frequently and regularly internally and this is appreciated by staff. However, staff reported that this is mostly information giving, rather than encouraging two-way engagement. The recent staff roadshows provided valuable feedback on how to improve this and the Council has taken this on board. The skilled staff in the Communications Team can advise and lead on how to ensure that internal communications are engaging and empowering. Explore how two-way

engagement with internal and external stakeholders can maximise benefits for residents and businesses.

Recommendation 5: Enhance the newly adopted Transformation Plan with a clear set of financial outcomes, deliverable dates, benefits, third party dependencies and risks across all programme areas

- Enhance the recently agreed high level transformation plan to ensure that aims, deliverables and expected outcomes are agreed between Cabinet and senior officers, with appropriate levels of flexibility, as soon as possible. Involve communications professionals from the start of the process to help identify how staff can be genuinely engaged with the process, and potential or perceived impacts can be communicated.

Recommendation 6: Conduct a wholesale process mapping and review of systems in Housing Repairs

- The Peer Review team recommends a wholesale process mapping and review of systems and processes as part of the Transformation agenda. Inefficient processes are reported to be hampering the Council's determination to clear the backlog of repairs. The Council has begun to address the issues in Housing, particularly through Scrutiny and Cabinet. It has established a Housing Improvement Board which has a plan for action. The Housing Regulator will look at repairs and tenant satisfaction, so it is imperative that the cultural issues within the service are tackled, alongside setting up clear, efficient systems and processes as a matter of urgency as soon as possible after the mapping exercise.

Recommendation 7: Engage more proactively in partnership working in all settings, ensuring the maximum benefit for the district's businesses and residents

- The Council is in a strong position to lead some of the partnership working, such as the network of councils directly affected by the Freeport. This involves building relationships with other councils involved, but also other partners. This will help to ensure that the Council influences and directs the economic development in the district. Maximise the opportunities afforded by the different large-scale developments to enable the Council to deliver what it wants for its residents.

3.5 In response to the Peer Review feedback report a draft action has been developed at Appendix B.

4.0 PROPOSED WAY FORWARD

4.1 The report and action plan was considered by the Corporate Scrutiny Committee on 5 December and a copy of the minutes of the meeting are attached at Appendix C.

4.2 The Council has developed an Action Plan to respond to the comments and recommendations within the Peer Review report, attached for Cabinet's consideration. Subject to Cabinet's approval the Action Plan will be published on the Council's website, alongside the report. Quarterly reports on progress against the action plan will be monitored by the Chief Executive and Corporate Portfolio Holder, Councillor Merrie.

4.3 The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the Council assess the impact of the CPC and demonstrate progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the Peer Review Team. It is a lighter touch version of the original visit. Arrangements are being made for the visit to take place in the spring of 2025.

4.4 The Corporate Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet will be updated on the outcome of this visit.

Policies and other considerations, as appropriate	
Council Priorities:	The report relates to all aspects of the Council Delivery Plan and its key priorities of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Planning and regeneration - Communities and housing - Clean, green and Zero Carbon - A well-run council
Policy Considerations:	Medium Term Financial Plan Risk Management Strategy Housing Revenue Account Housing Asset Management Housing Repairs Policy Coalville and District-wide Regeneration Frameworks Communications Strategy Constitution Treasury Management Strategy Equality and Diversity Strategy Transformation Plan
Safeguarding:	None arising from this report
Equalities/Diversity:	The Council was commended for its work on Equality and Diversity and support provided by the Human Resources team. However, the Council needs to demonstrate the added value that Equality Impact Assessments are providing.
Customer Impact:	None arising from this report
Economic and Social Impact:	None arising from this report.
Environment, Climate Change and zero carbon:	The Peer Review team recognised the ambitions of the Council on net zero and that the Council is currently in the process of building robust costings to deliver these ambitions into its Medium Term Financial Plan.
Consultation/Community Engagement:	The Peer Review Team conducted 110 interviews over the three days they were on site. They spoke to elected members, partners and staff as part of the process. The Peer Review report will be published on the website.

	<p>Any changes made as a result of the Review recommendations that require more formal consultation or engagement will be conducted in accordance with existing policies.</p>
Risks:	<p>That the report is not adequately considered to assist in the Council's continuous improvement activities.</p> <p>That there are insufficient resources to deliver the action plan.</p>
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