

Public
Key Decision – No

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge

Council / O&S -	Council 16th October 2024
Executive Portfolio:	Executive Leader of the Council, Councillor S Conboy
Report by:	Chief Executive
Ward(s) affected:	All

Executive Summary:

The Council invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge, which took place in May 2024.

The Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector, for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance and governance information and then spending three days at a council to provide robust, strategic, and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of Sector-led Improvement (SLI) put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are: responsible for their own performance, accountable locally, not nationally and have a collective responsibility for the performance of 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.

The Council has formally accepted the report and is now required to publish an Action Plan in response by 17th October 2024. The Peers will then return to the Council by the end of January 2025 to follow up on progress. This report outlines the Action Plan and provides an update on progress to date.

Recommendation(s):

That Members note the Action Plan that has been prepared in response to the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) and note the progress that has been made to date.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 Following receipt of the CPC report in July 2024, this report is required to set out the Council's response in the form of an Action Plan. Members are also asked to note the work that has been undertaken over the weeks and months since the receipt of the report, as well as the forthcoming programme of activity. Following the initial presentation of the Action Plan it will be reported on quarterly thereafter. Following the six month revisit by the Peers, further changes and updates may be required and will be provided as necessary.
- 1.2 It should also be noted that the findings of the CPC report have been clearly communicated to all staff through a series of briefings (both in person and online; and covering key locations such as Eastfield House and One Leisure) as well as emails, and wider staff communications.
- 1.3 Where necessary and appropriate, service managers and other staff have been involved in shaping the action plan and the associated activities.

2. WHY IS THIS REPORT NECESSARY

- 2.1 There is a requirement to formulate and publish an Action Plan following the receipt of the CPC report. It is important to do this to promote transparency and good practice. The original report accepting the CPC report can be found [here](#) and the CPC report can be viewed in full [here](#).

3. THE CPC FEEDBACK REPORT

Recommendations

- 3.1 **Recommendation 1 - Align finance and workforce to deliver the agreed political priorities including a review of organisational structure.**

A single narrative needs developing and communicating so that everyone is clear what the priorities are, how they are being delivered and what the timescales are for this. The council needs to ensure its officer structure enables delivery of the political priorities, that officer capacity is directed to the priority areas and the finances are aligned.

- 3.2 **Recommendation 2 – Strengthen the internal approach to engagement which ensures the voice of residents/service users are at the heart of decision making.**

Building on the good practice shown in consulting on Huntingdonshire Futures, develop different engagement mechanisms to gain the views of residents/service users on their experience of the council and how these can be responded to.

3.3 Recommendation 3 - Develop a resourced Communications and Engagement Strategy which defines the HDC brand and strategic narrative.

Promote the services the council delivers. Don't undersell the impact being made in the community by leisure, parks and open spaces and operational services. Ensure everyone knows these are delivered by HDC. Be clear about who leads external communications to prevent confusion of messages and brands.

3.4 Recommendation 4 - Review the planning service to ensure that within the planning policy framework the council's priorities are being delivered, for example climate, environment and inclusive growth.

Create understanding across all council services that there needs to be a holistic approach to deliver the councils growth and development ambitions. The planning service is a major contributor to fulfilling the longer-term outcomes of the council, but the results will benefit and impact on the whole council and it is important the service is appropriately positioned and supported to deliver these ambitions.

3.5 Recommendation 5 - Deliver the imminent Workforce Strategy at pace – including addressing staff concerns.

The extensive consultation on the new strategy has raised awareness and staff have high expectations of what it will deliver. Ensure the strategy addresses the inconsistency in policy and practice and brings services together to support a one council approach, where best practice is shared across services and fairness and equity is at its core.

3.6 Recommendation 6 – Continue to strengthen the council's approach to governance, compliance and risk.

To support the council's improved governance approach:

- Review the council's constitution.
- Provide additional capacity for MO and DMO roles.
- Ensure sufficient investment and resource for member development.

3.7 Recommendation 7 - Support and develop a member led scrutiny work programme and prioritise areas where they can add value and help mitigate risk – SLT support.

Ensure there is adequate time between Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Cabinet for members to add value to the process. Support them to shape agendas and work plans and contribute to policy development.

3.8 **Recommendation 8 - Define and communicate your approach to transformation/continuous improvement.**

Put in place the cross-cutting foundations (technology, workforce, structures, culture, communications) to prepare the organisation for holistic service transformation rather than reinforcing some silos and risk services continuing their own custom and practice.

3.9 In addition to these formal recommendations, there are several other recommendations and suggestions through the body of the Feedback report that will be captured to be considered as part of the formal action plan that will be developed to implement CPC, and by way of several examples, these include but are not limited to:

- To meet the council's ambitions for enhanced partnership working, peers recommend the council reviews the skills and capacity needed to support this work with senior stakeholders and partners.
- Creating and communicating key points of entry into the council for partners and stakeholders would significantly help the council to develop its partnerships and generate opportunities to enable and influence.
- Peers advise some facilitated top team development would assist the new team in building relationships, understanding leadership styles and create space for strategic visioning.
- Further work is needed with service managers to improve horizon scanning and feed this into the budget setting process.
- Consideration should also be given to undertaking a full staff survey.
- The Ideas Board should be taking a more strategic approach to reviewing requests for funding, making sure any bids are aligned to the councils' priorities and clearly drive innovation. There also needs to be consideration given to how any projects funded on a trial basis could be sustained in the longer term if deemed successful.

Governance

3.10 The Feedback Report makes references to the Council's progress against the LGA Governance recommendations, and does note once again the need for more capacity within the Monitoring Officer role and responsibilities – a few examples include, but are not limited to:

- The council is self-aware and identified a range of improvement areas in its 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement (AGS).

There were also 17 recommendations from the LGA peer challenge of internal audit arrangements in 2023, the CGC's self-assessment

against CIPFA's audit committee good practice principles, and the CFO's self-assessment against CIPFA's Financial Management Code, all of which peers were pleased to see were making significant progress and actions monitored closely by the CGC.

- Following recommendations from the Governance Peer Challenge in February, peers were pleased to see the Risk Officer is now working alongside the Internal Audit function drawing on skills and experience from other parts of the council.
- It was encouraging to hear that the council is building capacity with the risk management, procurement and contract management to ensure compliance with new legislation.

Positive Feedback

3.11 The Peer team have been complimentary about the way in which the council prepared and welcomed the team into our ways of working, including the honesty and transparency those whom they met. Alongside the learning to be implemented, it is also important to acknowledge some of the positive comments that have been made:

- Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) is an ambitious council with long-term aspirations for its place and communities.
- HDC is fortunate to have loyal and committed staff to both the council and place. Many live locally and have a vested interest in the success of the organisation.
- Peers were very impressed by the delivery of affordable housing in the district. In 2023/4 the council facilitated with Registered Providers (RPs) and developers the delivery of 703 homes – 450 specifically for social rent.
- The Economic Development team was praised for the proactive approach it takes with businesses, providing support and signposting.
- Leisure services are keen to work in partnership to develop the collaboration potential.
- The Performance and Efficiency Board, chaired by the Chief Operating Officer, was set up to monitor, address and benchmark performance and escalate issues to the senior leadership team (SLT). Peers considered this Board to be a real asset to the organisation and could see the value the officers involved were bringing to driving improvements in performance.
- Some positive work has been led on external communications, reducing the number of social media channels and increasing capacity to deliver messages via the councils' main channels.

4. THE ACTION PLAN

- 4.1 The recommendations contained within the CPC report, both the formal eight recommendations and the informal ones set out in the body of the report, have been considered by the senior leadership team. An action plan has been developed which is attached at Appendix 1.
- 4.2 Officers have applied our established project management framework to the consideration of the report and the development of the action plan. This is to ensure that it is treated consistently with other projects, whilst also ensuring appropriate prioritisation, project management, resourcing, and monitoring of activity. Appropriate Officers have also been identified to ensure appropriate responsibility for delivery and governance. All of which is considered important to ensure that the Action Plan is deliverable and trackable.
- 4.3 Senior Officers have also met with Cabinet and discussed the findings of the CPC report. These discussions have helped to shape the action plan and the shaping of the underlying activities that will flow from it. This is important to ensure that the Action Plan maintains alignment with other corporate activities and with the Corporate Plan. Additionally, a lead Member has been identified for each of the activities to aid with political accountability and ownership, whilst the overall response to the CPC remains within the remit of the Leader and Chief Executive.
- 4.4 It should be noted that the action plan contains:
- 27 Actions linked to the 8 formal recommendations.
 - 22 of those are currently considered Green
 - 5 are considered Amber
 - 0 are considered Red

 - 7 additional recommendations were identified
 - 7 Actions linked to those additional recommendations
 - 1 is presently Green
 - 1 is presently Amber
 - 5 are marked as To Be Commenced/Considered (yellow)
- 4.5 As can be seen, many activities are presently underway. Some of the recommendations also recognised the need for pieces of work which Officers had already identified as being required. As such, some activities and actions were able to be identified and moved forward at pace. For example, the work to create a single narrative for the Council to utilise in its communications approach – that work has been completed with input from the LGA and the narrative is presently being rolled out to staff and being used in communications.
- 4.6 Although many actions have no formal timescales for completion at this stage, the narratives provide an understanding of where activities have commenced and are underway. As can be seen, in some cases there are inter-dependencies with other feedback (such as from Members following meetings of the Constitution Working Group; or following training). Equally,

some activities are beholden to other parties (such as the Planning Peer Review which has been scoped and is programmed to be undertaken by the LGA/Planning Advisory Service).

- 4.7 The Action Plan is therefore a living document at this time, it will evolve and will be subject to change as the various activities are scoped, shaped, and delivered. Equally it is likely that there will be activities which flow from the action plan which will in turn result in changes to business as usual (BAU); or will result in procedural changes (such as to service planning). That said, some actions will be standalone and taken forward on a task and finish basis.
- 4.8 Thus it is natural that the Action Plan will evolve, and it must be recognised therefore that this is the first iteration, with further updates to be provided at quarterly intervals.

5. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

- 5.1 The Panel discussed the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Report at its meeting on 2nd October 2024.
- 5.2 In response to a question from Councillor Pickering, the Panel heard that the group would be returning to the Council in Spring 2025 to review progress and to agree the Council's action plan. This visit would mark the end of the formal process but the Council could repeat the review again in the future.
- 5.3 It was clarified to the Panel, following a query from Councillor Wells, that Recommendation 7 was marked as amber status and paused whilst the Overview and Scrutiny Panels undertook a period of self scrutiny and development following recent training.
- 5.4 Councillor Catmur observed that the word ensure had been used in abundance throughout the document and felt that as the definition of this word is to guarantee this was potentially misleading in it's intentions. The Panel were advised that this was a stylistic choice by the LGA and would feed this back. It was assumed that this wording had been used to underline the seriousness of the recommendations, which was taken on board by the Council.
- 5.5 It was observed by Councillor Blackwell, that several action timescales were to be confirmed as well as actions assigned to vacant posts. The Panel were assured that the details on this would be clarified and developed once the recruitment process had been completed and that actions would be redistributed across the project team as appropriate.
- 5.6 Following questions from Councillor Gleadow and Councillor Jennings the Panel were assured that there was a long term vision for the Council and that this would continue regardless of the political landscape. The current administration were aware that they were custodians of the vision and that the evolving structure would be fit for an incoming administration to continue. It was noted that there was continual evolution within local

government and by developing a dynamic structure the organisation would be reactive to change, regardless of the administration, whilst still striving to achieve the long term aims for the best interests of residents.

- 5.7 The Panel were further assured, following an additional question from Councillor Gleadow that a robust Communications Plan was in place and that this would focus equally on internal and external communications. It was noted that there would be changes in how the Council engages with the public and that there would be opportunities to ask residents what they want and to develop how this aligns with the Council's plans. Councillors were also encouraged to bring concerns of the public forward and that there would be opportunities to develop this within the Scrutiny process.
- 5.8 It was observed by Councillor Gardener, that it would be helpful to see regular updates on the progress and development of the action plan at Scrutiny. It was agreed that this would be a productive way forward. The Panel also heard that climate resilience would be built into the Local Plan in order to future proof it. It was reminded that the Local Plan will be fully reviewed based on the evidence provided, therefore residents were encouraged to feed into the consultation process.
- 5.9 Councillor Pickering expressed surprise that only one action had been aligned with Recommendation 1, following which, the Panel heard that the detail underneath the action would be vast and gave officers a clear steer on what to prioritise to achieve the desired outcomes. It was also noted that some reorganisation was likely in order to realign with the corporate strategy and key objectives and in order to make better use of the resource available. There would be a challenge to not be too prescriptive in approach but to work smarter and harder in addition to utilising and maximising funding opportunities as they become available. It was observed that a potential restructure would allow for the introduction of roles identified as critical within the review.
- 5.10 It was clarified to the Panel, following a query from Councillor Pickering relating to the action for Recommendation 2, that the Communications team were investigating how best to fulfil the action and whether the Communications team or the related service would drive each set of communications, this action will be developed following the findings from this.
- 5.11 Following the discussion, the Panel were informed that their comments would be added to the Council report to allow for visibility during their consideration of the report.

6. LINK TO THE CORPORATE PLAN, STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND/OR CORPORATE OBJECTIVES

- 6.1 The recommendations, general insight and opportunities for learning that the CPC process has provided will assist the Council in delivering against all the actions in the Corporate Plan and Service Plans.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Resource implications associated with the action plan have and will continue to be kept under review as part of the Councils project management processes.

9. LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED

Appendix 1 – CPC Action Plan

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

[Full Council Papers](#) – 17th July 2024 – Corporate Peer Challenge

CONTACT OFFICER

Name/Job Title: Michelle Sacks

Email: michelle.sacks@huntingdonshire.gov.uk