

CABINET
27 June 2023

PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

TITLE OF REPORT: CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE REPORT & ACTION PLAN

REPORT OF: SERVICE DIRECTOR LEGAL & COMMUNITY
EXECUTIVE MEMBER: LEADER AND DEPUTY LEADER OF THE COUNCIL
COUNCIL PRIORITY: BE A MORE WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE COUNCIL

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2020 the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) undertook a review, the review report and Action Plan were agreed through Cabinet on 24 March 2020 and 23 June 2020, respectively.

A follow up review was undertaken by (different) LGA CPC Peers during 2022 and a further LGA Peer Committee Support report was issued in January 2023 (Appendix A). This concentrated on the Overview & Scrutiny and Finance, Audit and Risk Committees and a number of further recommendations have been made. These have been separated out into the Action Plan (Appendix B) with response and proposed actions for the Committees consideration and recommendations to Cabinet.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. That the content of the CPC report be noted.
- 2.2. That the draft Action Plan at Appendix A be considered and approved (as per Appendix A or as amended, with relevant Overview & Scrutiny recommendation timescales).
- 2.3. That, *in the absence of timescales*, these be set by the Leader, Deputy Leader and Managing Director (in consultation with relevant Committee Chairs and Vice Chairs).

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To ensure that the Council responds to the matters identified within the CPC report, ensuring that the benefits of the CPC process are realised.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1. The 'do nothing' option of not creating an Action Plan to follow up on the report has been discounted, as the Council committed to undertake the further CPC and should therefore seek to gain benefit from that process.
- 4.2. There is no prescribed format for the Action Plan, so it has been developed in a simple format, with reference to the recommendations.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

- 5.1. Staff and Members identified by the Peers were interviewed and a report issued in January 2023. Copies were circulated to the Leader, Deputy Leader for initial consideration and this and the proposed response to the recommendations discussed in consultation with the Political Liaison Board (latterly on 16 May 2023).
- 5.2. This was also circulated following that to the then former Chair of Overview & Scrutiny and subsequently to the Chair and Vice Chair on 2 June 2023 (and to the Chair and Vice Chair of Finance, Audit and Risk). The Chair and Vice Chair of Overview & Scrutiny requested that this report and Action Plan came to the Committees in advance of Cabinet for consideration / recommendation.

6. FORWARD PLAN

- 6.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a Key Executive decision.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1. The background to the first CPC report can be found in the Cabinet report of 24 March 2020 [[CLICK HERE](#) for then Chief Executive's report and [CLICK HERE](#) for the CPC report]. This was considered and the proposed actions by Overview and Scrutiny on 16 June 2020 and an Action Plan incorporating recommendations was approved by Cabinet 23 June 2020 [[CLICK HERE](#) for relevant Cabinet and report meeting page].
- 7.2. The LGA CPC was invited back to further review the effectiveness of the Overview & Scrutiny, and Finance, Audit and Risk Committee in December 2021. There were delays due to change of Peers, and covid and the review was undertaken during 2022. The final report was issued in January 2023 as per Appendix A.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1. The Action Plan at Appendix B seeks to embrace the recommendations from the Peer Challenge and look for ways to implement improvements in the way we work. There are 31 recommendations. *Those specifically relating to Overview & Scrutiny Committee are detailed at 1-21, albeit the Committee will note that recommendations 24, 25 & 26 suggests splitting and adding financial scrutiny to Overview & Scrutiny with consequential recommendations.* For the reasons outlined next to these recommendations, the Action Plan response does not embrace those suggestions *at this time*, although it will be a matter for consideration post-election in 2024 as part of the overall constitutional review.
- 8.2. Members will note that much of the timescale column is currently blank. Recommendations 1, 6, 7,11,12,13,16, 17 and 20 being a matter for this Committee/ Chair etc (as to be approved by Cabinet or under delegation as suggested).
- 8.3. The Committee should note that in respect to *recommendation 4*, that following recent Legal & Community restructures a part time Scrutiny Officer post has been created (for 17 hours), which is currently being recruited to – closing date 19 June. It is hoped that this will be successful, given the Action Plan also refers to the role of a Scrutiny Officer.

- 8.4. The Committee should also note that in respect to recommendations 2, 3, 9, 10, 14 (and duplicate 15), that Scrutiny training was also offered post-election in 2023 to all Councillors as part of the *compulsory training* for all the membership. This was provided by an external trainer from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, 9 Members were noted as attending. This was recorded and is available via Growzone, and 2 further Members are understood to have since undertaken this training. Any Member who was unable to attend / has not undertaken this via Growzone, should log in and undertake this training (*deadline date to be suggested by the Committee to Cabinet*).
- 8.5. Chairing skills training has also been offered as part of the induction programme (albeit general skills)..
- 8.6. In the absence of any suggested timelines to Cabinet (and none being finalised by Cabinet), it is proposed that the Leader, Deputy Leader, and Managing Director agree these dates as soon as possible after the Cabinet in June, in consultation with relevant Chairs and Vice Chairs of the two Committees, as per the suggested delegation.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. Overview & Scrutiny Committee's terms of reference include at 6.2.7 "c) To make reports or recommendations to the authority or the Executive with respect to the discharge of any functions which are the responsibility of the Executive;"
- 9.2. Cabinet's terms of reference include at paragraph 5.7.13 "To consider the reports of external review bodies on key aspects of overall service delivery".
- 9.2. The CPC is a voluntary process and therefore there is no legal obligation to either host a CPC or act upon the recommendations. However, it is best practice to undertake a CPC and having done so, to act upon the issues identified.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. The recommendation relating to a Scrutiny Officer does have a financial implication. However, this has currently been covered as part of the overall reorganisations undertaken in Legal & Community by the Service Director during 2022-23. As a final decision, a part time role has been created for 17 hours per week (as the budget allowed, without seeking additional resource during the budgetary process). This approach had the support of the relevant Executive Member (then Leader covering Community Engagement), and Deputy Leader. The Leader of the opposition was also appraised of the reorganisation processes and suggested role during monthly briefings. This will need to be reviewed if the Service Director and Committee, Member & Scrutiny Manager are unable to recruit to this role during June.
- 10.2. The Peer Review, alongside many other services and support, is included within the Council's annual subscription to the Local Government Association.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

11. The CPC process offers a way to suggest and drive improvements and efficiency. Failure to consider and act on external recommendations would therefore be a waste of such a resource and a consequential risk to the Council that its arrangements were not operating as effectively as they could.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2. There are no known equalities implications that apply to this report. Individual actions on the plan may require equalities impact assessments in due course as solutions are developed.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1. The Social Value Act and “go local” requirements do not apply to this report.

14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1. There are no known Environmental impacts or requirements that apply to this report.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 15.1 The suggested Action Plan does involve additional resource – covered by a new Scrutiny Officer role. Such a role would still require support for meeting arrangements, and this will be covered by the existing Committee team.

16. APPENDICES

- 16.1 Appendix A – LGA Peer Committee Support.
- 16.2 Appendix B- Draft Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan

17. CONTACT OFFICERS

- 17.1 Jeanette Thompson, Service Director: Legal and Community
Jeanette.thompson@north-herts.gov.uk ; ext 4370
- 17.2 Anthony Roche, Managing Director:
anthony.roche@north-herts.gov.uk; ext 4588
- 17.3 Ian Couper, Service Director Resources
ian.couper@north-herts.gov.uk; ext 4243
- 17.3 Reuben Ayavoo, Policy and Communities Manager
reuben.ayavoo@north-herts.gov.uk; ext 4212

18. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 18.1 None other than those already identified.