

<b>CABINET</b>
<b>23 SEPTEMBER 2025</b>

**PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

**TITLE OF REPORT: CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE ACTION PLAN UPDATE**

REPORT OF: CHIEF EXECUTIVE

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

COUNCIL PRIORITY: THRIVING COMMUNITIES / ACCESSIBLE SERVICES / RESPONSIBLE GROWTH / SUSTAINABILITY

**1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The Council undertook a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) between 4 and 7 November 2024, where we were visited by a peer team supported by the Local Government Association. The peer team produced a feedback report, which was reported to Cabinet on 14 January 2025. Subsequently an Action Plan was developed to respond to the recommendations and was approved by Cabinet on 23 March 2025. This report updates on progress against the Action Plan, attached at Appendix A.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 That the updates to the Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan be noted.

**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 following up on the agreed action plan has been discounted, as the Council committed to undertake the CPC and should therefore seek to gain benefit from that process.

**5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS**

- 5.1 All staff and councillors who took part in the CPC were invited to attend the feedback session on the final day. That presentation has been made available to all staff and councillors (including those who had not taken part). The Leader, Deputy Leader and the Leadership Team received the feedback report and had the opportunity to raise any questions or clarifications.

- 5.2 The Action Plan was developed following discussions with the Leadership Team and Executive Members and was considered by Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 11 March 2025 prior to its adoption by Cabinet. Those responsible for the various actions on the Action Plan have provided updates on progress and these were considered by Political Liaison Board on 5 August 2025.

## **6. FORWARD PLAN**

- 6.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key Executive decision and has therefore not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

## **7. BACKGROUND**

- 7.1 The Local Government Association offers a number of services to authorities, one of them is the CPC and all authorities are encouraged to undertake them every four to five years. The Council's last full CPC took place in January 2020. A focussed review by different peers looking specifically at Overview and Scrutiny and Finance, Audit and Risk Committees was undertaken in late 2022 and reported to both committees on 20 June 2023 and 21 June 2023 respectively. It was decided to undertake another full CPC early in the new political administration in 2024, so that the recommendations could help shape and inform the approach over the four year term.
- 7.2 The CPC is designed by the Local Government Association (LGA) to provide a robust and effective improvement tool managed and delivered by the sector, for the sector. Peers are at the heart of the peer challenge process and consist of councillors and senior officers from other District/Borough Councils who provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge. The CPC was at no additional cost to the Council.
- 7.3 All CPC's look at five core areas for good performance – Local priorities and outcomes; Organisational and place leadership; Governance and culture; Financial planning and management; and Capacity for improvement. As part of considering Capacity for Improvement we specifically asked that peers look at our digital transformation programme, given its importance to the modernisation of the Council.
- 7.4. To prepare for the CPC the Council developed a background briefing document which set out our assessment of how the Council performs in certain key areas identified by the LGA. This has been published on the Council's website - [Corporate Peer Challenge | North Herts Council](#)
- 7.5 The final feedback report is also published on the above page of the Council's website. The approach taken in the CPC is set out in section 4.3 of the feedback report and is therefore not repeated here.

## **8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS**

- 8.1 The CPC feedback report covered a range of areas and identified both the Council's strengths and also areas where it could improve or change approach. In general terms the report was very positive and a fair assessment of the organisation. The action plan was developed to respond to the ten recommendations and followed a similar structure to the Action Plan adopted in 2020. As some of the recommendations contained a number of points, this is reflected in the Action column. It is acknowledged that some of the Actions are more narrative in tone, however work progresses we would expect more specific details to be captured in the Update column.
- 8.2 It should be noted that the CPC took place prior to the publication of the Government's Devolution White Paper on 16 December 2024, which set the wheels in motion for Local Government Reorganisation in Hertfordshire by (potentially) 1 April 2028. The updates to the Action Plan therefore reflect the changed circumstances in which we find ourselves – for example recommendation three regarding the Place Narrative will not now be actively pursued and recommendations six and seven relating to staff now need to be viewed against a different time horizon.
- 8.3 In general good progress has been made against all of the recommendations (except number three, for the reasons explained above), with a number of completed actions. Cabinet and Leadership Team will continue to take these actions forward, to improve the running of the organisation.
- 8.4 As part of the CPC process a progress review takes place, the report from which normally needs to be published within 12 months of the original CPC (ie no later than 7th November 2025). However given the focus that will be on the final LGR submission to Government during this period it has been agreed with the LGA that the progress review will take place on 15 December 2025. This will take the form of a one day visit, meeting with people across the organisation and also provides space for the council's senior leadership to update the peer team on its progress against the action plan. Whilst the final programme is yet to be agreed, there is also likely to be discussion on LGR and devolution, in addition to revisiting the five core areas.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 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 every five years and having done so, to act upon the issues identified. By doing so, this process is recognised by the LGA as a way to assist councils in meeting their Best Value Duty. The Best Value Duty is a statutory requirement contained within Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1999 for local authorities to "*make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.*"
- 9.3 The CPC report includes suggestions that relate to the Council's Constitution. These are matters for Full Council to determine in accordance with paragraph 4.4.1(p) of the Council's constitution and would be the subject of a separate report to Council.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 The Action Plan needs to take into account the cost of any proposals and how these will be funded. This is particularly relevant to recommendations 2 and 10, which relate to creating capacity to deliver projects but also challenging what is realistically achievable.
- 10.2 Recommendation 1 refers to the need to get to an in-year balanced budget. This will be supported by decisions on future priorities for service delivery. The Medium Term Financial Strategy sets out that this will be supported by resident consultation.

## **11. RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1. Good Risk Management supports and enhances the decision-making process, increasing the likelihood of the Council meeting its objectives and enabling it to respond quickly and effectively to change. When taking decisions, risks and opportunities must be considered.
- 11.2. The CPC process helps to reduce risk by providing a different perspective on the Council. All the five themes of the CPC process can support specific and strategic risk management.
- 11.3. The CPC report identified areas where we can utilise our performance management framework more effectively, which could help with risk mitigation.

## **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 The CPC report references behaviours which may have particular negative impacts on those with a protected characteristic. The action plan covers how this can be addressed. The CPC report also references the role of our Inclusion Group.

## **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 There are some potential staffing resource implications of some of the recommendations in the CPC feedback report, particularly organisational development and ways of working. There will also be HR implications to increase capacity, e.g. in relation to project management. These implications have been considered in the development of the action plan.

## **16. APPENDICES**

- 16.1 Appendix A – Updated Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report Action Plan

## **17. CONTACT OFFICERS**

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## **18. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 18.1 NHDC Peer Review Position Statement.
- 18.2 LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report