

Cabinet – 13 December 2023

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Revisit

Portfolio:	Councillor Bird – Leader of the Council
Related portfolios:	All
Service:	Council Wide
Wards:	All
Key decision:	No
Forward plan:	Yes

1. Aim

- 1.1 The report presents the findings of the recent Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) revisit undertaken by the Council in October 2023 and presents the final report from the LGA in this peer review process as well as information on how any remaining actions are being taken forward in business as usual/existing governance mechanisms in the Council.

2. Summary

- 2.1 The report outlines the key headlines and findings from the 6 months on revisit in October and some final thoughts and considerations from the peer review LGA team as we complete the Corporate Peer Challenge process.
- 2.2 The final report is structured across three key themes distilled from the original 5 core elements and local focus, with findings and comments on positive Council practice against each of those themes. These include HR, OD and Culture, Change, transformation and ways of working, and Internal controls and processes.
- 2.3 The report noted progress against all 11 recommendations received from the initial LGA CPC report back in March 2023. Mention was given to:
 - acknowledging the significant progress in the Council's approach to EDI and the importance the Council is placing in ensuring psychologically safety for staff in the workplace,
 - appreciation for the continued partnership working and co-delivery ethos evident through We are Walsall 2040,
 - the visible step change in collaboration across the Council with staff coming together in a variety of ways to work, and
 - the positive internal appointment to senior roles and the flexibility this affords the Council as it moves forward under a new Chief Executive tenure.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. That Cabinet note and celebrate the successes highlighted by the final Corporate Peer Challenge report.
- 3.2. That Cabinet note how any remaining actions are now being taken forward under existing internal programmes and governance.

4. Report detail - know

- 4.1 It is recommended that Councils undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge every 5 years to ensure a reflection, stocktake and consideration of the organisation. It gives Councils an opportunity to engage with peers with current or previous experience on specific areas or issues and enable consideration of direction of travel for the future.
- 4.2 During the week of 16-19 January 2023, we welcomed a team of peers and one Member from leading Councils across the country. The assessment consists of 5 core elements:
 - **Local priorities and outcomes:** Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities and achieving improved outcomes for all its communities?
 - **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 respect, challenge, and scrutiny?
 - **Financial planning and management:** Does the council have a clear understanding of its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a clear 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?
- 4.3 In addition to the 5 core elements, we asked for the assessment to focus on the delivery of our Proud Promises:
 - Improve outcomes and customer experience.
 - Improve employee satisfaction and engagement.
 - Improve service efficiency and performance.
- 4.4 The peer team spoke to 120 staff, Members, volunteers, and partners during their 4 days on site through group workshops and focus groups, 1-1 conversations and further examined Council strategies and plans.
- 4.5 The findings from the January review were taken to Cabinet in March outlining the findings. This included 11 LGA recommendations to further support the Council's improvement journey. Alongside this Cabinet noted and approved the Council response -in the form of a delivery plan with clear actions and statements against each of the specific 11 recommendations.

- 4.6 Since March 2023 the Council has made significant progress on all actions within the CPC Delivery plan and provided a comprehensive update against each action both to Council management through regular updates at CMT (Corporate Management Team) and to Cabinet through informal briefings. Furthermore, a clear update of progress against each action and recommendation was provided to the LGA in advance of the revisit in October 2023.
- 4.7 The revisit on 09 October 2023 was a short and sharp look at three key themes sublimated from the 11 recommendations: HR, OD and Culture, Change, transformation and ways of working, and Internal controls and processes. The process involved thematic discussions with senior officers, Leader of the Council and Leader of the Labour Group, as well as focus groups with key staff. The revisit aimed to understand progress and remaining areas of focus rather than identify new lines of enquiry.
- 4.8 The final report has now been received from the LGA and they are pleased with the Council's progress against all 11 recommendations within the initial March CPC report and against the actions in the Council's CPC Delivery plan.
- 4.9 Specific comments received include:

HR, OD, and Culture:

- We Are Walsall 2040: recognised the progress with approval of the Borough vision at Cabinet in June 2023, continued engagement with partners and delivery mapping and planning underway.
- **Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI):** The peer team were encouraged by progress made across all elements of EDI and the organisational commitment to an overarching EDI strategy.
- **Flexible Working:** The LGA team noted the physical changes within the Council buildings to facilitate effective onsite working and the work around continuous culture change.
- **HR/OD Restructure:** The LGA acknowledged the good progress in a short time frame citing publication of Workforce and OD Strategies.
- **Senior Officer Structures:** The thoughtful use of interim/acting-up arrangements were praised and the opportunity for flexibility that provides for the next stage of council's journey.

Change, Transformation and Ways of working:

- **Proud:** The peer team noted the good progress against Proud delivery and encouraged continued clarity on next steps through the recognition of achievements to date and capturing learning for the future.
- **Partnership Working:** The LGA highlighted the engagement with partners for We Are Walsall 2040 and the significant work underway already to embed the priorities across the borough.
- **Walsall Pound:** The report acknowledged our first steps towards embedding social value across Council processes and activities.
- **Council Plan:** The LGA noted our plans to align related themes (including transformation, partnership working and social value) in a refreshed Council Plan – that encapsulates how the Council is delivering outcomes against the 2040 vision.

Internal controls and processes

- **Financial Controls:** The peer team were confident of the Council's ability to continue maintaining effective financial controls, leaving it in a better financial position than many other local authorities. But like other areas they advised the Council should continue to be alert to ongoing demand-led pressures.
- **Internal Processes:** The report recognised the efforts of the Council to simplify processes in recruitment and introducing governance training and encouraged continuance in reviewing officer governance and consideration of sector norms and interplay with elected member arrangements.
- **Member Enquiries:** The LGA highlighted that the new system has potential to support timely responses and performance and should continue to be prioritised.

4.10 The LGA final report also encouraged further consideration and continuance in our improvement journey as follows:

- **Council Plan:** Develop a new Council Plan to provide clarity on the Council's role in delivering our We Are Walsall 2040 ambitions.
- **Culture and Values:** Consider the opportunity to revisit Council values and align with new Council Plan development.
- **Process Improvements:** Continue with reviewing and simplifying process to enable further efficiency and effectiveness.
- **Transformation Programme:** Consider formal closure of the current 'wave' of transformation, capturing progress and achievements and focus on the next stages of Council transformation and innovation.
- **Co-Production with Communities:** Build on strong foundations of We Are Walsall 2040 engagement at a community level to work 'closer to the problem' moving towards more preventative and outcome-based approaches across the borough.

4.11 All remaining actions and activities from the CPC delivery plan from the final report will be monitored through existing processes and governance e.g. Proud Board, Third Party Spend Board, CMT/Cabinet. Plans are underway to develop a new Council Plan in 2024 and details will be shared with Cabinet and Members in the near future.

Risk management

4.12 There are no significant risks. Effective risk management practice is incorporated as standard into the planning of Council projects and initiatives that will support the delivery of the actions that are ongoing and now business as usual.

Financial implications

4.13 There are no direct financial implications related to the action plan itself but there may be financial implications regarding the ongoing delivery of actions because of the Corporate Peer Challenge.

Legal implications

- 4.14 There are no direct legal implications from this report. There is no legal requirement to act following a LGA Corporate Peer Challenge however to do so does promote good governance and transparency.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

- 4.15 There are no direct procurement implications from this report, however there is a specific recommendation related to increasing social value across the Council that is being addressed and considered.

Property implications

- 4.16 There are no direct property implications from this report.

Health and wellbeing implications

- 4.17 There are no direct implications in this report.

Staffing implications

- 4.18 There are no direct staffing implications from this report, however there is a potential impact on staffing resources from the delivery of some of the ongoing actions that have been considered within business-as-usual staff planning procedures.

Reducing Inequalities

- 4.19 The remaining action plan activities will strengthen the delivery of Our Council Plan and We are Walsall 2040 borough plan. Both strategies ensure we can reduce inequalities across the borough.

Climate Change

- 4.20 There are no direct implications.

Consultation

- 4.21 The report has been informed by evidence gathered and submitted during the LGA CPC process and via consultation with Cabinet members and senior managers.

5. Decide

The Cabinet paper presents the final report from the LGA Corporate Peer review for consideration and closure of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. It further includes the governance arrangements to provide assurance to Cabinet that ongoing activities from the CPC delivery plan continue with monitoring and accountability.

6. Respond

The Council is already undertaking programmes and activities that directly address the recommendations identified by the March 2023 LGA CPC report and the recent final LGA report. This work will continue through specific governance mechanisms to ensure the Council remains on its improvement trajectory.

7. Review

The outlined governance mechanisms in section 4.11 will ensure continued review and monitoring of any remaining activities related to the Corporate Peer Challenge process and action plan.

Background papers – March 2023 Cabinet report '[Corporate Peer Challenge Findings and Action Plan](#)'

Annexes:

Appendix 1 LGA final report

Author

Dr Karen Griffiths
Head of Policy & Strategy
✉ karen.griffiths@walsall.gov.uk



Judith Greenhalgh
Executive Director – Resources



Councillor M. Bird
Leader of the Council

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