

Cabinet – 22 March 2023

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Findings and Action Plan

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) undertaken by the Council in January 2023 and presents a high-level action plan for approval that responds to the recommendations made by the LGA.

2. Summary

- 2.1 The report outlines the findings from the review and presents a Council response to the 11 recommendations proposed by the LGA from their recent peer challenge of the organisation. The report highlighted some very positive areas of work in the Council; acknowledging the transformational impact of the Proud programme over the last 5 years, the effective relationship between officers and Members, the robust financial and governance arrangements in scrutiny and audit, the extensive engagement work undertaken for the We are Walsall 2040 Borough plan, the excellent performance in challenging areas of service delivery and the strong foundations now in place through the Hub for the Council to continue its improvement story.
- 2.2 The recommendations made by the Peer Challenge team are themes that the Council had/have in consideration prior to the visit of the team in January 2023, with work planned or already underway.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. That Cabinet note and celebrate the successes highlighted by the Corporate Peer Challenge report.

3.2. That Cabinet approve the Council's action plan, which responds to the Corporate Peer Challenge in January 2023.

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. The last peer challenge assessment was undertaken in 2017 and was the catalyst for the Proud transformation programme that has delivered a fundamental shift in Council services and delivery.

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. The report (appendix 1) was shared with the Council in February in draft form and finalised in early March. It includes 11 recommendations for further consideration towards the Council improvement journey.

4.5 Members were singled out for praise for their broad local knowledge of the communities they serve and the trusting and effective relationships that exist between officers and Members across the Council. The peer team also noted that there is strong political leadership of the Council and were impressed by the breadth and diversity of the Cabinet.

- 4.6 The findings have praised the excellent transformational approach of the Proud programme to bring new leadership, capacity, skills, and ways of thinking to the organisation. The report highlighted that Proud has enabled the Council to embed and consolidate an effective approach to transformation and change and the new expertise and knowledge available to the organisations through the Hub (Policy & Strategy; Communications, Marketing and Brand; Business Insights; and Commissioning, Procurement, and contract management) ensure that the organisation has the right skills in place to move forward in the next phase of strategic transformation and delivery.
- 4.7 There are strong and robust controls in place within the Council. Finance was cited as highly effective with clear financial reporting, effective Council engagement with audit and robust and appropriate scrutiny in place. Audit Committee was singled out as “one of the strongest they have seen.” The team noted and commended the Council’s ‘Outcome based budgeting’ ambitions in integrating service transformation planning, budget setting processes and the use of policy, strategy, and data insight to ensure a coherent and strategic approach across the Council.
- 4.8 The peer team have noted the breadth and scale of the engagement programme undertaken for We are Walsall 2040 and noted that the Council should be extremely proud of its achievement in this space. The ongoing socialisation of the strategy is hugely important to ensure that fostering of a collective ambition for the borough and provides a strategic framework for our continued partnership working across the borough. The report commended the Council on its strong relationship with partners, particularly the community sector and the building blocks towards integrated working that are in place through the various partnership boards, Walsall Connected and Walsall Together. Partners involved in the Peer challenge process spoke highly of the Council- “Walsall approaches its partnerships collaboratively and positively” These arrangements will continue to be harnessed to ensure collective working to achieve effective delivery of outcomes.
- 4.9 The positive performance of the Council in some highly challenging areas was cited by the team within the report. This includes achieving positive outcomes in areas of Adult Social Care and Health through Walsall Together, the delivery of Children’s services and the work of the Council in developing integrated teams and enabling hospital discharge. The team also commended the Council on its clear and simple performance management against the Council plan through its Markers of Success.
- 4.10 There is a strong culture of improvement within the organisation as evidenced by the Council inviting the peer team to carry out the assessment highlighting our willingness to reflect and learn, the investment into the new insight and strategic skills through the Hub, Transformation and Change unit and recent investment into Human Resources. The report commends this culture of learning and encourages the Council to continue in pushing forward with learning, reflection and embracing ideas. The report also commends the Council on progress made on Equalities and Diversity across the workforce and in delivery against the Public Sector Equality Duty. Particularly noted are

the introduction of staff networks to ensure diverse voices can be heard and the work done to close the gender pay gap.

- 4.11 The action plan (appendix 2) highlights the Council response to the 11 recommendations produced from the report. The commentary response and actions highlight that many programmes and specific activities that address the recommendations were already planned before the Corporate Peer Challenge or are already underway. The review gave the Council the opportunity to reflect and now consider how we can continue and add to existing plans for the next stage of our transformation journey.
- 4.12 Staff have been engaged in the development of the response and actions for each recommendation through a variety of workshops, including a joint strategic session of Executive Directors and Directors, and at Senior Managers Group. Alongside the public action plan a detailed delivery plan will be produced with clear strategic alignment to our key strategies (Council plan, We are Walsall 2040, Proud promises) and with clear milestones and accountabilities for delivery.

Risk management

- 4.13 There are no significant risks associated with the action plan other than potential risk to the Council's reputation if it fails to deliver. Effective risk management practice is incorporated as standard into the planning of Council projects and initiatives that will support the delivery of the actions identified.

Financial implications

- 4.14 There are no direct financial implications related to the action plan itself but there may be financial implications regarding the delivery of suggested actions.

Legal implications

- 4.15 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

- 4.16 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 addressed within the action plan.

Property implications

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

Health and wellbeing implications

4.18 There are no direct implications in this report.

Staffing implications

4.19 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 suggested actions in the plan.

Reducing Inequalities

4.20 The 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

4.21 There are no direct implications.

Consultation

4.22 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 report presents a draft action plan for approval that responds to the recommendations for improvement identified and reported by the LGA following the CPC undertaken by the Council in January 2023. A review will be undertaken alongside the lead LGA officer in six months to check the Council progress in its action plan.

6. Respond

The Council is already undertaking programmes and activities that directly address the recommendations identified by the report. This existing and planned work will continue alongside some new actions to ensure that we continue to improve as an organisation. The delivery plan will be reported through to Corporate Management Team to ensure accountability and delivery.

7. Review

The CPC process includes a review from the LGA around six months from the initial visit. This will provide an opportunity to reflect and consider the delivery of the action plan.

Background papers

None

Annexes:

Appendix 1 LGA report
Appendix 2 Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan

Author

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

Stephen Gunther
Director Public Health, Policy & Strategy, and Business Insights
✉ stephen.gunther@walsall.gov.uk

Signed:



Deborah Hindson
Interim Chief Executive
22 March 2023

Signed:



Councillor M Bird
Leader of the Council
22 March 2023