

Cherwell District Council

Council

27 February 2023

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge 2023

Report of Chief Executive

This report is public.

Purpose of report

To present the findings of and resulting activity in line with the council's Corporate Peer Challenge, which was carried out by the Local Government Association (LGA) in November 2022. The CPC has provided a very positive picture of the Council and has recognised the considerable achievement of responding to the covid pandemic and decoupling its partnership from OCC, during which service delivery for its residents was always at the centre of its decision making. The recommendations are all in line with current activity and provide a powerful base from which the organisation can move forward as a standalone and ambitious District Council – one that takes pride in putting our residents and communities at the heart.

1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To endorse the Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge report (Appendix 1).
- 1.2 To approve the Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan (Appendix 2).
- 1.3 Note the progress that has already been made towards the Peer Review recommendations, which are set out in the proposed Action Plan.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 The LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) programme is highly regarded by the sector. According to a recent survey of participating councils, all were either very or fairly satisfied with their corporate peer challenge.
- 2.2 By bringing together leaders and senior managers from other local authorities as member and officer peers, CPCs provide robust, strategic and credible check and challenge to support councils in achieving their aspirations and managing emerging issues. Peer challenges also enhance the capacity of the sector by encouraging

councils to think beyond their traditional boundaries and partnerships to achieve better outcomes for their communities.

- 2.3 All councils are encouraged to host a CPC every five years. The last one for Cherwell was at the end of 2017 when the Council was in partnership with South Northamptonshire Council.
- 2.4 Corporate Peer Challenges are designed to facilitate local government improvements. They are also tailored to meet the specific priorities and needs of the participating authority and to take reflect their local circumstances, therefore complementing and adding value to the authority's own performance and improvement priorities.
- 2.5.1 The peers use their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information gleaned from the people they meet, what they have read in the supporting paperwork and what the latest data is indicating. Peers are drawn from across the sector. Cherwell District Council supports the programme by enabling senior staff to join and lead CPCs for other authorities.
- 2.6 Each CPC covers the five core areas listed below as well as those specifically requested by the Council:
- **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?
- 2.6 The two additional areas that this council requested were:
- **Growth & Infrastructure**
 - Is the council's Growth ambition clearly established?
 - Does the council have the resources to support the delivery of this ambition?

- **Decoupling of the strategic partnership with Oxfordshire County Council**

- Has the organisation successful decoupled from its formal strategic partnership?
- Has the Council successfully used this opportunity to renew Cherwell District Council?

- 2.7 The Corporate Peer Challenge took place between **29 November** and **2 December** 2022. We received initial feedback in a presentation on the 2 December 2022
- 2.8 During the challenge week the peers spoke to more than **145** people (stakeholders, councillors and staff), gathered feedback from over **70** meetings and interviews, undertook research and reviewed a wealth of council documentation.
- 2.9 Councils are encouraged to publish the final report and to produce an action plan in response, hence bringing this report and accompanying appendices to Full Council.
- 2.10 The LGA will organise a check-in meeting, six months after the CPC. This will be a facilitated session for the Council to discuss progress and any challenges with peers and to agree the next steps. This check-in meeting will take place late Summer in 2023.

3.0 Report Details

- 3.1 The Corporate Peer Challenge report highlights the council's strengths and opportunities for development.
- 3.2 The overriding messages and observations from the Corporate Peer Challenge were:
- The council has **ambitious plans** and has a **proven track record of delivery**.
 - There is a **recognised need for a compelling vision** for the council now that it is a standalone authority.
 - The council needs to **face the future financial challenges head-on**.
 - **Transformation is fundamental** to achieving the council's corporate priorities and the MTFs.
 - **Continue to work with your regional partners** to meet the infrastructure gap.
 - **Be clear about your plans for regeneration** and communicate this widely.
 - **You've stabilised the organisation** following a tough decoupling exercise you now need to refocus your relationships.

3.3 The Council should therefore be proud that its achievements and areas of good practice have been recognised. The CPC highlighted many strengths:

- Strong leadership credentials - a **leader of place**
- **Loyal and committed staff** – ‘the officers at CDC are first class’, you need to take them with you on your transformation journey.
- **Members exhibit a wide variety of talents** and backgrounds that bring a real strength to the council.
- Adept at **attracting growth and inward investment**
- **Supporting its communities** housing needs
- **Managing its finances** and budgets
- It’s very **positive reputation** amongst partners

3.3 The CPC identified eight opportunities for development all of which are either underway or captured in an existing delivery plan.

3.4 The Action Plan in **Appendix 2** sets out the eight recommendations, the progress this council has already made towards achieving them and what further action is required.

4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

4.1 The Council has embraced the Corporate Peer Challenge process and would like to put on record their thanks to the peer team who undertook the challenge and to all of those who contributed to the process; councillors and colleagues from local public sector organisations, town and parish councils, staff, public partners and many representatives of the local business and voluntary sector communities.

5.0 Consultation

5.1 A significant part of the Corporate Peer Challenge involves seeking the views of key stakeholders. For Cherwell this included representatives from our business sector, community and voluntary sector, the Oxfordshire System, staff, councillors and town and parish councils.

6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

6.1 There are no proposed alternative recommendations.

7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

- 7.1 There are no financial implications arising directly as a result of this report.

Comments checked by:

Michael Furness, S.151 Officer & Assistant Director – Finance. Tel: 01295 2216845, Email: Michael.furness@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Legal Implications

- 7.2 There are no legal implications arising directly as a result of this report.

Comments checked by:

Shiraz Sheikh, Monitoring Officer & Assistant Director Law and Governance
Tel: 01295 227981, Email: Shiraz.sheikh@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Risk Implications

- 7.3 There are no direct risks from endorsing the CPC report or agreeing the action plan. The specific risks of actions in the suggested action plan will be identified and captured during the project planning life cycles.

Comments checked by:

Shona Ware, Assistant Director – Customer Focus.
Telephone: 01295 221652, Email: Shona.ware@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Equalities and Inclusion Implications

- 7.4 There are no direct implications arising from this report as the suggested action to agree the councils EDI action plans is already well underway. Equality Impact Assessments will be undertaken for each action as part of the normal project planning process.

Comments checked by:

Shona Ware, Assistant Director – Customer Focus.
Telephone: 01295 221652, Email: Shona.ware@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Sustainability Implications

- 7.5 There are no direct implications arising from this report in relation to sustainability. In relation to the Peer Review's recommendation on Regeneration, we will ensure that climate change actions are considered in line with any delivery. Our influence over regeneration in the district, is a key way in which we can help to ensure that Cherwell becomes carbon net zero.

Comments checked by:

Jo Miskin, Climate Action Manager, Environmental Services
Tel: 07900 227103 Email: jo.miskin@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

8.0 Decision Information

Key Decision

Financial Threshold Met: N/A

Community Impact Threshold Met: N/A

Wards Affected

All

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

All

Lead Councillor

Councillor Barry Wood, Leader of the Council

Document Information

Appendix number and title

- Appendix 1 – LGA Report - Corporate Peer Challenge Cherwell District Council
- Appendix 2 – Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan

Background papers

None

Report Author and contact details

Shona Ware

Assistant Director – Customer Focus

01295 221652

Shona.ware@cherwell-dc.gov.uk