

LGA PEER CHALLENGE REVIEW REPORT

Cabinet Member(s): Councillor Bob Deed - Leader
Responsible Officer: Stephen Walford – Chief Executive

Reason for Report: To receive the report from the Local Government Association (LGA) as part of their peer challenge sector-led improvement programme and to consider the action plan proposed by means of addressing the recommendations from the peer team.

Recommendations:

- 1. That cabinet notes the LGA report at Appendix A, including the nine specific recommendations contained therein, which was produced as a result of the recent peer challenge process.**
- 2. That cabinet approves the action plan at Appendix B and requests a further update in six months to review the implementation and/or progress of these actions.**

Financial Implications: None arising from this report.

Budget and Policy Framework: The peer challenge process is part of the LGA's sector-led improvement process and looks at the performance of the council and the way it is meeting its objectives and planned outcomes. It does not intend to advise the council on its ambitions as expressed through the its various budgetary and policy decisions, but it does seek to reflect back on areas for improvement in core areas of local government work. See report body text for more details.

Legal Implications: None.

Risk Assessment: The LGA peer challenge process aims to foster continued improvement in the sector, therefore while its recommendations are not binding on the council they do, in the considered opinion of the team visiting, represent a suite of opportunities that would help the council deliver better outcomes if they were followed up. Therefore the risks inherent in this report revolve around any inability or lack of desire to adopt such recommendations for improvement, particularly bearing in mind the challenging landscape for council service provision and resultant community outcomes.

Equality Impact Assessment: There are no concerns with regard to equalities impact relating to the content of this report.

Relationship to Corporate Plan: The views of our colleagues, partners and peers are critical to helping us deliver the council's corporate plan ambitions.

Impact on Climate Change: Several conversations as part of the peer challenge process incorporated discussion relating to our activity, approach and delivery with regard to climate change priorities.

1.0 Introduction/Background

- 1.1 The peer challenge process, as administered through the Local Government Association, is part of a sector-led process that seeks to ensure councils across the country continue to challenge themselves to improve outcomes.
- 1.2 The process is independent and involves a team of experienced elected member and officer peers from other councils reviewing Mid Devon in order to help provide focus on areas for potential improvement, drawing on the team's experience and knowledge of local government.
- 1.3 The process is not an inspection. By reviewing a significant amount of documentation and material beforehand and speaking with over 60 people over the 2 days they were on site (including members, officers, and a range of external partners), they seek to build an accurate picture in order to help identify recommendations that will aid the council's continued improvement.

2.0 Outcomes

- 2.1 The peer review report is included in its entirety at Appendix A.
- 2.2 The report includes a mix of aspects, approaches or projects that have been a success, alongside the highlighting of those areas that have either proved challenging in recent times, or are likely to benefit the council if it can find ways to address them in future. Some of these recommendations may potentially have resource implications in terms of prioritisation, but at this point the acceptance of the report does not create any specific new financial pressures.
- 2.3 One of the beneficial aspects of this peer review was the participation of team members who had visited the council during its last peer challenge back in 2017. This created an opportunity not just to consider Mid Devon in isolation, but also in some ways to reflect on the progress made since 2017. The report contains lots of information, but the opening remarks are worth highlighting:

'Mid Devon District Council (MDDC) is a good council. It has shown real leadership of place and should be proud of the way it has supported residents and businesses throughout the last two years in responding to the pandemic.'
- 2.4 Many of the recommendations highlight priorities that are (reassuringly) already known to the council and, as such, the draft action plan at Appendix B contains references to workstreams previously initiated and processes already in hand. However, there are also a few areas where increased priority is recommended to ensure the council is best placed to handle the upcoming challenges relevant to Mid Devon both as a place and as an organisation. Not least around making sure that individual projects or successes are recognised within the context of the council's overarching ambition; quite a few areas relate to better or more effective communication of the council's plan, delivery and/or achievement.

Contact for more Information:

Stephen Walford, Chief Executive or Sally Gabriel, Member Services Manager

Circulation of the Report:

Councillor Bob Deed, Cabinet Members and Leadership Team
Appendix A – LGA Peer Challenge Report
(see separate pdf file)

Appendix B – Action Plan

	Recommendation	Response	Timeframe
1	Develop a stronger narrative for the place that encapsulates the wide range of projects and ambitions that you have for your place so that partners, stakeholders, and residents understand the council's vision – and the role they can play in delivering it.	<p>Consider how to publicise and reframe the revised corporate plan to tell a better story about council projects and delivery so that they all become achievements in the journey rather than a series of one-off success. Consider the resident survey feedback as context in order to prioritise and strengthen the messaging – where does feedback not correlate? How can we do a better job not just talking about successes, but joining the dots between the corporate plan and delivery of better outcomes.</p> <p>Corporate plan review timetable (see below). Communications and engagement strategy; to be implemented before Christmas.</p>	Oct '22.
2	Use the mid-term re-set of the corporate plan as an opportunity to review priorities in light of capacity constraints and ensure member/political ownership of both the process and the outcomes.	Corporate Plan mid point review went to cabinet in April (05/04/22), with a requirement to be considered by all four PDGs for their views prior to it coming back to cabinet inclusive of any recommendations for change/re-prioritisation. This is in hand and will be coming back to cabinet once the PDG cycle has been completed. (NB. If any changes are proposed, this will require onward recommendations to full council.)	<p>July or August Cabinet.</p> <p>Onward to full council as required.</p>
3	Proactively seek to engage your residents/communities in the re-set process, using the different communications channels you have begun to embed.	<p>As per recommendation 1 above. Need to do a better job raising awareness of the corporate plan and utilising effective communication channels to increase engagement.</p> <p>We could consider revisions to our resident engagement approach when we come to revisit the survey towards the end of the year (this data has also just been put to the PDGs as part of their ongoing work programme considerations).</p> <p>The annual discussions with the business community could be better utilised to brief and help further awareness of what the Council is doing.</p> <p>This could also be linked to better/regular briefings of all members and help with parish liaison so when they attend their respective town and parish councils or other meetings they have an overview list of all the good things we have done, are doing, and will be</p>	<p>Oct '22.</p> <p>Nov '22</p> <p>Jan '23</p> <p>July '22</p>

	Recommendation	Response	Timeframe
		<p>doing over the next few month.</p> <p>The role of the Community PDG in terms of community engagement has been highlighted in terms of policy development and in other PDGs in terms of involvement of stakeholders.</p>	
4	<p>Seek external support/advice to ensure a culture of respect between officers and members and between members so that you can realise your potential.</p>	<p>This is an area of quite focused concern – although the peer review suggests that this is now ‘permeating through the council’ as other members voice their concern about it, so it is something that needs to be tackled. In a small number of cases, officers are increasingly finding themselves in a ‘debating’ space with members as opposed to an advisory one. This is inappropriate and is something that needs to be addressed swiftly for two reasons. Firstly, one of protocol – officers are not there to debate with members and it is perfectly normal for there to be times when members don’t like or agree with the advice given. Secondly, officers do not have the time or capacity to engage in extended debates with some members when they might disagree with either the advice or the outcome of a council decision.</p> <p>The concept of being subject to continued challenge from elected members on matters of professional advice and opinion is largely alien to the professional roles of officers. However, the fact that this challenge is often accusatory in nature and seeks to apply pressure from elected members (politicians) to officers (employees) is leading to distress amongst a variety of staff – and, it should be noted, is causing concern amongst many members. It has also been the cause of officers choosing to leave the council and staff making complaints about their treatment as employees.</p> <p>There are two specific factors that need addressing:</p> <p>Reinstating or clarifying the roles of officers (to advise) and members (to consider, to debate with member colleagues, then to decide – not always to agree). This report marks the start of that process in order to restore the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and provide a reset point.</p> <p>Seeking external support from the LGA to help reset the culture in some quarters where necessary. To be explored and put in place at a time to suit all participants.</p>	<p>July ‘22.</p> <p>Conversations initiated with LGA. To be scoped out further after approval of</p>

	Recommendation	Response	Timeframe action plan.
5	Provide training and development to all members so that they make best use of existing democratic structures e.g., Scrutiny and Policy Development Groups to provide effective oversight of organisational performance AND positively influence policy and decision making – ensuring the best possible outcomes are delivered for residents.	<p>To be picked up and embedded in the member development programme in terms of the understanding of roles and remits.</p> <p>The council will shortly be advertising for a new Corporate Performance & Improvement Manager to help manage corporate performance within and across the performance management framework. This will include reporting on the Corporate Plan as well as operational and service metrics, drawing on best practice and innovation from across the sector and outside it, and to assist in the effective management of performance across the full range of council services.</p> <p>The council is also looking at overhauling its performance tools to better help the (officer) leadership team and elected members better shape and influence outcomes by understanding the various inputs and policy levers available to them.</p> <p>There is the potential to involve members in co-designing an improved performance/risk reporting suite/system for the PDGs, cabinet etc. To be facilitated after the appointment of our new Corporate Performance & Improvement Manager.</p>	<p>As soon as possible.</p> <p>Advert due to go live in June</p> <p>To be advised on options for timeline.</p> <p>To be advised on options for timeline</p> <p>Draft Member Development Programme has been produced for 2022/23 as a pilot sample for 2023/4 – 2027/8.</p>
6	Provide clarity as a priority to officers and members around your	This work is already ongoing and it is worth remembering that two thirds of the organisation is operating in exactly the same way for our customers in terms of working	

	Recommendation	Response	Timeframe
	plans for hybrid working going forward – building on the successful approaches you have developed during the pandemic and reflecting the needs of all stakeholders in the ‘new normal’.	<p>practices and access to services as they were before the pandemic.</p> <p>The other third are largely the office-based roles and the new telephony system (implemented after the peer challenge had taken place) now enables any officer to make/take calls via their laptop and internet connection, thus alleviating one of the main causes of frustration about any inability to connect external phone calls given the limitations of the internal skype-based channel (not all office-based staff had work mobiles).</p> <p>Discussions with staff and union groups are focusing on how their working patterns can be managed and facilitated as we move to a more normalised set of hybrid arrangements (for those staff whose roles suit this), as well as how flexibility can be balanced with need for non-work time. One of the biggest challenges is ensuring that one person’s flexibility isn’t another’s out of hours pressure.</p> <p>Nevertheless, the council’s physical opening hours are amongst the widest and least restrictive in Devon and we moved rapidly to normalise the balance between on and off-site working, when others remained largely remote in their provisioning. Getting this balance right remains a challenge at workplaces across the country and represents a very real service delivery, recruitment and retention risk if not handled appropriately.</p>	<p>Bandwidth upgrade in March '22.</p> <p>Telephony rollout in April '22.</p> <p>Discussions with union and employee rep groups ongoing.</p>
7	Continue to play a visible and positive role in key regional and sub-regional partnerships – particularly Team Devon and the emerging County Deal.	Will do. 2022 is Mid Devon’s chairmanship of the district forum, which has meant the leader and chief executive playing wider district representative roles this year. Thematic leadership and wider relationships will continue beyond this chairmanship, with roles across housing and social care in addition to the lead roles taken during the emerging county deal negotiations with government, representing all districts’ interests.	Ongoing.
8	Consider developing a MDDC Climate Change Action Plan to reflect the district’s circumstances, to sit under the county umbrella	The peer challenge process highlighted that while internal and external stakeholders were able to confidently talk about the Devon climate action plan, there was more to do to publicise and increase awareness of what the council was doing firstly to meet its own objectives on carbon reduction, but secondly to ‘join the dots’ on linking our own	

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	plan.	<p>efforts with community action that will help achieve the wider Devon goals.</p> <p>A successful state of the district debate was held in April (after the peer challenge) and provided a good start to involving the wider community on how we can collaboratively deal with the climate agenda. Lots of good networking and new contacts were made.</p> <p>A full update on the Mid Devon climate action plan and progress towards its various measures was presented to the Environment PDG on 24/05/22. As well as doing a more effective job communicating this, there is a need to consider how we help the community join the dots between what we are doing as a council (in terms of our own operational activity) and the strategic intent captured within the Devon Plan.</p> <p>Climate action strategic communications plan needed.</p>	<p>April '22</p> <p>Enhanced comms messaging throughout 2022.</p>
9	Communicate the Action Plan you have developed to address the issues identified through the recent staff survey.	It is proposed that the implementation of this action plan be brought back to cabinet by way of an update / progress report in 6 months.	To be brought back to Cabinet before Dec '22.