

**CABINET**  
**03 JANUARY 2023**

**LGA PEER CHALLENGE – FOLLOW UP REPORT**

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

**Reason for Report:** To update the Cabinet on the progress made towards addressing or implementing the recommendations arising from the peer review team during 2022.

**Recommendations:** That Cabinet notes the table at appendix A and the progress made on the recommendations from the peer team.

**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 its various budgetary and policy decisions, but it does seek to reflect back on areas for improvement in core areas of local government work.

**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 peer team visiting, represent a suite of opportunities that would help the Council deliver better outcomes if they were followed up. When initially considering the recommendations from the peer review process, Cabinet requested a six-month update in order to be assured on progress being made.

**Equality Impact Assessment:** There are no concerns with regard to equalities impact relating to the content of this report, although a number of recommendations from the peer review team relate to better or more effective communication – as such, the communication and engagement strategy is critical to the success in tackling these, particularly around hard-to-reach groups.

**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. This report notes actions taken in relation to various projects – each of those reports will contain assessments on climate change impact specifically linked to those projects.

## 1.0 Introduction/Background

- 1.1 The peer challenge process, as administered by and 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.
- 1.4 These reviews typically take place every 4 or 5 years. Mid Devon's most recent peer review process occurred in March 2022.

## 2.0 Outcomes

- 2.1 The peer report was presented to Cabinet on 28/06/22 and contained an action plan to address the recommendations that arose from the peer review process.
- 2.2 As was reported to Cabinet previously, the report contained lots of information, but it was reassuring to note the opening remarks:

*'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.'*

- 2.3 However, it is important that the Council uses this process to continue to strive for improvement and treats this as a learning exercise as well as being a review at a given snapshot in time. Many of the recommendations highlighted priorities that were already known to the Council and, as such, the draft action plan was able to reference workstreams previously initiated and/or processes that were already in hand. However, there were also a few areas where increased priority was recommended, and to that end the Cabinet agreed to request a follow up report (this report) six months on to review progress.

### **Contact for more Information:**

Stephen Walford, Chief Executive or Andrew Seaman, Member Services Manager

### **Circulation of the Report:**

Councillor Bob Deed, Cabinet Members and Leadership Team


### **Appendix A – Action Plan Progress Update Table**

## Appendix A – Action Plan Progress Update Table

	Recommendation	Initial Response	Timeframe	December 2022 Update
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.</p> <p>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.	<p>In the time period immediately following the peer review process there was a focus on developing the communications plan and schedule up to the end of this municipal administration. The communications team has a yearly plan, which is fed into by service leads, to help maximise opportunities for awareness-raising as well as sharing positive news stories. This plan includes work around the four Corporate Plan themes. A recent example of this would be the series of press releases regarding the growth of the Council's housing stock. A video outlining these plans is also being created and due to go online in December. The team also works closely with the Climate Specialist and Waste and Recycling service to support the Council's climate and environmental ambitions, shown through our stand at the Mid Devon Show, the district debate and the recent Bin It 123 campaign.</p> <p>In 2021 a residents' survey was launched, which received more than 1500 responses. The results from this have been fed into our engagement work, particularly through social media posts. The survey is being repeated now (Nov 2022) and will feed into the Council's budget setting process in early 2023. The results can also help officers and members see the public's priorities for spending, particularly with regards to the Council's non statutory services.</p> <p>Alongside this work a revised Communication and Engagement Strategy is due to go to Cabinet in March 2023. This will show how the work of the communications team supports the Council's efforts of coordinating our messaging along and around our themes of Communities, Economy, Environment and Homes. The work supporting these themes is already underway and has been since the plan was launched.</p>

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				We are also mindful that national programmes such as the shared prosperity fund (SPF) and rural England prosperity fund (REPF) provide an additional opportunity to reinforce the place narrative. The interventions we are proposing are a response to the character of Mid Devon and its specific economic context and are informed by stakeholder/member engagement. We therefore have an opportunity to double-up on our efforts to explain how we are introducing interventions which are targeted towards supporting our communities, but to also advertise those initiatives at the same time.
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.	July or August Cabinet.  Onward to Full Council as required.	Having been to the Cabinet in April 2022, the Corporate Plan mid-point review then went to each of the Council's policy development groups (PDGs) as well as to the scrutiny committee.  This went back to Cabinet in July for approval (with no further recommendations being required to Council).
3	Proactively seek to engage your residents/communities in the re-set process, using the different	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.	Oct '22.	See comments at 1 above linked to current activities, including resident surveys, and future opportunities. The resident survey does not close until 15 <sup>th</sup> December and as such, feedback is not available at the point of publishing this report. More detail may be able to be provided by way of verbal update, but other



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4	Seek external support/advice to ensure a culture of respect between officers and members and between members so that you can realise your potential.	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	July ‘22.	The ‘culture of respect’ is an area that has received a lot of attention over the past few months. This has been explored by discrete groupings of members as well as in wider sessions open to the whole membership cohort. This culminated in an externally-facilitated session part-funded by the LGA held during November to focus on the quality and nature of the relationships within Council. This exposed a considerable lack of engagement in some quarters and highlighted the level of frustration felt by some towards those who repeatedly display behaviours that are out of keeping with a professional and respectful working environment. To be clear, there was substantial consensus among attendees as to how people should (and should not) behave. However, this ran alongside a

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	<p>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</p>		<p>recognition that those who perhaps most needed a greater level of understanding in these areas, had declined to participate.</p> <p>This mirrors examples elsewhere in Council life, where opportunities for learning and improvement are created but are perhaps not always taken up by those who might benefit most. This weakens the quality of decision-making in the Council and exposes the Council to greater risk of both challenge and cost. While not all decisions are so readily quantifiable, recent analysis has shown poor quality decisions at planning have cost the Council over £450,000 in the last 3 years, for example.</p> <p>Considerable attention was given to the role of committee chairs in maintaining appropriate conduct in public meetings, with lots of suggestions for how to improve the member induction process for next May (subsequent to the 2023 local government elections) so that incoming members better understand the acceptable norms of how to interact with each other as well as with officers (see response to item 5 on member training and development).</p> <p>Finally, it is worthy of note that everyone who participated (this included cross-party participation and a mix of executive and non-executive roles) found it to be an incredibly useful experience and that the sense of 'team' within Mid Devon was strong. This will be fed back to the LGA as part of the 'follow up' to the peer review process, along with this Council's thanks for their support in this space.</p>

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		<p>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>		
5	<p>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>	<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 be recruiting a new Corporate Performance &amp; 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</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>With District and Parish elections on 4 May 2023 a working group consisting of three Members (one Independent, one Conservative, one Lib Dem) with officers from Communications, Learning &amp; Development, the Monitoring Officer, Member Services Manager and the Director for Business Improvement and Operations has been formed to look at new member induction. The first meeting was on the 10 November and the brief is to review the previous induction process, formulate ideas for doing things differently and organising a questionnaire to be sent to all Members asking them to reflect on their experience as a new member and for feedback.</p> <p>An online councillor handbook is being looked at together with recording of induction sessions and a dedicated sharepoint area for members.</p> <p>On service-related development, the planning committee members were invited to complete a full day of in-person training on the 23<sup>rd</sup> November with PAS (Planning Advisory Service) as part of regular training and development in order to ensure full appreciation and understanding of current issues, changes and roles &amp; remits. This was specifically in response</p>



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		<p>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 &amp; Improvement Manager.</p>	<p>To be advised on options for timeline</p>	<p>to organisational performance issues and a need to focus on achieving better outcomes.</p> <p>The Council has appointed a new corporate manager for performance and risk and it is anticipated that their influence will widen over the coming months as opportunities are taken to engage members in corporate performance activity, reflect on progress against corporate objectives, and use risk metrics in a more effective way when considering both policy and financial decisions.</p> <p>Dr. Stephen Carr joined the Council on the 12<sup>th</sup> October 2022 and has been reviewing the different work streams and processes that feed into the Corporate Performance and Improvement portfolio. Work has already commenced reporting on the performance of the Corporate Plan in the November Audit and Cabinet meetings. A review of best practice is in progress.</p> <p>How the Council uses its performance management tools and performance management framework to better shape and influence outcomes is currently being reviewed. A key element will be how data and information is reported to Members to support scrutiny and decision making. Improvements are being implemented as they are identified.</p> <p>An industry related review of our performance management framework and performance indicators is being undertaken to better inform future planning and decision making. A report on</p>

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				both the process followed and findings of the review when it is finished, will be provided no later than 1st March 2023.
6	Provide clarity as a priority to officers and members around your 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>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 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</p>	<p>Discussions with union and employee rep groups ongoing.</p> <p>Bandwidth upgrade in March '22.</p>	<p>Given that the majority of Council service provision relies on physical presence, there has been a need to handle discussions in this area in the context of recognising that different services face different challenges when exploring how hybrid working can be embedded. To that end, managers and staff were surveyed regarding ‘willingness to adopt’ and service impacts of hybrid working. Contract addendums have been developed and signed by staff. Approximately 90% of those working in roles which were applicable for hybrid working agreed to the addendum and the clause puts emphasis on the managers ability to allow hybrid working. FAQs have been developed outlining staff/manager expectations of how hybrid should work for the organisation.</p> <p>A policy for hybrid where applicable has been developed to aid recruitment and retention during challenging times.</p> <p>A clear desk policy has been implemented and work is commencing to rationalise storage and condense working areas to improve staff interaction and office experience and reduce energy usage for less frequently used areas. This will also allow for new opportunities in bringing other public service providers into Phoenix House. Discussions are ongoing with two possible options being explored at the moment. This has the potential to make PH more of a public service hub – improving the service for customers by ensuring that, if a</p>

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		<p>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>Telephony rollout in April '22.</p>	<p>physical visit is required, a wider range of services and agencies are located here.</p> <p>A demo layout was set up in a training room to show how a new hybrid and revised working office layout can facilitate modern ways of working. This physical set up will work alongside the two new system-based improvements that have been implemented recently:</p> <p>MS365 implemented to improve collaborative working between individuals and teams.</p> <p>A new phone system (3CX) to officers and members to improve accessibility; with the ability to see officer availability and make contact through the app (or desktop), with all officers being issued with headsets. Officers can now work and make/take calls from anywhere with a wifi-connection.</p> <p>This has largely been rolled out without incident, however there is a danger that 'hybrid' becomes an organisational pattern rather than a benefit to customers. As such, during 2023 we will be implementing a new CRM system to enable the single-view of the customer and ensure any officer can help (customer services aim to resolve 70% of queries at first point of contact with the Council). This will also improve the 'handover' between general and technical services – with most customer frustration about call-backs being related to individual technical departments not the customer services team. Whilst complaint levels are slightly above pre-pandemic levels, only a small proportion are linked to access to officers.</p>

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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.	<p>Work has continued on maximising our partnership role and strategic influence beyond Devon. The county deal work stream has been progressed and is now waiting for government to engage; deals with areas that would accept a directly-elected mayor have been negotiated first.</p> <p>Our chairmanship of the Devon District Forum is now coming to the end of its annual cycle, but we will continue to support the new chair in this space to ensure continuity – particularly where previous knowledge would assist as context.</p> <p>Thematic work streams are also progressing, with housing matters rising up the agenda. In addition to discussion with MPs, Devon recently gave evidence to the House of Lords build environment committee looking at the issue of short-term lets and their impact on the housing market locally. (Changes to the Levelling Up Bill have been proposed that would see new licensing arrangements being developed, with further consultations on requiring change of use consent.)</p>
8	Consider developing a MDDC Climate Change Action Plan to reflect the district’s circumstances, to sit under the county umbrella plan.	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	April ‘22	As well as exploring this issue through the 2022 state of the district debate, this was also an item for the all-member away day, with consideration of direction of travel against the background of needing to be opportunistic with investment – success in the recent public sector decarbonisation funding programme has secured £2.8m towards decarbonisation works at leisure centres, which will also help lower energy bills for the authority. However the scale of the challenge remains significant.

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		<p>own 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>Enhanced communication and messaging throughout 2022.</p>	<p>The county's carbon plan has been officially launched (end of Sept 22) and we now have this adopted framework to link more activity to this workstream by aligning our efforts to the Devon Carbon Plan aims and actions through a database that is accessible to all.</p> <p>Regular update reports are provided to Environment PDG to cover corporate plan aims, climate change strategy priorities and climate action plan spreadsheet. It is intended that this approach will summarise the flow of decisions from 'plan' to 'proposal' to 'delivery'.</p> <p>Positive climate change messages shared on our website at <a href="#">Our Plan</a></p> <p>In addition to climate action as expressed through carbon reduction, we are picking up an Agricultural gap analysis – refined after an Economy PDG discussion – to consider how various workstreams/departments can join up dots to support agriculture and ensure environmental protections etc. Climate is a key strand, but other service areas such as forward planning, development management and economic development will also be involved. The NFU are engaged in working with us on the work.</p>
9	Communicate the Action Plan you have developed to address the issues identified	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.	This report represents the 6 month update back to cabinet. In terms of the staff survey and action plan, this was produced following the staff survey and was agreed by the Union and Impact staff consultative group in January 2022. Key themes identified included better all staff communication and

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	through the recent staff survey.			<p>cementing hybrid working as a permanent employment fixture. These have been addressed through the introduction of the first hybrid 'All Staff Briefing', which took place on 29 June 2022 at three different times (morning, afternoon and evening) to allow for participation across a range of working patterns and other work/life commitments. A recording was also made available for those that could not attend the three sessions throughout the day. The next briefing is scheduled for February 2023.</p> <p>Hybrid working was made a permanent fixture for applicable employees, on the basis of a requirement to maintain service delivery and team effectiveness. A review of our employee benefits also took place in 2022 with an improved leisure offer already on the table for existing employees and new recruits.</p> <p>The pay award for 2022 has now been implemented and plans are in place to rerun the wider all-staff survey again in June 2023 to assess our progress. We are also undertaking some enhanced analysis of leavers (staff turnover) that will be helping to target and prioritise our efforts in future with a view to maintaining a stable, motivated workforce and reducing our reliance on agency workers.</p>