

## Southend-on-Sea City Council

### Report of Chief Executive To Cabinet On 21 February 2023

Report prepared by: Sarah Brown, Policy Manager

#### Agenda

Item No.

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### LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (Oct 2022) Report and draft Action Plan Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee Cabinet Member: Councillor Stephen George Part 1

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#### 1. Purpose of Report and desired outcome/s

- 1.1 This paper reports the findings and recommendations of the Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC), which took place from 11 – 14 October 2022. Southend-on-Sea City Council invited the LGA to conduct the Challenge, in order to provide an external assessment of its progress, and recommendations for further improvement. The LGA's assessment and recommendations are set out in the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report (Annex A) and are summarised below.
- 1.2 Cabinet is asked to note the report and the recommendations made by the Peers, and to agree to the recommendations. Cabinet is further asked to consider and agree the Council's draft response which is set out in the Action Plan (Appendix 1)

#### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To note the Peer's findings and accept the nine recommendations
- 2.2 To note and agree the steps to address the LGA's recommendations as outlined in the Action Plan

#### 3. Background

- 3.1 The LGA offers all local authorities the opportunity to participate in a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) every 4 years or so as part of its sector-led improvement programme.
- 3.2 The Council's CPC took place in October 2022 and was conducted by a team of elected members and senior officers from other local authorities, together with LGA advisors.

- 3.3 The CPC considered questions from 5 core components: -
- a) **Local priorities and outcomes:** Are priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities and achieving improved outcomes for all its communities?
  - b) **Organisational and place leadership:** Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
  - c) **Governance and Culture:** Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Does the current framework allow for the most effective decisions to be made? Is there a culture of respect, challenge, and scrutiny?
  - d) **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?
  - e) **Capacity for improvement:** Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?
- 3.4 Peer challenges are not inspections but are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual Councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a Council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team use their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by the people they met, things they saw and material they read.
- 3.5 Preparation for the Challenge included reviewing a range of documents in order to ensure the peers were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 4 days at the Civic Centre, during which they:
- Gathered information and views from more than 51 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
  - Spoke to more than 160 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders.
  - Observed four council meetings (two in person and two on-line)

#### 4. Corporate Peer Challenge Findings

- 4.1 The LGA's report and findings can be read in full at Annex A. In summary, the Peers found that the Council has huge potential and that there are many positive attributes and assets both within the Council and city, including the strong community ethos, ambitious regeneration projects and sound financial management.
- 4.2 However, Peers found that the approach to leadership, governance and decision making is impacting the council's capacity to progress. As a result, nine recommendations were made, many of which relate to the theme of governance and decision making. The recommendations are:
- 4.3 **Constitutional Review** - Complete and implement your constitutional review as a matter of urgency.

- 4.4 **Organisational commitment to behaviour change** - Underpin your constitutional changes with a clear organisational and visible commitment to behaviour change. It will be important to ensure that the councillor development and leadership development programmes are aligned with the council's agreed values and behaviours, supporting a more effective councillor / officer working relationship.
- 4.5 **Election Cycle** - Implement the proposed boundary review and, as part of this, consider changing the election cycle to whole council elections every 4 years.
- 4.6 **Partnerships** - Re-engage partners across public, private and voluntary sectors on Southend 2050. Establish how the Council will work in partnership to deliver shared outcomes for the city.
- 4.7 **Prioritisation** - Ensure agreed priorities are aligned to resources and capacity. Provide more clarity on the link between strategic priorities and delivery.
- 4.8 **Communication** - Communicate and engage with all councillors, officers and residents on agreed priorities to help build a shared understanding. Be clear about the difficult decisions required to deliver a balanced medium term financial position.
- 4.9 **Modernise your council operating model, systems and processes** - This will help support the required pace of change and transformation. In addition to modernising governance and decision-making processes (as outlined above), the Council needs to ensure business needs are driving the operating model and that the Council has the capacity to deliver this. This includes work to implement the new data strategy and Corporate Data systems (including HR systems)
- 4.10 **Develop a consistent plan to address inequalities and disparities across the city and its neighbourhoods** - The Council should challenge itself as to whether the thematic nature of the Corporate Plan and Southend 2050 will address the entrenched inequalities and deprivation within some of Southend-on-Sea's localities and neighbourhoods.
- 4.11 **Strengthen your voice and influence for the benefit of the City and South Essex in the wider regional agenda** - It will be important for the Council to ensure it continues to exercise sufficient voice and influence on ASELA in relation to the devolution agenda.

## 5. Response and Action Plan

- 5.1 The Peers commented that the Council was very self-aware and the challenges that were set out within the pre-prepared Position Statement were reflective of the conversations, material, and meetings they observed whilst on site. It is therefore recommended that Cabinet note and accept the LGA's findings and nine recommendations outlined above.
- 5.2 Cabinet is asked to note and agree the Action Plan (Appendix 1) which is the Council's response to the Peer's recommendations. The Plan will be published

and outlines how the Council will implement the learning and seek opportunities for improvement. A lead sponsor, and Cabinet lead has been identified for each of the recommendations.

## **6. Reasons for Recommendation (this section should only be included in Cabinet and Cabinet Committee reports).**

6.1 The LGAs Corporate Peer Challenge process independently validated the challenges that the Council faces. The recommendations provide the Council with an improvement focussed and tailored response to its needs. The recommendations further complement and add value to a Council's own performance and improvement plans. Therefore, it is recommended that Cabinet agree to these recommendations and the Action Plan.

## **6. Corporate Implications**

The action plan will require staff resource to implement, where many of the recommendations are focused within the Strategic, Change and Governance directorate. Consideration will need to be given to the capacity of this directorate and the ability to support delivery.

### **6.1 Contribution to the Southend 2050 ambition, outcomes and road map and Transforming Together**

The recommendations and Action Plan support the Council's ability to improve its capacity to deliver its priorities as set out in Southend 2050 and the Corporate Plan. In addition, specific recommends and actions compliment the transformation of the organisation to deliver services more effectively.

### **6.2 Finance and value for money implications**

As mentioned above, the action plan will require staff and councillor capacity to implement however, these actions aim to deliver a more efficient way of working.

### **6.3 Legal Implications**

Changing the constitution and election cycle has several legal implications. Work to understand and plan for the legal steps will need to be undertaken alongside the Monitoring Officer.

### **6.4 Equalities and diversity Implications**

EDI is a priority for the Council and the recommendations above will help the Council to better and more effectively prioritise its work. The recommendation to re-engage partners and improve working relationships will bring important inclusion benefits. For each area of work, an equality analysis will need to be carried out to consider the impact on those from the protected characteristics groups.

**6.5 Other corporate implications:** [Note - Include those relevant from: People (key HR implications); Property; Empowerment, Co-design/production & Consultation; Risk; Community Safety; Green City/Environment/Climate Change; Data Protection; ICT; Health; Health & Safety; Commissioning/Procurement].

Principles of co-design will be important in delivering several aspects of the Action Plan. Such an approach will support greater accountability in the delivery and success of the projects.

There will be people implications through the review and enhancement of the learning and development offer to both councillors and members. The refreshed offer will improve working relationships and support the Council's values and behaviours. Likewise, the work to review the Constitution will support better working relationships between councillors and officers.

## **Annex A – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (Oct 2022) Report, – Findings & Recommendations for Southend-on-Sea City Council**

### **Appendix 1 – Southend-on-Sea City Council Action Plan for the LGA CPC (October 2022)**