



Report for: Cabinet

Date of Meeting:	26 October 2023
Subject:	LGA (Local Government Association) Corporate Peer Challenge – final report and response
Key Decision:	Yes
Responsible Officer:	Alex Dewsnap, Managing Director
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Paul Osborn, Leader of the Council
Exempt:	No
Decision subject to Call-in:	Yes
Wards affected:	All
Enclosures:	LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – London Borough of Harrow: Feedback Report (Appendix A) London Borough of Harrow Peer Review Response (action plan) (Appendix B)

Section 1 – Summary and Recommendations

This report sets out the recommendations from the Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Challenge earlier in the year and presents an action plan by way of response.

Recommendations:

Cabinet is requested to:

1. Agree the contents of the report and accept the recommendations of the Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Review team (as set out in Appendix A).
2. Agree the contents of the action plan prepared in response to those recommendations (Appendix B) and that implementation of the actions is delegated to the Managing Director, who will report progress to Cabinet or appropriate committee.
3. Note that there will be a follow-up visit from members of the Peer Team, in early 2024, to review progress against the action plan (currently set for 8th January 2024).

Reason: To respond to recommendations arising from LGA Corporate Peer Challenge 2023.

Section 2 – Report

This report considers the key findings (recommendations) of the February 2023 LGA Corporate Peer Challenge. The action plan, that has been developed by way of response, addresses each of the thirteen recommendations by outlining the activity the council intends to take or is already taking. Overall, the response describes a high degree of improvement activity in the vast majority of the recommendation themes that is already ongoing or planned within the organisation. This therefore aligns very much with the council's vision and corporate priorities.

Options considered

- Do not respond to the Peer Challenge feedback report and recommendations (rejected)
- Respond to the Peer Challenge feedback report and recommendations with an action plan (recommended option)

Background

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – February 2023

The LGA were invited to carry out a Peer Challenge of the London Borough of Harrow. The LGA open these Peer Challenges out to all local authorities in supporting their continuous improvement. This challenge was undertaken in February 2023 and their final report was received in late April. The feedback report is appended to this report and has been published on the council's website.

The peer team considered five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges - areas that are critical to councils' performance and improvement:

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

In addition, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on a theme focused on the customer experience:

6. **Customer experience** - Does the council demonstrate leadership and a clear vision for the customer experience?

The peer team, made up of experienced member and officer peers, prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent four days (7-10 February 2023) onsite at the council, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 60 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 140 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

Feedback report and recommendations – April 2023

In their feedback report, the Peer Challenge team made a number of observations and suggestions. The LGA ask that the recommendations are taken on board by the council and that an action plan be developed to articulate and subsequently track the council's response to these recommendations.

The 13 recommendations are:

- 1. Corporate Plan:** Whilst the flagship actions are helpful in providing focus, the council should ensure that they do not distract from the business as usual. The council should take steps to embed the Corporate Plan across the council and establish alignment with other key policies and strategies.
- 2. Improvement, transformation and capacity:** There is a need for a defined strategic improvement programme with sequenced actions, supported by further capacity for transformation and change. A properly established and resourced Project Management Office (PMO) alone will not solve this (but would be a helpful start); capacity is required across the organisation. There is a need to urgently reprioritise programmes and allocate resource accordingly. This may involve moving resource around and the revision of milestones and targets. There is also a need to acknowledge not everything that needs doing can be done now so some phasing with clear communications and expectations is required.
- 3. Organisation:** A determination is needed as to whether to agree and require (or not) a standard operating model for the council and all service areas. If this is agreed clarity should be provided with clear design principles for either devolved or centralised services, and the overall model of service delivery. There is currently a mixture of devolved and centralised (hub and spoke) corporate services and they vary across departments.
- 4. Financial planning and management:** Continue to develop alignment between the Corporate Plan, MTFs and other financial strategies.
- 5. Savings and MTFs:** Ensure a relentless tracking and reporting system is in place with clear ownership of budgets with a focus on delivering the agreed savings proposals and avoiding double counts that might arise from changes to the operating model.
- 6. Internal systems:** Identify, agree and implement a range of options to urgently resolve key system issues (e.g. Microsoft Dynamic 365 and planning). Consider what alternative options might be available to help deliver the necessary urgent improvements.
- 7. Performance:** Introduce a consistent council-wide performance framework which provides organisational assurance. Ensure this performance monitoring is used to inform service delivery and decision making. Develop a suite of performance information and data packs

which go through formal council governance arrangements e.g. reports to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny.

- 8. Human Resources and Organisational Development:** Systems, processes and policies need to be reviewed, refreshed and made fit for purpose to deliver the council priorities as a matter of urgency. It is important that a culture is developed to ensure that all council services understand and comply with agreed corporate policies. This needs to be closely monitored and any non-compliance identified and appropriate corrective action taken. A robust annual appraisal system should be developed that aligns individual and organisational objectives, values and behaviours as set out by the new Corporate Plan.
- 9. Workforce Strategy and Culture:** The council should develop a workforce strategy setting out plans to attract, recruit, retain and develop the workforce with the skills and capabilities required to achieve the council objectives. LBH could also look to zone the council office by service area to enhance team working and support collaboration. The council should discuss and agree with staff a set of expectations about when and why they should be in the office, informed by service need and job roles. Thereafter monitoring will be needed to ensure compliance is in line with the agreed approach.
- 10. Member development:** The existing member training and development offer should be evaluated and in line with member feedback should be expanded, targeting key roles such as Cabinet members and committee chairs.
- 11. Governance:** The council's schedule of meetings should be reviewed to allow for sufficient pre-decision engagement and the timely issuing of reports.
- 12. Commissioning:** The council should develop a long-term commissioning strategy and implementation plan. Longer term planning is needed in areas such as extra care housing and leisure provision.
- 13. Health partnerships:** Build on the strong relationships established locally and the role the council plays in the borough partnership. The council should look to be more influential across the ICS footprint to make sure Harrow residents get their fair share of resources.

Response to LGA recommendations and monitoring of progress

In responding to the recommendations from the LGA Peer challenge, an action plan has been developed (Appendix B), by which to monitor progress against each of the recommendations. This is aligned to the council's Corporate Improvement Programme (CIP) as the LGA peer challenge is very much welcomed as part of the council's ongoing improvement journey and there are significant overlaps in the LGA recommendations and the CIP. This should give a high degree of confidence that regarding critical areas for improvement identified, the council is self-aware, has begun a considerable

amount of development activity and can be confident (subject to ongoing monitoring) of delivering considerable improvements.

Governance mechanisms have been put in place to support this: A new working group of lead officers responsible for the Peer Review recommendations and the CIP has been established and meets monthly to monitor progress and take a coordinated look at improvement across the council. The group reports on a monthly basis to the Corporate Leadership Team and will periodically report to Cabinet, or other relevant committee, on progress as a part of the usual performance and improvement reporting mechanisms.

As the action plan demonstrates, the council accepts all the recommendations made by the LGA Peer Challenge team. The only proviso to this is in relation to recommendation 3 on 'organisation'. The council has determined that recommendations to explore a single operating model overlook the potential to consider cutting-edge, innovative and progressive ways to deliver council services to ensure better outcomes for our residents. Therefore, this is not a model that will be looked at as part of delivering on the recommendations put forward by the Peer Review team.

The council looks forward to welcoming back the Peer Challenge team early in the new year, to assess progress made on recommendations.

Ward Councillors' comments

N/A – affects all wards.

Risk Management Implications

Risks included on corporate or directorate risk register? **No**

Separate risk register in place? **No**

The relevant risks are summarised below **N/A**

The following key risks should be taken into account when agreeing the recommendations in this report:

Risk Description	Mitigations	RAG Status
Risks preventing the action plan from being achieved are not proactively identified and managed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A project or similar risk register will be put in place by the working group to proactively identify and mitigate any risks to full implementation of the action plan and this will be regularly reviewed and updated by the group.	GREEN
Insufficient organisational capacity, focus and co-ordination have been put in place to fully achieve the action plan to time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The action plan has been aligned with the the Council's Corporate Improvement Programme (CIP) and will be driven and implemented throughout the organisation alongside and on a par with the CIP.	AMBER

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A working group of lead officers responsible for the Peer Review recommendations and the CIP has been established, meeting monthly to monitor progress and take a coordinated look at improvement across the Council. • The above group reports on a monthly basis to the Corporate Leadership Team and will periodically report to Cabinet on progress as a part of the usual performance and improvement reporting mechanisms to the Executive. 	
The action-plan is not "SMART".	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All recommendations agreed and forming part of the action plan will be stated in SMART terms - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound terms where this is not already the case 	GREEN
The timelines set for completion of actions in the action plan are overly optimistic resulting in some or all actions not being achieved within the designated time frame.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The action plan has been aligned with the the Council's CIP, as have the timelines in the action plan. • A working group of lead officers responsible for the Peer Review recommendations and the CIP has been established, meeting monthly to monitor progress and take a coordinated look at improvement across the Council. This group will report back progress, including any slippage against timelines, on a monthly basis to the Corporate Leadership Team and will periodically report to Cabinet on progress as a part of the usual performance and improvement reporting mechanisms to the Executive. 	GREEN
Arrangements for the measuring and reporting of progress against the action plan are not adequate or timely.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A working group of lead officers responsible for the Peer Review recommendations and the CIP has been established, meeting monthly to monitor progress and take a coordinated look at improvement across the Council. 	GREEN

Procurement Implications

There are no procurement implications associated with the recommendations of this report.

Legal Implications

Some of the peer review recommendations fall within the terms of reference of Cabinet and others within the terms of reference of Council or other committees.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications arising from the recommendations of the Peer Review as many of the recommendations are already in place and require no additional resources.

Equalities implications / Public Sector Equality Duty

The Council's commitment to equality will be integral to our approach to governance, service delivery and improvement when taking these recommendations forward. Whereby the recommendation requires a change in policy, practice or procedure, an EQIA will be completed. Whereby an EQIA is not required, LB Harrow will ensure that any changes or improvements made in response to the recommendations do not inadvertently create barriers for certain groups or individuals.

Council Priorities

Delivery of the action plan resulting from the LGA Peer Challenge will help deliver all council priorities:

1. **A council that puts residents first**
2. **A borough that is clean and safe**
3. **A place where those in need are supported**

Section 3 - Statutory Officer Clearance

Statutory Officer: Sharon Daniels

Signed by the Chief Financial Officer

Date: 21 September 2023

Statutory Officer: Jessica Farmer

Signed by the Monitoring Officer

Date: 28 September 2023

Chief Officer: Alex Dewsnap

Signed off by the Managing Director

Date: 22 September 2023

Head of Procurement: Nimesh Mehta

Signed by the Head of Procurement

Date: 21 September 2023

Head of Internal Audit: Neale Burns

Signed on behalf of the Interim Head of Internal Audit

Date: 25 September 2023

Has the Portfolio Holder(s) been consulted? Yes

Mandatory Checks

Ward Councillors notified: NO, as it impacts on all Wards

EqIA carried out: NO

EQIA not needed as no service change proposed in this report.

Section 4 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact: Nahreen Matlib, Senior Policy Officer,
Nahreen.matlib@harrow.gov.uk

Background Papers: LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – London Borough of Harrow: Feedback Report

Call-in waived by the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee: No