

# Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge 2024 - West Berkshire

<b>Committee considering report:</b>	Executive
<b>Date of Committee:</b>	23 May 2024
<b>Portfolio Member:</b>	Councillor Jeff Brooks
<b>Report Author:</b>	Catalin Bogos - Performance, Research and Consultation Manager
<b>Forward Plan Ref:</b>	EX4567

## 1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To publish the results of the Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge for West Berkshire Council and inform Members that an Action Plan to address the recommendations will be presented to the next meeting of the Executive.

## 2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Note the Corporate Peer Challenge report produced by the LGA.
- 2.2 Note that an Action Plan will be presented to the next meeting of the Executive.

## 3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
<b>Financial:</b>	There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report. However, as part of the production of the Action Plan to address the report's recommendations, governance boards responsible for particular actions might identify such implications and manage accordingly.
<b>Human Resource:</b>	There are no direct HR implications as a result of this report.
<b>Legal:</b>	There are no direct Legal implications as a result of this report.
<b>Risk Management:</b>	There are no significant risk management issues as a result of this report.

<b>Property:</b>	N/A			
<b>Policy:</b>	There are no direct Policy implications as a result of this report. However, governance boards responsible for particular actions might identify such implications and manage accordingly.			
	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Commentary</b>
<b>Equalities Impact:</b>				
<b>A</b> Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		x		N/A
<b>B</b> Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?				N/A
<b>Environmental Impact:</b>				N/A
<b>Health Impact:</b>				N/A
<b>ICT Impact:</b>				N/A
<b>Digital Services Impact:</b>				N/A
<b>Council Strategy Priorities:</b>	x			The report highlights strengths and a number of recommendations for the Council to consider in delivering the Council Strategy and core services.

<b>Core Business:</b>	x			The report highlights strengths and a number of recommendations for the Council to consider in delivering the Council Strategy and core services.
<b>Data Impact:</b>				N/A
<b>Consultation and Engagement:</b>	Corporate Board, Portfolio Holders			

## 4 Executive Summary

4.1 This paper disseminates the results of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge which took place in February 2024. The resulting report from the LGA congratulates the Council for the progress made to address recommendations from the previous Corporate Peer Challenge (2019) and paints a positive picture with a small number of recommendations being made. The purpose of this paper is to publish the Corporate Peer Challenge report and inform members that an Action Plan will be produced for approval at the next meeting of the Executive, detailing the Council’s response to each recommendation.

4.2 The LGA report highlights a range of strengths in each domain of the Corporate Peer Challenge: local priorities and outcomes, organisational and place leadership; governance and culture; financial planning and management; capacity for improvement, and Special Education Needs and Disabilities. Examples of such strengths include:

- a noticeably changed approach to ways of working brought by the new administration, that are “more inclusive,” “more open,” and “more visible.”
- prompt production of an ambitious Council Strategy to reflect the new administration’s priorities;
- permanent appointments to all corporate leadership team’s posts;
- there are examples of partnership working bringing about real benefits for the people of West Berkshire and opportunities to achieve more;
- constructive and valuable scrutiny function;
- enthusiastic and committed members, staff and partners, passionate about making a difference to the district;
- a less risk adverse council, which has launched a transformation programme with dedicated resource to lead this activity.

4.3 The report includes a number of recommendations, namely:

- Urgently address overspending in children's and adult services and build reserves, develop a clear plan that has buy-in from the whole organisation.
  - Ensure that there is traction on the delivery of the Delivering Better Value SEND programme and have a plan to resolve the High Needs Block Deficit.
  - Embed transformation across the organisation with strong leadership from the political leadership, Corporate Leadership Team (CLT), and an empowered central team. A bolder transformation programme to impact on finances (in children's and adult services, and home to school transport).
  - Strengthen the CLT to provide effective leadership, clear and consistent direction and stewardship for the organisation. Create more space for the Executive and CLT to jointly develop as a 'Top Team' to reinforce close working relationships and trust. Urgently stabilise the leadership below executive director level.
  - Stronger prioritisation and focus on what will make the most difference, delivered within the council's financial envelope and capacity.
  - Executive members should continue the good work settling into their new roles, taking up opportunities to develop their skills, and owning and leading their portfolios to ensure effective political leadership for the council.
  - Simplify the governance structure to increase pace and agility.
  - Ensure that strategic legal, HR, communications and transformation expertise has a place at the 'top table' in a meaningful way and at the right point of policy development and delivery.
  - Test the extent to which the behaviour framework has been embedded within the organisation (e.g. through staff survey/ pulse survey).
  - Strengthen communications and engagement activity further, by using internal communications expertise earlier in project planning, closing the communications loop via consistent feedback on outcomes of consultations, and embedding approaches that engage wider groups of people earlier in the process and in more meaningful ways.
  - Build on strong and positive operational relationships between the council and partners, including contractors, and develop strategic relationships that create opportunities to deliver activity that will support wider council and partner objectives (e.g. apprenticeships, social value). As part of this, develop a strategic Memorandum of Understanding with the Voluntary and Community Sector.
- 4.4 To address the report's recommendations, an Action Plan is being prepared and will be submitted for approval at the next meeting of the Executive. In addition, the action Alan will be added for consideration to a future agenda of the Scrutiny Commission (subject to agreement with the Chairman of Scrutiny).

## 5 Supporting Information

### Introduction

5.1 The Local Government Association (LGA) offers a range of support for local authorities as part of a 'sector led improvement' programme. A component of the programme is the Peer Challenge, as a solution to reduce the inspection burden on local Government, whilst aiming to provide robust, strategic and credible challenge and support to councils, by involving member and officer peers from other local authorities in the country. There are a number of different types offered, but all local authorities are meant to have a Corporate Peer Challenge every four or five years. The Council's last Peer Challenge was in 2019, so the Council's request for a review was an appropriate timescale.

### Background

5.2 The Corporate Peer Challenge took place in February 2024. The LGA Peer Review Team produced a self-contained report (attached at Appendix A). The report covers the findings, recommendations and details of the peer team (which was made up of senior Officers, and Councillors from other Local Authorities, with an LGA supporting officer).

5.3 The report has been placed on the Executive agenda to formally acknowledge it. A copy has already been made available to all staff and is available to the public via the Council's website.

5.4 Work has already started to address the recommendations, but a comprehensive set of actions will be included as part of an Action Plan, which will be submitted for approval at the next meeting of the Executive. These actions will be incorporated in the council performance framework for regular monitoring of progress. The LGA will review our progress on the report late in 2024.

### Proposals

- (a) The strengths in each of the six core components of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge and the recommendations included in the LGA report are noted.
- (b) To note that an Action Plan in response to the LGA report's recommendations will be submitted for approval at the next meeting of the Executive.

## 6 Other options considered

6.1 The Council found the Corporate Peer Challenge (Feb 2024) very valuable as a sense check of where we are on our aim to continuously improve as a Council. Similar to 2019, the report reflects on the Council's strengths and areas for further improvement. A careful consideration of the feedback, which will result in an Action Plan to address the recommendations, is the option that will achieve the maximum benefit from undertaking the corporate peer challenge. Not to consider

the report as a guide to future improvement would mean that the preparation and CPC time would have been wasted.

## 7 Conclusion

7.1 The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge highlights many of the Council's strengths and successes for each of the six domains of the peer challenge. It also identifies eleven key recommendations for further improvement. Work has already begun on addressing some of the recommendations highlighted in the report. All the actions in response to these recommendations will be built into an Action Plan for approval at the next meeting of the Executive and for monitoring as part of the Council's performance management framework.

## 8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback report February 2024

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### Background Papers:

None

### Subject to Call-In:

Yes:  No:

- |   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval  | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council                              | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position  | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| Considered or reviewed by Scrutiny Commission or associated Committees, Task Groups within preceding six months | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| Item is Urgent Key Decision   | <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| Report is to note only  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

**Wards affected:** All

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## Document Control

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<b>Version:</b>	V1	<b>Date Modified:</b>	
<b>Author:</b>	Catalin Bogos		
<b>Owning Service</b>	Strategy and Governance		

## Change History

<b>Version</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Change ID</b>
1	09/05/2024	Produced the first version of the report.	
2	14/05/2024	Amended the report based on feedback from the Chief Executive	