

REPORT TITLE: Corporate Peer Challenge Final Report

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| Cabinet Date | Wednesday 31 January 2024 |
| Cabinet Member | Cllr Mark Hawthorne, Leader of the Council |
| Key Decision | No |
| Purpose of Report | To report to Cabinet the findings of the Local Government Association's (LGA) recent Corporate Peer Review of Gloucestershire County Council |
| Recommendations | That Cabinet: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formally records its thanks to the team that undertook the Corporate Peer Challenge in November 2023. Accepts the findings and recommendations arising from the Local Government Association's Corporate Peer Review of Gloucestershire County Council and supports the development by officers of an action plan to be brought back to Cabinet for approval on 10 April 2024. |
| Reasons for Recommendations | Responding to and acting on the recommendations of the report will demonstrate a clear commitment to continuous improvement. |
| Resource Implications | The development of the action plan will be led by officers within the Planning, Performance and Improvement service, engaging with senior leaders and colleagues across the council as appropriate. Any resource implications arising from the actions within that plan will be addressed in the April Cabinet report. |
| Background Documents | Gloucestershire County Council Corporate Peer Challenge 2023 Position Statement, November 2023 - https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/ge3amfpx/gcc_4031-lga-peer-challenge-november-2023_dev3.pdf |
| Statutory Authority | Local Government Act 1999, Part 1 |
| Divisional Councillor(s) | N/A |
| Officer | Name: Rob Ayliffe Tel. no: 01452 328506 |

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| | Email: rob.ayliffe@gloucestershire.gov.uk |
| Timeline | <p>14-17 November 2023 – Corporate Peer Challenge undertaken by LGA</p> <p>31 January 2024 – LGA Report presented to Cabinet</p> <p>17 February 2024 – LGA publish report on their website</p> <p>10 April 2024 – Action Plan presented to Cabinet for approval</p> <p>Autumn 2024 – LGA to undertake Progress Review</p> <p>27 November 2024 – Deadline for publication of Progress Review Report by GCC</p> |

Background

1. Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) forms the central element to the Local Government Association's (LGA's) framework for Council assurance and peer support. They provide a robust and rigorous assurance and improvement tool that is managed and delivered by the sector, for the sector. It is designed to complement and add value to councils' own performance and improvement frameworks.
2. Although CPCs are voluntary, there is an expectation that all Councils will receive one at least every five years. Each CPC covers the following five core elements:
 - Local priorities and outcomes
 - Organisational and place leadership
 - Governance and culture
 - Financial planning and management
 - Capacity for improvement.
3. Gloucestershire County Council invited the LGA to undertake a CPC during November 2023. In addition to the five core elements, GCC also asked the LGA to focus on two specific areas:
 - The council's effectiveness in leading partners towards achieving the vision for future growth in Gloucestershire.
 - How effectively the council is aligning its corporate resources to drive transformation and improvement organisationally whilst supporting improvement within specific areas such as Fire, Children's Services and Adults.
4. Like all CPCs, ours was undertaken by a team of peers drawn from across Local Government. The team undertaking Gloucestershire's CPC comprised:
 - Owen Mapley, Chief Executive, Hertfordshire County Council
 - Cllr Keith Glazier, Leader, East Sussex County Council
 - Cllr Sarah Butifoker, North Norfolk District Council
 - Meredith Dixon-Teesdale, Director of Children's Services, Sheffield City Council
 - Angela Jones, Director of Thriving Places, Westmorland and Furness Council
 - Paul Britton, secondee to the LGA from Homes England
 - Chris Bowron, LGA
5. Prior to the CPC, the team was provided with a range of information to familiarise themselves with Gloucestershire, its opportunities and challenges, and its plans for the future. This included a position statement that set out the Council's own assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. During the week the team undertook interviews and focus groups across 40 meetings, involving more than 150 people including elected members, officers and external partners.

6. At the end of the week, the LGA presented its initial findings to those who had participated in those meetings, in the form of a presentation. Those findings have now been brought together into a report that is attached as an appendix to this paper.

Main findings

7. The CPC report includes much for the Council to be proud about. It recognises the talent and skill of officers and councillors, a strong commitment to delivering services that make a difference for local people, and that the core elements of good governance are in place. Given the significant financial challenges facing many councils at this time, it was particularly pleasing to note that the report also finds that the overall financial position of the council is seen to be sound.
8. The main findings of the CPC were as follows:
 - The key themes that will define the strategic direction of Gloucestershire, including its vision, core partnerships and the structures that will shape and drive delivery, are in transition – albeit not uniquely to Gloucestershire.
 - There is much to build on, with positive progress including as active members of the Western Gateway and the Local Enterprise Partnership and through the developing city region approach.
 - We met a large number of talented officers and councillors who are hugely committed, are delivering much good work and are passionate about delivering services for the people and communities in the county.
 - There has been a marked and positive change in the leadership culture within the council – people have highlighted a more collegiate and supportive style, including increasing amounts of work to promote and enable positive outcomes on equalities, diversity and inclusion.
 - Reporting and performance management arrangements have been strengthened and intensified. This is delivering benefits. Senior leaders will want to assess the sustainability of these arrangements given the intense demands this places on meeting time; that there is sufficient cross-council assessment of interdependencies; and that the right issues are highlighted and focused on – particularly around corporate enabling programmes, especially IT.
 - The council has huge potential to fly – enabling this will require ongoing commitment to strong partnerships across the council, the county and beyond and providing the necessary corporate service enablers, including addressing the constraints in its core IT infrastructure.

9. The report goes on to make a number of recommendations, the main ones being that GCC should:
 - Build on the council's strategic leadership role to work with partners to shape the evolution of a refreshed vision for growth in Gloucestershire.
 - Prioritise the continued investment in IT as an enabler to the council's operations and make its improvement a demonstrable and equal part of the council's overall transformation portfolio, with associated funding, expertise and leadership.
 - Ensure the equalities, diversity and inclusion agenda is 'lived and breathed' by the entire cohort of leaders.
 - Enable greater collective corporate leadership and the development of cross-organisational dialogue, understanding and approaches.
 - Demonstrate to people that they are being heard and responded to.
 - Enable a greater focus on prioritised outcomes for communities through the more effective use of cross cutting data and intelligence.
10. Within the detail of the report, there are also recommendations relating to:
 - Improving the way that members are kept informed about issues affecting their division.
 - Refreshing county councillor induction, recognising that much of this was undertaken remotely while the Council was still responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Developing a more co-ordinated approach to the work of Overview and Scrutiny, including extending the scope of the Executive Forward Plan.
 - Remembering to celebrate the Council's successes.
11. These recommendations will form the basis of an action plan that will be developed by council officers with the involvement of cabinet members, Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, senior leaders and officers across the council. It will be brought to Cabinet for approval on 10 April 2024.
12. In the meantime, a number of actions are already underway, based on the initial feedback provided by the team at the end of the CPC week. For example:
 - The new City Region Board has been established as a Joint Committee of the County Council and the six District Councils within Gloucestershire as a key driver of our vision for growth.

- The draft Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) prioritises continued investment in ICT, recognising the key role it needs to play in enabling transformation and efficiency.
- An ICT Governance Board has been established, including the Leader, Deputy Leader and Chief Executive. This board will provide oversight of the highest priority elements of the Council's ICT transformation as well as making sure there is corporate oversight of the Council's ICT improvement journey.
- The results of the latest Staff Survey are currently being analysed and will be used to develop and hone plans for workforce health and wellbeing.
- Additional corporate capacity is being created to continue to deepen and develop our approach to Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion, including increased support for staff networks.
- A 'marketplace' event is being planned to provide councillors with an opportunity to meet with a range of senior officers, find out more about Council services and fill gaps in their knowledge and understanding of how the council works.
- A protocol on keeping councillors informed about local issues has been drafted and shared with Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Once adopted this will form the basis of training for council officers.
- We have agreed to publish information on the forward plan up to three months before an executive decision is taken, giving Scrutiny the opportunity to plan ahead more effectively.
- We have begun to plan a staff awards event for 2024 to celebrate achievements and successes.

Options

13. As CPC recommendations do not have a statutory footing, the Council is not under an obligation to agree the recommendations in full. Nevertheless, as they are the result of a robust and extensive review process undertaken by experienced leaders within the Local Government sector, they provide a valuable and meaningful opportunity to reflect on the Council's practice and learn from others. As a result, it is anticipated that Cabinet will welcome the findings.
14. The options are therefore to:
 - a) Accept the recommendations in full and develop an action plan to respond to them. This is the recommended option.

b) Accept some of the recommendations and develop an action plan to address those.

c) Reject the recommendations.

Risks

15. The purpose of the LGA's CPC offer is to provide an independent assessment of the Council's corporate health and direction. As such, it provides an important and valuable element of the Council's Corporate Governance Framework, and helps to mitigate the risk of significant failures in corporate governance.
16. Any risks arising from the Action Plan will be presented as part of the report brought to Cabinet in April.

Financial implications

17. The action plan will be developed by the Planning, Performance and Insight team within existing resources.
18. It is currently anticipated that the resources set out in the draft MTFS required will be sufficient to deliver the actions within that plan, once developed. However, should that prove not to be the case, options for resourcing the plan will be presented to Cabinet as part of the report being brought in April.

Climate change implications

19. There are no climate change implications arising from this report.

Ecological implications

20. Has an Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA) been produced, or will one be undertaken at a later stage? No

Equality implications

21. Has an Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) been completed? No

Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) implications

22. There are no Data Protection implications arising from this report.

Social value implications

23. There are no social value implications arising from this report.

Consultation feedback

24. The CPC included extensive engagement with elected members, officers and partners of the Council, all of which has been taken into account by the peer team when developing their report.

Officer recommendations

25. That Cabinet:
- Formally records its thanks to the team that undertook the Corporate Peer Challenge in November 2023.
 - Accepts the findings and recommendations arising from the Local Government Association's Corporate Peer Review of Gloucestershire County Council and supports the development by officers of an action plan to be brought back to Cabinet for approval on 10 April 2024

Performance management/follow-up

26. Once agreed, performance management of the action plan will be integrated into quarterly Corporate Performance reporting.
27. The LGA will undertake a review of progress in autumn 2024 and the Council will publish a Progress Review Report by 27th November 2024.