

**Report to CABINET**

# **LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Feedback and next steps**

**Portfolio Holder:**

Councillor Arooj Shah, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Reform and Regeneration

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## **Reason for Decision**

To update Cabinet on the outcome and findings of the recent Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) and to agree the Council's action plan in response to the recommendations.

## **Executive Summary**

In early-November 2023 the Local Government Association undertook a Corporate Peer Challenge in Oldham. The purpose of this was for the experienced and knowledgeable peer team to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement at Oldham Council.

The review looked at five key areas: our priorities and outcomes, organisational and place leadership, governance and culture, financial planning and management and capacity for improvement.

The most recent review was broadly positive recognising a range of improvements since the last LGA Peer Challenge in 2020, including the transformation of the town centre; clear corporate priorities, performance management and grip on the organisation; and that staff are passionate about getting the best for Oldham. The review also suggests nine key recommendations which will support the organisation to meet its key priorities.

## **Recommendations**

- That Cabinet note the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge report, summarizing their findings and recommendations
- That Cabinet agree the Council's response and action plan
- That Cabinet refer the Corporate Peer Challenge report to Full Council for discussion and noting

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## LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Feedback and next steps

### 1 Background

- 1.1 Oldham Council invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during the week of Monday 30<sup>th</sup> October 2023 to Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2023. It is recommended best practice for councils to undertake a CPC every five years. The previous Peer Challenge was undertaken in January 2020, but with the Covid-19 pandemic shifting the priorities of the council, the updated Corporate Plan (2022 – 2027), and with the renewed 'Resident Focus', it was an appropriate moment to undertake another CPC.
- 1.2 Peer challenges are improvement focused; they are not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.
- 1.3 The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement:
- 1.4 **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
- 1.5 **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
- 1.6 **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
- 1.7 **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?
- 1.8 **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?
- 1.9 In addition to these questions, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on the Council's approach to 'Resident Focus'.

### 2 Current Position

- 2.1 The Corporate Peer Challenge set out nine key recommendations to the council:
1. Resident focus needs to be embedded across everything the Council does, with clarity about what that means in practice for the experience of residents, including with customer service.
  2. Agree and deliver a budget for 24/25 and 25/26 that deals with the budget deficit without relying on the continuing use of reserves.
  3. Develop a clearer line of sight between the expected deliverables of the transformation programme including the budget and the next iteration of 'Getting to Good'.

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4. Start to build and communicate a new reputation inside and outside the Council, sharing positive local stories more.
  5. Clarify how the changes to senior officer leadership will work in practice and review the effectiveness of this arrangement after 6 months alongside the other options at that point.
  6. Commission an external review of the governance and capacity needs of managing the Creating a Better Place programme, to ensure it delivers everything it can for Oldham and the Council.
  7. Refresh the Oldham Plan to harness the collective power of partners to improve the borough.
  8. Build on the early progress seen with Overview and Scrutiny with support, training and capacity as detailed throughout this report.
  9. Further develop the Council as a member-led organisation using the examples given in this report.
- 2.2. An action plan has been developed with senior officers to address the recommendations made by the Corporate Peer Challenge. This is accompanied to this report as an appendix.

### 3 **Options/Alternatives**

- 3.1 Option 1: Note the recommendations and content of the Corporate Peer Challenge report, agree to the actions laid out in the action plan and note the timescales for completing those actions. This course of action would allow the council to improve in line with the recommendations.
- 3.2 Option 2: Do not agree with the actions set out in the action plan. This course of action would mean business as usual and disregarding the recommendations set out by the Corporate Peer Challenge.

### 4 **Preferred Option**

- 4.1 Option 1 would be the preferred option, leading to a programme of improvement at Oldham Council.

### 5 **Consultation**

- 5.1 A series of meetings between senior staff and the policy team took place to determine the Council's action plan in response to the recommendations made by the Corporate Peer Challenge.

### 6 **Financial Implications**

- 6.1 The preferred option as detailed in paragraph 4.1 is to agree and implement a programme of improvement at Oldham Council following a recent Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC).
- 6.2 The CPC has set out nine key recommendation to the Council. Please refer to paragraph 2.1 for details.
- 6.3 There are no financial implications associated with approving the preferred option in this report.
- 6.4 With reference to Key recommendation number 2. The Council has a statutory duty to set a balanced budget and has a robust Budget setting process in place. The budget for 2024/25 and 2025/26 will be is balanced firstly using budget reductions and then a projected use of reserves to support transformational activity which will support the delivery of the budget reductions.

(Matthew Kearns – Matthew Kearns)

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7      **Legal Implications**

7.1      The CPC report makes nine clear recommendations for the Council. It is clearly important that the Council endeavor to achieve best practice. In doing so it would be prudent to instigate the recommendations of the CPC report. Failure to do so would not only defeat the purpose of having a Corporate Peer challenge process, but would also likely lead to a reputational risk, particularly if any failings should occur by the Council which were recommended points of improvement.

The recommendations would likely help the Council serve the residents better within the borough and help the Council operate at a more efficient level.

(Alex Bougateg – Interim assistant Director Legal Services)

8.      **Co-operative Implications**

8.1      The proposals set out in the action plan accompanying this report set out a clear plan of improvement for the council, which in turn will lead to improved services for our residents. A core recommendation from the CPC is to have a golden thread of resident focus throughout everything the council does. Acting upon this recommendation will mean working for the benefit of our residents, which is a core element of our cooperative values.

(James Mulvaney, Policy Manager)

9      **Human Resources Implications**

9.1      N/A

10      **Risk Assessments**

10.1      N/A

11      **IT Implications**

11.1      N/A

12      **Property Implications**

12.1      N/A

13      **Procurement Implications**

13.1      N/A

14      **Environmental and Health & Safety Implications**

14.1      N/A

15      **Community cohesion, including crime and disorder implications in accordance with Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998**

15.1      N/A

16      **Oldham Equality Impact including implications for Children and Young People**

16.1      N/A

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17     **Key Decision**

17.1    No

18     **Key Decision Reference**

18.1    N/A

19     **Background Papers**

19.1    None

20     **Appendices**

20.1    Appendix A – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report

Appendix B – Peer Challenge Action Plan January 2024