

Report title	LGA Corporate Peer Challenge outcome and the Council's response
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Department	Chief Executive's Office
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:

- **To Resolve**

Synopsis of report:

The Council hosted a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) review, facilitated by the Local Government Association (LGA) in October 2024. The outcome provides significant external assurance in the Council's delivery of Best Value and ongoing continuous improvement.

This report presents the LGA's report and the Council's proposed response in terms of an action plan to address the recommendations. This report is also a key workstream deliverable for the Council's Non-Statutory Best Value Notice response programme and will therefore be submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) as part of the evidence base.

Recommendation that:

- i) The Committee notes the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge report; and**
- ii) The Committee approves the proposed action plan shown at Appendix B.**

1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 The Local Government Association (LGA) offers to support sector led improvements by offering each council a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) every five years. The Corporate Peer Challenge process is 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 a council's own performance and improvement focus and thinking.
- 1.2 Peer Challenges provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge as peers use their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by the people they meet, things they see and material that they read. The team provides feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.

- 1.3 The Council last hosted a CPC in October 2019 and therefore it was timely to invite the LGA to deliver a CPC during 2024.
- 1.4 The Council received a Non-Statutory Best Value Notice (NS-BVN) in December 2023. Within the letter, the Council was explicitly instructed to commission an external governance review to provide more in-depth assurance on governance and leadership structures in line with Best Value principles. Further, the letter also encouraged the Council to engage with the Local Government Association, making use of the full range of support they have to offer.
- 1.5 As a result, the Council invited the LGA to deliver a CPC on-site visit, scheduled for 16-18 October 2024.
- 1.6 A scoping meeting was held in June 2024 attended by the Chief Executive, each of the co-leaders and the LGA's Peer Challenge Manager. The scope was agreed to concentrate the on-site assessment on the five core themes that are considered for all CPC visits as these have been shown to be the most critical for delivering and achieving Best Value:
- Local priorities and outcomes
 - Organisational and place leadership
 - Governance and culture
 - Financial planning and management
 - Capacity for improvement

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

- 2.1 The LGA sourced the individuals that made up the CPC Peer team, through a combination of currently serving or recently retired Local Government peers or SOLACE associates.
- 2.2 The peer team members were:

Statutory Officer peers:

- **Neil Taylor**, CEX Peer – LGA/SOLACE Associate and formerly substantive Chief Executive of Bassetlaw District Council
- **Sal Khan**, S151 Peer – S151/ Director of Resources at East Staffordshire BC until 2023, Interim Corporate Director of Finance and Resources, Worcester City Council and LGA/SOLACE Associate
- **Shiraz Sheikh**, Monitoring Officer and Assistant Director (Law and Governance), Cherwell District Council

Elected member peers:

- **Councillor Alan Connett**, Devon County Council (Liberal Democrat), National Lead Peer for the Liberal Democrat Group at the LGA
- **Councillor Isobel Darby**, Buckinghamshire Council (Conservative)
- **Councillor Jeremy Pursehouse**, Tandridge District Council (Independent)

LGA Facilitator:

- **Chris Bowron**, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

- 2.3 The CPC on-site visit took place over three days from 16-18 October 2024. In advance of the visit, a document library of key reports and information were produced for the CPC team. This also included a comprehensive 'Position Statement' which provided a summary of background information on the Council, the Corporate Business Plan and related Corporate Strategies and key information related to each of the CPC core themes.
- 2.4 The CPC process was comprehensive and rigorous, with 25 information-gathering meetings and focus groups held in person on day 1 and day 2. The CPC team met with over 130 people including frontline staff, middle managers, senior officers, statutory officers, co-leaders, opposition leaders, chairs of committees, cross-party elected members, external stakeholders and external partners. Information gathering took a combined 72 hours of peer time.
- 2.5 The full feedback report can be found at Appendix A which includes a section for each of the five core themes.
- 2.6 The overall outcome of the CPC provides a significant level of assurance that the Council is self-aware and focussed on continuous improvement, understands and manages risks faced, in order to deliver for residents and provide vital front-line services that people rely on every day.
- 2.7 Overall messages and observations made by the peer team are summarised below:
- The Council has been experiencing a significant degree of change as an organisation – these are not normal times for Runnymede
 - The Council is providing a very constructive response to the Non-Statutory Best Value Notice which is carefully thought through and rigorous
 - The Council is very aware of the opportunities and challenges facing the borough and a political narrative reflecting these is emerging
 - Staff and elected Members are proud to belong to the Council and have a strong sense of self-worth through what it delivers
 - There is a strong shared agenda across the political and managerial leadership of being a council that wants to do things well
 - This is a 'discovery period' in which established approaches and ways of doing things in the organisation are being appropriately challenged and some new directions being forged
 - The May 2024 elections saw very significant change, and this has required the establishing of a new set of relationships and people adapting to new roles
 - The Council can approach its financial challenge confidently and in a measured and planned way because of its traditionally good financial position
 - The Council must keep its committee and working group arrangements under review – they must be fit for purpose
 - A key area of risk in relation to the borrowing is around ensuring the Council has the necessary expert capacity to undertake the on-going management of the related assets and regeneration activity – the Council is very much aware of this risk and is taking mitigating action
 - There is a growing and driven organisational development and cultural change agenda which is intended to deliver significant impact within 18 to 24 months
- 2.8 The peer team also proposed seven recommendations that reflect a positive overall position, as the majority are already underway or planned:

- CPC001. Keep up the good work! There is already clear activity and significant momentum around most of the key areas we have touched upon. Central to this obviously is maintaining the very constructive response to the Non-Statutory Best Value Notice
- CPC002. Ensure the Council has the necessary expert capacity to deliver the Asset Management Strategy and, within this, undertake the on-going management of the related assets
- CPC003. Revisit the Corporate Business Plan to ensure it reflects the priorities and political narrative of the Runnymede Council Alliance
- CPC004. Ensure the necessary progress is made in relation to key areas of performance that are below target
- CPC005. Meet the developmental needs around the political 'change of control' both through the Council's own activity and the LGA's sector-led improvement offer.
- CPC006. Keep the committee and working group arrangements under review – they have to be fit for purpose and strike the right balance
- CPC007. Publish and be seen to respond to the findings of the staff survey

2.9 Annex B provides the proposed action plan to address these recommendations. If agreed, delivery of the action plan will form core activity for the relevant service area and be added to service area plans accordingly. Progress will be monitored through corporate performance processes with an update to the action plan coming forward to this Committee ahead of the CPC revisit in 2025.

3. Policy framework implications

- 3.1 The CPC outcome and delivery of the proposed actions will result in further continuous improvement opportunities to deliver Best Value and support ongoing delivery of the Corporate Business Plan and associated Corporate Strategies.
- 3.2 The CPC provides external assurance of the delivery of Best Value and supports the Council's response to the non-statutory Best Value Notice.

4. Resource implications

- 4.1 The LGA provides the CPC at no cost to the Council other than for on-site hosting during the visit.
- 4.2 A small budget was set aside as part of the NS-BVN response programme budget, funded from the Service transformation reserve, to provide catering and refreshments for the CPC peer team during their on-site visit. The visit was delivered under budget. A follow-up visit will be required as part of the CPC process in 2025 and therefore the remaining budget will be carried forward for this purpose.
- 4.3 Implementation of actions arising from the CPC recommendations will be built into service area plans for delivery in 2025/26 and ordinarily be delivered within existing budgets. Recommendations arising from the capacity and capability review of Assets & Regeneration will be subject to a future report to Corporate Management Committee.

5. Legal implications

5.1 None identified.

6. Equality implications

6.1 None as a direct result of this report.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

7.1 None as a direct result of this report.

8. Risk Implications

8.1 Failure to demonstrate continuous improvement may result in non-compliance with the Best Value duty.

9. Other implications

9.1 Not applicable

10. Timetable for Implementation

10.1 As part of the CPC process, the peer team will revisit the Council during 2025, approx. 10 months after the original visit (exact dates TBC). At this visit, the Council will need to demonstrate ongoing continuous improvement and delivery of actions arising from the original visit. Therefore, actions identified will be added to the business planning tool for relevant service areas to deliver as part of their Service Area Plans for 25/26 and progress monitored through corporate performance monitoring.

10.2 An update on the delivery of the action plan will be reported to this Committee in May or July 2025 depending on the scheduling of the CPC return visit.

11. Conclusions

11.1 The positive outcome of the CPC is one that the organisation can be proud of and provides external assurance of the delivery of Best Value and focus on continuous improvement.

12. Background papers

12.1 Not applicable

13. Appendices

- Appendix A – Runnymede Borough Council LGA CPC Final Report 2024
- Appendix B – Action plan to address recommendations arising from the CP

