

STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL

Resources Overview & Scrutiny Panel

22 May 2024

TITLE:	Corporate Peer Challenge Update
PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	Councillor Mike Gledhill (Leader)
CONTACT OFFICER:	Tanya Cooper, Head of Organisational Development & Transformation, Julie Nankivell Information Business Partner
WARDS INVOLVED:	Non-Specific

Appendices Attached

Appendix 1: Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report 2024

1. Reason for the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is for the Panel to consider the outcomes from the Corporate Peer Challenge which took place in February 2024.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Resources & Scrutiny Panel note the findings from the Corporate Peer Challenge.

3. Executive Summary

- 3.1 The Corporate Peer Challenge process, which is co-ordinated by the Local Government Association (LGA), forms a key aspect of sector-led improvement, and the process is designed to complement and add value to the Council's own performance and improvement thinking. The Council previously commissioned its first Corporate Peer Challenge in January 2022 in conjunction with its strategic alliance partner High Peak Borough Council (HPBC). Following its completion, the Alliance published the CPC report and action plan for addressing the recommendations made during that CPC
- 3.2 The Alliance commissioned the LGA to deliver another peer review in 2024, with a scope to review the CPC recommendations made in 2022. However, as the political context of both Councils had changed following the May 2023 local elections, it was also agreed to review the position against the core CPC components.

- 3.3 The peer team were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and consisted of elected member and officer peers. They used their experience and knowledge of local government to review the information presented to them.
- 3.4 The peer team’s report is attached at Appendix 1.
- 3.5 The peer team found that **the Alliance is impressive and continues to be effective**. The team reported that the key finding from the previous CPC in 2022 that **“Both councils can be seen to have been well managed organisations over many years. There is sound financial management and attention is paid to maintaining good governance and to managing risk. Both are performance-focused and can demonstrate the delivery of services that are high performing and low cost, with a value for money focus.”** remains true.
- 3.6 The peers found that the Alliance had made good progress against addressing most of the recommendations made in 2022 and highlighted a number of strengths.
- 3.7 The peer team’s made 8 key recommendations to the Council following this CPC which are detailed in section 8.6 of the report.
- 3.8 The next steps are for the political and managerial leadership at the Councils to consider, discuss, and reflect on the findings. It will then be necessary to produce an Action Plan to set out the response to the recommendations in the report. This will be presented to members in the next few weeks.
- 3.9 The CPC process includes a progress review within twelve months of the CPC, which provides space for the Council’s senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the recommendations from this report. This is currently been planned for later in 2024.

4. How this report links to Corporate Priorities

- 4.1 Recommendations in the report align to the Council’s key objectives.

5. Alternative Options

- 5.1 None.

6. Implications

6.1	<u>Community safety, including safeguarding and prevention of terrorism</u> None
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6.2	<u>Workforce</u> None
6.3	<u>Equality and Diversity/Equality Impact Assessment</u> Recommendations will be considered in line with the Council's Diversity and Equality Policies
6.4	<u>Financial Considerations</u> Recommendations will be considered in line with the Council's financial objectives
6.5	<u>Legal</u> None
6.6	<u>Climate Change and Sustainability</u> Recommendations will be considered in line with the Council's Climate Change and Sustainability objectives
6.7	<u>Conservation and Enhancement of Biodiversity</u> Recommendations will be considered in line with the Council's Conservation and Biodiversity objectives
6.8	<u>Consultation</u> The recommendations have been reviewed by the Alliance Executive / Cabinet, Select Committees / Overview & Scrutiny Panels and Leadership Team
6.9	<u>Risk Assessment</u> Any mitigating risks arising from the recommendations will be controlled by the Alliance Risk Management Procedure

ANDREW STOKES
Chief Executive

Background Papers

Corporate Peer Challenge data pack

Contact details

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7. Background and Introduction

- 7.1 The Corporate Peer Challenge process, which is co-ordinated by the Local Government Association (LGA), forms a key aspect of sector-led improvement, the process is designed to complement and add value to the Council's own performance and improvement thinking. The Peer team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.
- 7.2 The Council previously commissioned its first Corporate Peer Challenge in January 2022 in conjunction with its strategic alliance partner High Peak Borough Council (HPBC). Following its completion, the Alliance published the CPC report and action plan for addressing the recommendations made during that CPC
- 7.3 The Alliance commissioned the LGA to deliver another peer review in 2024, with a scope to review the CPC recommendations made in 2022. However, as the political context of both Councils had changed following the May 2023 local elections, it was also agreed to review the position against the core CPC components.
- Local priorities and outcomes - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
 - Organisational and place leadership - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
 - Governance and culture - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
 - 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?
 - Capacity for improvement - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?
- 7.4 This CPC was therefore structured to review the 10 recommendations made in 2022 and as a CPC 'health check' proportionate in its approach and reviewed alongside the 2022 report.
- 7.5 The peer team were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and consisted of elected Members and officer peers . They used their experience and knowledge of local government to review the information presented to them. The peer team consisted of:
- Rob Barlow - Joint Chief Executive of Boston BC, East Lindsey DC, and South Holland DC
 - Cllr Alan Rhodes – Labour peer, Cabinet Member for Corporate & Financial Services, Bassetlaw DC
 - Cllr Georgina Hill – Independent peer, Northumberland CC and LGA Regional Member peer for the North East and Yorkshire and Humber
 - Liz Elliott - Deputy Chief Executive, Harborough DC
 - Jamie Sutterby - Director of People and Communities, South Norfolk DC,

- and Broadland Council
- Siraj Choudhury - Head of Governance, People & Performance (Monitoring Officer), Crawley BC
- James Millington - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

8 Outcomes from the Corporate Peer Challenge

- 8.1 The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with each Council in the Alliance and the challenges they are facing. The team had a number of virtual meetings with the Alliance's stakeholders, including discussions with members of the 2022 CPC team, prior to spending three days onsite, during which they:
- Gathered information and views from more than 30 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
 - Spoke to more than 80 people including a range of the Alliance's staff, together with Members from HPBC & SMDC and external stakeholders.
- 8.2 The peer team's report is attached at Appendix 1.
- 8.3 The peer team found that **the Alliance is impressive and continues to be effective**. The team reported that the key finding from the previous CPC in 2022 that **"Both councils can be seen to have been well managed organisations over many years. There is sound financial management and attention is paid to maintaining good governance and to managing risk. Both are performance-focused and can demonstrate the delivery of services that are high performing and low cost, with a value for money focus."** remains true.
- 8.4 The peer team undertook a Progress Review of the recommendations made following the 2022 CPC. The peers found that the Alliance had made good progress against addressing most of the recommendations.
- 8.5 A number of strengths are highlighted in the report including:
- Councillors reported feeling well supported by officers and the Member/Officer and Member/Member relationships were seen to be very strong and productive.
 - The Council has continued to be an active player in the Staffordshire Leaders' Board. The Council is engaging well to bring about the best outcomes for its communities.
 - The Council understands its challenges well and some of the difficult decisions it must make particularly regarding growth, housing, and the balance with the natural environment.
 - There continue to be many very positive aspects of the Alliance's activity both internally and externally, including with partners, and this provides a firm foundation and opportunities for the Councils to move forward.
 - The Chief Executive is seen as driving forward the organisations in implementing the ambitions and priorities of the elected Members.

8.6 The peer team's key recommendations to the Council following this CPC are as follows:

Recommendation 1

The peer team consider that there is benefit in more clearly articulating a shared ambition for the future of the Alliance – through an overarching plan - to understand the risks and benefits of the partnership.

Recommendation 2

There is a necessity through the digitisation programme and modernising the working environment to now pick up pace, and this will support the delivery of the Council's ambitions.

Recommendation 3

The Alliance can continue developing the positive impact of Scrutiny. There may be further opportunities, particularly on some large topics, to pool the expertise across the Member base of the Alliance for undertaking joint scrutiny to expand the capacity and generate improved outcomes.

Recommendation 4

Council Controlled Companies:

- 1) The planned Leisure LATCo should not lose the opportunity for wider benefits beyond the financial and support the Alliance's ambitions around culture and its health and wellbeing agenda.
- 2) The Alliance should periodically review outside bodies to assure itself that these are operating effectively and delivering outcomes.

Recommendation 5

The peer team heard about the devolution changes which are happening locally now and into the future. It would be helpful for the Top Team to reflect and consider where the Alliance positions itself in response to devolution changes

Recommendation 6

Increase the pace of delivery with more robust project and programme governance: in the depots; in ICT; its office estate; in its assets; and in the climate change agenda so external funding bids and internal growth bids can be made by officers to understand more clearly the budgetary impacts. These projects will also support organisational culture change.

Recommendation 7

The Alliance should ensure that capacity, including around transformation, is focused in the right places, with ongoing support in place for the CEX to deliver the change programme and the ambitions at pace.

Recommendation 8

Planning:

- 1) There is a need to urgently reflect on the Local Plan delivery at SMDC. The Council has a commitment to building homes and the Local Plan should not be a barrier to it. This requires a degree of focus from Members and senior

officers.

2) Members of the SMDC Planning Committee would benefit from further training regarding the complexity of the role, the formal administrative process, and the need to consistently apply national and local policies, legislation, and case law.

9. Next Steps

- 9.1 It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership at the Councils will want to consider, discuss, and reflect on these findings. It will then be necessary to produce an Action Plan to set out the response to the recommendations in the report. This will be presented to members in the next few weeks.
- 9.2 Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a progress review within twelve months of the CPC, which provides space for the Council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the recommendations from this report. This is currently been planned for later in 2024.