

Surrey Heath Borough Council
Performance & Finance Scrutiny Committee
15 November 2023

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan

Strategic Director/Head of Service

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Report Author:

Wards Affected:

Summary and purpose

This report outlines the background to a Corporate Peer Challenge undertaken by the Local Government Association (LGA) at Surrey Heath Borough Council earlier this year. It shares the key recommendations contained within the published report, and sets out an action plan in response to be agreed by the Executive at its meeting on 21 November 2023.

The Committee are asked to consider the report and submit any comments or observations to the Executive.

Recommendation

The Committee is advised to consider the Peer Challenge Action Plan at Annex A, and submit and comments or observations to the Executive.

1. Background and Supporting Information

- 1.1 Peer Challenge is an established sector-led improvement tool initiated by the Local Government Association (LGA), involving a team of experienced officers and members who understand the challenges and opportunities facing local government, spending time in another council as 'peers' to provide constructive feedback and share learning.
- 1.2 Participating councils receive a comprehensive report and recommendations from the peer team and then identify their own action plan to respond.
- 1.3 The recommendation nationally is for councils to undertake a Peer Challenge at least every five years. However, this ambition was severely impacted over the past three years by the pandemic. Surrey Heath Borough Council had its previous Peer Challenge in 2014.

- 1.4 While a Peer Challenge is not mandatory, the LGA encourages councils to take up this offer as undergoing a Peer Challenge every few years is an effective tool for independent challenge and improvement and ensures councils have a sense of collective responsibility for performance in the sector as a whole. The purpose of this exercise is to help councils identify areas for improvement, or endorse areas they are already working on.
- 1.5 Surrey Heath Borough Council invited the LGA to carry out an independent corporate peer challenge from 11 to 13 July 2023. The challenge was carried out by experienced senior officers and councillors from other authorities across the country, as well as colleagues from the LGA. The team of six peers were on-site for three days and spoke to more than 75 people including external partners, councillors and staff, as well as reviewing a significant amount of documentation including a position statement prepared in advance by the Council.
- 1.6 All Corporate Peer Challenges includes a focus on leadership, governance, corporate capacity and financial resilience. At the Council's request, an even more in-depth focus was given to financial resilience and governance, and the peer team included two senior finance officers from other authorities rather than the usual one.
- 1.7 During their time at the Council, the peers recognised the many successes achieved so far, as well as the positive culture, leadership and commitment of staff. The peer team also praised the open and trusting relationship between members and officers, and strong partnership working.
- 1.8 The Council has received an in-depth report from the LGA with the findings of the challenge, which has [been published on the Council's](#) and LGA's websites. The report recognised that the new administration has a clear set of ambitions and has positively engaged staff in the development of a new 'Short-Term' plan to complement existing strategies. The report also commended the council's commitment to continuous improvement
- 1.9 The report includes a number of observations and suggestions and sets out nine key recommendations to the council for further development; many of which were already being implemented at the time of the challenge:
- **Recommendation 1** – Develop a financially sustainable budget, including scenario planning for regeneration options.
 - **Recommendation 2** – Complete a review of governance and develop and action plan encompassing risk management, project management and procurement.
 - **Recommendation 3** – Develop a future engagement plan with partners.
 - **Recommendation 4** – Enhance the role of Scrutiny – use it to its full potential, actively engaging members.
 - **Recommendation 5** – Create a continuous member development plan, informed by members, to support them in their roles.
 - **Recommendation 6** – Ensure Climate Net-Zero is integrated into the council's culture and appropriately resourced.

- **Recommendation 7** – Develop an Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training plan including all protected characteristics.
- **Recommendation 8** – Make improvements to the working environment at Surrey Heath House.
- **Recommendation 9** - Develop a digital vision that reflects engagement with staff and residents.

- 1.10 An action plan to address the recommendations is set out at Annex A. A number of the actions have already been completed.
- 1.11 This report will be considered by the Executive at its meeting on 21 November 2023 The Committee are asked to make any comments or observations to be considered by the Executive.
- 1.12 Members of the Peer Team will return to the Council for a progress ‘check in’ session in April 2024 to discuss and review progress in delivering the action plan and other improvements.

2. Reasons for Recommendation

- 2.1 To ensure that the Council continues to deliver improvement to its residents through using and responding to the comprehensive and thorough review carried out by the Peer team and the LGA.

3. Contribution to the Council’s Five Year Strategy

- 3.1 The Peer Challenge supports Surrey Heath Borough Council to be an effective and responsive council and is an important part of the Council’s commitment to continuous improvement.

4. Resource Implications

- 4.1 The action plan at Annex A can be delivered within existing resources.

5. Section 151 Officer Comments:

- 5.1 The action plan has been reviewed by the S151 Officer.

6. Legal and Governance Issues

- 6.1 Delivery of the action plan at Annex A will further promote good governance across the Council.

7. Monitoring Officer Comments:

- 7.1 The action plan has been reviewed by the Monitoring Officer.

8. Other Considerations and Impacts

Environment and Climate Change

- 8.1 Ensure Climate Net-Zero is integrated into the council's culture and appropriately resourced is one of the key recommendations within the action plan.

Equalities and Human Rights

- 8.2 Developing an Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion training plan, including all protected characteristics, is one of the key recommendations within the action plan.

Risk Management

- 8.3 Reviewing governance – including risk management - is one of the key recommendations within the action plan.

Community Engagement

- 8.4 The Peer Team spoke to a number of partners representing Surrey Heath communities and neighbouring authorities during the course of the Challenge.

Annexes

Annex A – Surrey Heath Borough Council – Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan – October 2023

Background Papers

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Surrey Heath Borough Council – 11-13 July – Feedback Report