

Report title	Response to 2019 LGA Corporate Peer Challenge
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Department	CEX Office
Exempt?	No
Exemption type	Not applicable
Reasons for exemption	Not applicable

<p>Purpose of report:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For information

<p>Synopsis of report:</p> <p>In October 2019, the LGA conducted a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) of the Council. The report and recommendations were presented to Corporate Management Committee in December 2019 along with an action plan for implementation during 2020/21. Whilst the action plan was not formally closed due to the coronavirus pandemic response and subsequent recovery, continuous improvement since the 2019 LGA CPC can demonstrate progress and achievement against the plan.</p> <p>This report presents an updated response to the 2019 action plan to assure Members that areas of improvement identified in the 2019 CPC have been acted upon as part of organisational continuous improvement.</p> <p>This report also informs Members of the intention to host an LGA CPC during 2024 which will also support the Council’s response to the Non-Statutory Best Value Notice.</p>
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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 four-five years. Peer Challenges provide a ‘practitioner perspective’ and ‘critical friend’ challenge (at no cost other than hosting requirements) at a time of its choosing and focusing on local needs and specific requirements.
- 1.2 The Council last hosted a Corporate Peer Challenge with an on-site visit in October 2019. The report and recommendations were presented to Corporate Management

Committee in December 2019. The action plan was considered and approved for implementation as part of the Corporate Action Plan to be delivered in 2020/21.

1.3 Delivery of the Corporate Action Plan in 2020/21 was severely impacted by the coronavirus pandemic and the requirement to reprioritise resources to react to the situation faced and support our prolonged emergency response and recovery phase. As a result, the 2019 CPC action plan was never brought back to Committee to formally close out.

1.4 This report presents a retrospective update against the 2019 CPC action plan to provide assurance that action has been taken as part of continuous improvement.

2. Report

1.5 In 2019, the 5 themes that were assessed as part of the LGA CPC were:

- i. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the Council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
- ii. Leadership of Place: Does the Council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
- iii. Financial planning and viability: Does the Council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
- iv. Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?
- v. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the Council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

1.6 There was a total of 33 recommendations made in the LGA CPC final report. An action plan/ response to the recommendations were given in Appendix C of the CMC December 2019 report. The intention at that time was to add the activities identified in response to the CPC recommendations to relevant Service Area Plans for delivery during 2020/21.

1.7 The first case of coronavirus CV-19 was identified in November 2019. The World Health Organization declared the CV-19 outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, and a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Therefore 2020/21 and 2021/22 were by no means 'normal' years and the Council operated without an updated Corporate Business Plan from 2020 - 2022. Service Area Plans and delivery of planned activity were put on hold to divert significant resources to support the emergency response and subsequent recovery. This impacted the delivery of the CPC action plan.

1.8 Due to the pandemic and recovery period, the 2019 LGA CPC was not formally concluded with a follow up on-site visit to assess the impact of the peer challenge

and progress made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team.

- 1.9 However, since December 2019, ongoing continuous improvement across the organisation demonstrates delivery of the recommendations as detailed in Appendix A. This appendix provides a retrospective update against each of the recommendations resulting from the 2019 LGA CPC demonstrating the progress and improvement made. Committee is asked to note this update against the action plan.
- 1.10 The Council received a non-statutory Best Value Notice (N-S BVN) from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) on 19 December 2023. The Council is expected to commission an external governance review which aims to provide more in-depth assurance on governance and leadership structures in line with Best Value principles, including a review of:
- The effectiveness and efficiency of internal decision-making and scrutiny processes
 - Culture and leadership, including the Authority's sense of strategic vision and direction, effectiveness of leadership, and attitudes and behaviours towards positive and open relationships.
 - Capacity and capability, including evidence of continuous improvement.
 - Delivery of services.
- 1.11 The LGA provides each Council with the opportunity of a CPC every 4-5 years. Therefore, it is timely that the Council hosts a CPC during 2024 as per the LGA's timeline and this will also support the requirement for an external governance review in response to the N-S BVN. This is a workstream within the N-S BVN response programme and the onsite visit is expected to be held during Autumn 2024. Workstreams currently underway within the programme will support the LGA CPC process including the self-assessment against the Best Value guidance and the assessment of organisational culture.

3. Policy framework implications

- 1.12 The 2019 LGA CPC was assessed against the previous Corporate Business Plan (CBP) 2016-2020 and looked to improve the organisations capability to deliver against the four Corporate Themes at that time:
- Supporting Local People
 - Enhancing Our Environment
 - Improving Our Economy
 - Organisational Development
- 1.13 The recommendations identified by the 2019 LGA CPC are however equally applicable for the current CBP 2022-2026, formally adopted by Full Council in October 2022.

4. Resource implications/Value for Money

- 1.14 Demonstration of continuous improvement is a requirement to meet the Best Value duty.
- 1.15 Hosting an LGA CPC during 2024/25 was a known 'planned activity' that would have been taken forward regardless of the receipt of the N-S BVN.
- 1.16 A small budget has been set aside for on-site hosting requirements as part of the N-S BVN budget sum set aside after approval from Corporate Management Committee in January 2024.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 The Best Value Duty relates to the statutory requirement for local authorities and other public bodies defined as best value authorities in Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1999 (“the 1999 Act”) to “make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness”.
- 5.2 In practice, this covers issues such as how authorities exercise their functions to deliver a balanced budget (Part 1 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992), provide statutory services and secure value for money in all spending decisions. Best value authorities must demonstrate good governance, including a positive organisational culture, across all their functions and effective risk management.
- 5.3 Under the provisions of section 26 Local Government Act 1999 the Secretary of State can issue guidance to local authorities on the issue of best value. Following a public consultation, which ran between 4 July and 15 August 2023, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has issued statutory guidance on best value standards and interventions under section 26 of the Local Government Act 1999 on the 8th May 2024.
- 5.4 A CPC forms a key part of the new improvement and assurance framework for local government and is underpinned by the principles of Sector-led Improvement (SLI) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. CPC is also recognised as assisting councils to meet their Best Value duty by having one CPC at least every five years.

6. Equality implications

- 6.1 None identified.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 7.1 None identified.

8. Risk Implications

- 8.1 It is an expectation of the LGA that actions identified as a result of a CPC are acted upon and closed out within the intervening period between visits. Therefore there is a reputational issue which can be mitigated by presenting this report to Members.

9. Other implications

- 9.1 Not applicable

10. Timetable for Implementation

- 10.1 Not applicable as this is a retrospective review of improvements made since the last CPC in 2019.

11. Conclusions

- 11.1 Members are asked to note the retrospective update against the 2019 CPC recommendations.

12. Background papers

- December 2019 Corporate Management Committee, agenda item 6
<https://democracy.runnymede.gov.uk/CeConvert2PDF.aspx?MID=277&F=Agenda.pdf&A=1&R=0>
- December 2019 Corporate management Committee minutes
<https://democracy.runnymede.gov.uk/CeConvert2PDF.aspx?MID=277&F=Minutes.pdf&A=1&R=0>

13. Appendices

- Appendix A: 2019 CPC action plan – 2024 response