

**REPORT TO:** CABINET

**DATE:** 13 JULY 2023

**TITLE:** LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION  
CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE REPORT AND  
DRAFT ACTION PLAN

**PORTFOLIO HOLDER:** COUNCILLOR DAN SWORDS, LEADER OF THE  
COUNCIL, (01279 446004)

**LEAD OFFICER:** ANDREW BRAMIDGE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE  
(01279) 446000

**CONTRIBUTING OFFICERS:** WIDER LEADERSHIP TEAM (01279) 446004

**CORPORATE PRIORITY:** IMPROVE COUNCIL SERVICES

**This is not a Key Decision**  
**It is on the Forward Plan as Decision Number I016006**  
**Call-in Procedures may apply**  
**This decision will affect no ward specifically.**

**RECOMMENDED that Cabinet:**

- A** Notes the Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) Report (attached as Appendix A to this report) and the intention to provide a further update to Cabinet after the follow up CPC visit at the end of 2023.
- B** Approves the draft action plan (attached as Appendix B to the report) developed from the reports key findings.

**REASON FOR DECISION**

- A** To ensure that the recommendations and findings that have been presented to the council in the CPC report are agreed and the action plan to deliver those recommendations is endorsed to provide accountability and robust timescales for improvements to be implemented.
- B** The council has embraced the CPC process and would like to put on record their thanks to the peer team who undertook the challenge and to all of those who contributed to the process; councillors, staff and external stakeholders.

## **BACKGROUND**

1. The council invited the LGA to undertake a CPC review in February 2023. By bringing together leaders and senior managers from other local authorities as member and officer peers, CPCs provide robust, strategic and credible check and challenge to support councils in achieving their aspirations and managing emerging issues. CPCs also enhance the capacity of the sector by encouraging councils to think beyond their traditional boundaries and partnerships to achieve better outcomes for their communities.
2. CPCs are designed to improve council services. They are also tailored to meet the specific priorities and needs of the participating authority and to take reflect their local circumstances, therefore complementing and adding value to the authority's own performance and improvement priorities.
3. CPC reviews are undertaken with the aim of identifying opportunities for continuous improvement, and their recommendations provide a framework for helping to deliver this.

## **THE REVIEW**

4. Each CPC covers the five core areas listed below:
  - a) Local priorities and outcomes;
  - b) Organisational and place leadership;
  - c) Governance and culture;
  - d) Financial planning and management; and
  - e) Capacity for improvement

Further details are contained within the Feedback Report at Appendix A.

5. In addition, the council asked the CPC peer review team to consider key elements of the housing agenda in Harlow, specifically in relation to the culture and contract/programme management of HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd and the housing repairs and maintenance programme, as well as how to implement future neighbourhood renewal programmes.
6. A peer review team of six, including a peer Chief Executive, a Lead Member senior officers from other local authorities and representatives from the LGA, visited Harlow over the course of three days. Prior to this the team reviewed a range of documents, including the council's Corporate Strategy and key delivery plans, to familiarise themselves with the council and its context.
7. During the three days spent in Harlow the team undertook a number of interviews and focus groups with staff, councillors and external partners,

involving 130 people. The peer review team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them and provided a number of recommendations.

## **REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS**

8. The peer review team highlighted good practice in many areas of the council's activities and noted the passion and ambition that is present in relation to the opportunities and positive potential that exist for developing Harlow Council and Harlow as a place.
9. The CPC also found several areas where it is felt that the council can improve both what it does and how it does it. The CPC Feedback Report can be found at Appendix A. Its key recommendations have been accepted by the council's senior leadership in full. In summary the recommendations are to:
  - a) Develop a new corporate strategy.
  - b) Develop clear vision and narrative about the future of Harlow with external partners to raise the profile of Harlow and Harlow Council in the region.
  - c) Establish a clear understanding of decision-making processes within the council.
  - d) Improve internal relationships through establishing and implementing a clear understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities of councillors and staff.
  - e) Ensure there is an identified evidence base behind the council's strategies, policies and decisions as well as more meaningful performance reporting.
  - f) Deliver a more inclusive approach to how the council sets its budget and alignment with the Corporate Strategy.
  - g) Ensure internal staff engagement and appropriate policies to support delivery of the plans recommendations.
10. The findings of the peer review team in relation to the Housing agenda were that issues identified in this area were a microcosm of the main report findings. Recommendations were included in the outcome report around creating accountability within the relationship with HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd and looking outward to adopt learning from elsewhere as delivery plans are developed in relation to improving homes.

## **PEER CHALLENGE ACTION PLAN**

11. The recommendations made by the peer review team have been discussed and reviewed by the council's wider leadership team and an action plan developed to deliver the improvements identified. The Action Plan can be found at Appendix B of this report.
12. The peer review team will visit Harlow again in Autumn 2023 to provide a follow up review of how the council is performing against this action plan. This secondary review will address any actions that have not progressed as planned, and advise on additional measures that could be implemented to further improve Council services. As set out in the recommendations to this report, the outcomes of the follow up visit will also be reported back to Cabinet soon after that visit.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

### **Communities and Environment**

As contained within the report

**Author: Andrew Bramidge, Chief Executive**

### **Finance**

As contained within the report

**Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance**

### **Governance and Corporate Services**

As contained within the report

**Author: Simon Hill, Director of Governance and Corporate Services**

### **Housing**

As contained within the report

**Author: Neil Euesden, Interim Director of Housing**

### **Strategic Growth and Regeneration**

As contained within the report

**Author: Andrew Bramidge, Chief Executive**

## **Appendices**

Appendix A – LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Report

Appendix B - Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan

## **Glossary of terms/abbreviations used**

CPC – Corporate Peer Challenge

LGA – Local Government Association