

Cabinet

25 January 2023

Item

Report of	Chief Operating Officer	Author	Richard Block richard.block@colchester.gov.uk
Title	Local Government Association Peer Challenge Report and Action Plan		
Wards affected	All wards		

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Local Government Association peer challenge process provides independent and external improvement support and challenge through a peer review, conducted by a team of councillors and senior officers from other local authorities.
- 1.2 Colchester City Council had a peer challenge in September 2022 and received the full report in November 2022. This report proposes an action plan to respond to the key recommendations from the Peer Challenge for consideration by Cabinet.

2. Recommended Decision

- 2.1 To consider the proposed action plan and approve it as the Council response to the key recommendations made the following the Peer Challenge.

3. Reason for Recommended Decision

- 3.1 To ensure the Council responds appropriately to the key recommendations made by the Local Government Association Peer Challenge and in turn support the continuous improvement of how the Council is operated.

4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 To approved alternative actions to respond to the key recommendations of the Peer Challenge.

5. Background Information

- 5.1 The Local Government Association (LGA) offers all councils the opportunity to have a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC). This is free, and a tried and trusted 'critical friend' method of improvement.
- 5.2 The challenges faced by councils in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic are unprecedented. The CPC provides independent and external improvement support and challenge to not only assist councils' thinking about recovery but to also support those councils who wish to use this period to reset, reimagine and reinvent as well as rebuild.
- 5.3 Colchester invited a peer challenge team to conduct a peer challenge during the week starting 26 September 2022.
- 5.4 The team used the five core areas that are used for all peer challenges as the overarching areas for the review:
 1. **Local priorities and outcomes:** Are the Council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities and achieving improved outcomes for all of its communities?
 2. **Organisational and place leadership:** Does the Council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
 3. **Governance and culture:** Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of respect, challenge and scrutiny?
 4. **Financial planning and management:** Does the Council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a clear plan to address its financial challenges?
 5. **Capacity for improvement:** Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the Council have the capacity to improve?
- 5.5 In addition, the peer team were also asked to provide feedback on the following:

Transformation and Organisational Development – Colchester City Council needs to reset and realign its organisation to reflect resource pressures and significant changes in working arrangements to support residents effectively, as Colchester's communities grow.

Regeneration and Growth - Colchester, now a city, plays into some important strategic arrangements and has a strong place-based focus when exploring the opportunities ahead for devolution through the Levelling Up and Shared Prosperity Funds.

- 5.6 In conducting the peer challenge, the team deployed a hybrid approach with four days on site in Colchester but with some interviews conducted remotely. During this time, they gathered information and views from more than 45 meetings, in addition to further research and reading, meeting either virtually or in person with over 150 people across the period of the challenge.
- 5.7 The resulting full peer challenge report was previously published by the City Council and a copy can be seen at appendix A.
- 5.8 Key highlights included:
 - With the opportunities afforded by their plans for growth, the new Member and Officer

Leadership team and, most crucially, city status, the City Council and Colchester, the place is on the cusp of something great.

- Colchester City Council has good self-awareness and understands the communities it serves and the economy across the borough.
- Colchester has an incredible heritage and culture offer that competes nationally and Colchester City Council has worked hard over the years to develop resilient and productive relationships and partnerships to ensure this heritage and cultural offer can thrive.
- Colchester City Council is driven and has a strong desire for achievement and delivery, with fantastic people, including staff, councillors, and partners.

5.9 The report also identified 8 key recommendations as follows:

1. Focus on city status. Use this as an opportunity to galvanise partners, improve the borough's economic and cultural strength and raise the voice of Colchester;
2. Get a firmer grip on the capital programme – manage all risks and improve your planning to ensure you have appropriate strategic finance, programme and project capacity and the resources to deliver;
3. Co-design a compelling and longer-term place-based narrative/city vision to define Colchester for the future;
4. Strengthen your political and officer 'leaders of place' roles and look beyond Colchester – map your anchor institutions, partners and stakeholders;
5. Review your priorities and projects and refocus on delivering 'Brilliant Business As Usual' and strengthen your corporate resources;
6. Strongly consider whether changing your election cycle will help you achieve your goals, ambitions and deliver improved services for Colchester's communities;
7. Better define with your staff what 'hybrid working' means for CBC and provide a clear definition. Also, clarify how the new CBC values will be designed and embedded, communicating to staff how these define the Council and will help achieve Colchester's ambition; and,
8. Commission an independent review of Colchester Commercial Holdings Ltd, and its subsidiaries, also undertake an internal review of Colchester Borough Homes to assess whether the companies are realising the benefits they were established to deliver.

5.10 In order to further improve and maximise opportunities available to the Council, it is vital the key recommendations are responded to appropriately. A full proposed action plan has now been developed and is already being delivered against. This is shown at appendix B.

5.11 The action plan will be used to track progress and will also be a key document used by the Peer Challenge team when they conduct a follow up visit which is usually conducted 6 months after the original peer challenge.

5.12 In addition to the key recommendation, several other areas of advice were provided by the Peer Challenge Team. Although not part of the main recommendations covered in this report, this additional advice has also been captured and is being acted upon.

6. Equality, Diversity and Human Rights implications

- 6.1 The peer challenge team identified a positive approach taken by the Council to equality and diversity making reference to an external audit commissioned to help improve in this area. The team also identified Colchester has a young, diverse and dynamic community and emphasised the Council should work to harness that diversity better.

7. Strategic Plan References

- 7.1 Several of the key recommendations and findings of the peer challenge report will support the creation of the new strategic plan and subsequent delivery plan.

8. Consultation

- 8.1 The consultative nature of the peer challenge process has meant that a broad group of staff, councillors and partner organisations have been involved and have contributed to the final recommendations. The action plan has also been developed in consultation with appropriate staff and Councillors.

9. Publicity Considerations

- 9.1 An end-to-end publicity process has ensured that the peer challenge and resulting report have been widely publicised. Once the action plan is approved, it will also be publicised.

10. Financial implications

- 10.1 Several of the recommendations will have financial implications which will need to be carefully considered e.g. external review of wholly owned companies. There will also be some additional initial costs in implementing the action plan and provision has been made in the 23/24 budget for these.

11. Health, Wellbeing and Community Safety Implications

- 11.1 Delivery against several of the recommendations from the peer challenge will have a positive direct and indirect impact on, health, wellbeing and community safety.

12. Environmental and Sustainability Implications

- 12.1 There are no specific implications but in responding to the key peer challenge recommendations, the Council will have an even stronger focus on key priorities such Environment and Sustainability.

13. Health and Safety Implications

- 13.1 There are no direct health and safety implications associated with this report.

14. Risk Management Implications

- 14.1 In responding to the recommendations from the peer challenge the Council will be better placed to mitigate key strategic risks.

Appendices

Appendix A – Peer Challenge Report

Appendix B – Peer Challenge Action Plan

Background Papers

None