



COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL

Council name	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	COUNCIL - 23 SEPTEMBER 2020
Report Number	AGENDA ITEM (13)
Subject	CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE – FEEDBACK REPORT
Wards affected	ALL
Accountable member	Cllr Joe Harris / Leader of the Council Email: joe.harris@cotswold.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Christine Gore – Interim Chief Executive Tel: 01285 623605 Email: christine.gore@cotswold.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	To consider the Local Government Association’s Feedback Report following the Corporate Peer challenge, and to note the progress made in implementing the recommendations within the report.
Annexes	Annex A – Corporate Peer Challenge – Feedback Report
Recommendation/s	<i>That Council notes the Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report and progress made to date in implementing the recommendations.</i>
Corporate priorities	Ensure that all services delivered by the Council are delivered to the highest standard.
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	None

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. The Council invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to conduct a Corporate Peer Challenge in late 2019. A Corporate Peer Challenge provides for an external review of how a Council functions and its ability to deliver on its plans, proposals and ambitions. The review is undertaken by a team that is knowledgeable and experienced in local government. The team acts as a 'critical friend' and produces feedback that provides a health check and commentary on areas of strength and potential areas for further consideration.
- 1.2. The Corporate Peer Challenge Team gathers information from a wide range of sources and attends various meetings, whilst also conducting interviews with staff, councillors and the Council's partner organisations. The Council's performance is then reviewed in terms of a core set of assessment areas:
 - Understanding of the local place and priority setting
 - Leadership of place
 - Financial planning and viability
 - Organisational leadership and governance
 - Capacity to deliver

In addition to covering the core assessment areas, the Council requested that the Peer Challenge Team also consider:

- The culture of the organisation and the extent to which this reflects political ambitions and aspirations
- The capacity of the organisation to deliver the emerging Council Plan
- The identity of the council within the Publica context

2. MAIN POINTS

- 2.1. The Council's Corporate Peer Challenge took place between 5 and 8 November 2019. The Feedback Report has been shared with all members and published on the Council's website. The purpose of this report is to set out the main recommendations and the progress made in implementing these.
- 2.2. Recommendation – In order to produce credible delivery plans for the emerging priorities of the new administration, the council should set aside sufficient and distinct organisational thinking time to develop a credible Corporate Plan and to determine the resources required to deliver. Progress – although this has taken longer than anticipated, officers have worked closely with members of the Administration to develop a comprehensive Plan which appears elsewhere on the agenda for this meeting. The revised Budget for 2020/21, which also appears on this agenda, and the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) approved in February 2020, reflect the ambitions set out in the Plan and allocates resources where the requirements are already known. Future iterations of the budget and MTFS will allocate further resources as action plans are developed and refined.
- 2.3. Recommendation – Ensure the Council has the strategic leadership capacity it requires, within the retained senior officer team, to: shape the identity and unique agenda of Cotswold District Council and to influence key stakeholders; engage in wider partnership working to help deliver new and emerging ambitions; work with

and influence the Publica strategy/policy team; act as intelligent client to commission services from Publica and other partners. Progress – following discussions with West Oxfordshire District Council earlier this year, in April the Council's s151 officer ceased to be shared with them and now works full-time for Cotswold District Council. The former Head of Paid Service retired at the end of June and whilst interim arrangements are currently in place a report recommending a permanent appointment to the new post of Chief Executive appears elsewhere on this agenda. A new Monitoring Officer has also been appointed in recent weeks. This has already created greater strategic leadership capacity than previously existed, and with the inclusion of a Publica Executive Director and Group Manager as members of the local management team, significant progress in these areas is anticipated over the coming months.

- 2.4. Recommendation – Develop a medium-term financial strategy to underpin implementation of the Corporate Plan that identifies opportunities to enhance financial capacity including: income from fees and charges; returns on investment from treasury management; savings and income from Publica; opportunities to generate savings and create additional capacity to deliver through partnership working; a commercial strategy, learning from best practice elsewhere, to create new income streams. Progress – the current iteration of the MTFs, together with the Investment Strategy for the Recovery of Cotswold District which appears elsewhere on this agenda, collectively reflect these recommendations.
- 2.5. Recommendation – Recognise the value and potential of Publica to refocus capacity to deliver on the Council's ambitions and utilise the opportunity of a new Managing Director (MD) to reset the relationship between the Council and Publica and address governance issues. Progress – significant progress has been made in respect of this recommendation with a close working relationship having been established between the Council Leader and the Publica MD. A refocussing of the roles of the Executive Directors, with a locality lead being created for each of the partner Councils has also assisted with this, and a better understanding of respective roles and responsibilities is emerging. Publica is undertaking a review of its Procurement and Commissioning role and function which is expected to resolve the governance issues and provide greater clarity for both staff and Council members.
- 2.6. Recommendation - Undertake the LGA's Communications Health Check to support improved communications and help develop a branding strategy. Progress – the recommended Health Check was undertaken early in 2020 and changes have been made to strengthen Publica's Communications Team and its support for the Council in accordance with the recommendations made at the time. The Interim Head of External Communications will leave his post in the next few weeks and a recruitment process for a permanent replacement is underway. Whilst a branding strategy is yet to be adopted, the issues around the predominance of the Council's brand versus the Publica brand have largely been resolved.
- 2.7. Recommendation – Build the Council's organisational capacity by: putting in place a development programme for officers to harness enthusiasm and positivity of Group and Business Managers which will build organisational capacity; strengthening performance management and reporting including programme and project management; a comprehensive reboot of the current transformation programme in order to develop a new programme plan, with resources and

expertise in place to deliver. Progress – strictly speaking the implementation of these recommendations lies with Publica as the organisation responsible for the vast majority of staff working on the Council’s behalf. The Publica MD has confirmed that a Leadership Development Programme has been procured and, but for Covid-19, would have been underway by now. The revised start date is currently planned as October 2020 and, where necessary, elements of the programme will be delivered virtually to avoid further delay and to support Publica’s agile working strategy. The Council’s retained managers will be included in the programme cohort to build on the ‘one team’ approach and over time there will be opportunities for all staff to benefit from the programme, which aims to deliver ‘leadership at all levels’. Publica is also signing up to the three year Investors In People standard, which will dovetail with the leadership development programme, supporting Publica to transform its business performance through its staff by helping to develop, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of its people strategy. In terms of strengthening performance management and reporting and programme and project management these are key actions in Publica’s own Business Plan and significant progress has been made in relation to both. The transformation programme has also been overhauled and is now more focused around key customer service experience improvements to help deliver the customer promise agreed by the Council. In the last year the Salesforce digital platform has gone live and is integrated with the refreshed website. A live agent facility has been introduced to enable a new customer channel and a bot has been added to provide 24/7 access to information via this channel with a 90% success rate. The new Customer Experience improvement programme is appropriately resourced and additional resources have been approved to enhance the digital enablement of further customer service processes.

- 2.8. Recommendation – Ensure the potential risks associated with any potential equal pay claim are understood and being managed. Progress – this recommendation relates specifically to the new pay and grading scheme within Publica that was being worked on at the time of the Peer Challenge. This scheme was successfully implemented in April this year with no Equal Pay claims to date.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1. There are no specific financial implications arising from this report. Any financial implications arising from the actions taken progress the recommendation of the Peer Challenge Team have been and will continue to be addressed as and when necessary.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. There are no legal implications associated with this report.

5. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 5.1. The principal risk associated with this report is that the recommendations fail to be implemented or that insufficient progress is made against them. The LGA expect to undertake a review of progress within 18 months – 2 years of the original peer Challenge being undertaken and a further report on progress will be submitted to Council after that has been carried out.

6. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 6.1. The only alternative to what has been reported above would have been for the Council to have ignored the recommendations of the Peer Challenge team, with the associated reputational damage that would have been caused by such a response.

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1. None.

(END)