OXFORD CITY COUNCIL
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To:	**Cabinet**
Date:	**18 October 2023**
Report of:	**Chief Executive**
Title of Report:	**Corporate Peer Challenge – Local Government Association Peer Review**

Summary and recommendations
Purpose of report: To update members on the key scope and process, recommendations from the July 2023 Peer Review Team, and to outline the future Action Plan
Key decision: No
Cabinet Member: Councillor Susan Brown
Corporate Priority: Well-run Council
Policy Framework: Council Strategy 2020-24

Recommendations: That Cabinet resolves to:
1. **Note** the Local Government Peer Challenge Feedback report of July 2023
2. **Note** the recommendations from the Peer Review Team and that the Chief Executive has already commenced action planning to address these.

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Oxford City Council Local Government Peer Challenge Feedback report, July 2023
Appendix 2	Case Study One: Oxford City Council's solution to procuring electric vehicle infrastructure: The EV Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS)
Appendix 3	Case Study Two: Developing the Oxford City Council's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion strategy: an inclusive approach to understanding complex inequalities in our communities

Introduction and background

1. The Council invited in a Local Government Association (LGA) team to conduct a review in July 2023 and this was followed by a feedback report detailing the strengths of the Council, the issues considered, and areas for further improvement and key recommendations. (Appendix 1)

2. This was the first Peer Challenge review the Council has undertaken for eight years – with the COVID pandemic frustrating plans for an earlier review. Its purpose was to assess the work of the Council, its companies and investment portfolio, and gather an independent view from those running other councils on where the Council is doing well and where and how the Council might be able to improve.

3. The timing of the Peer Challenge will help shape the Council's new Corporate Strategy, 2024 to 2028, supports positive impact of priorities and will inform the Budget setting process.

4. A key background document for the Peer Challenge Review Team ("The Peer Team") was a 'Position Statement' prepared by the Council. This provided a clear brief and steer on the local context and what the Peer Team should focus on. It was an opportunity to set out the key issues, challenges and current thinking in relation to the review, and an opportunity to undertake an honest self-assessment.

5. Two examples of good practice were prepared, which the Council felt will be of help to the local government sector (Appendix 2 and Appendix 3). These are to be published on the LGA website.

6. The review recognised the Council's commitment and success in a number of areas and was a positive report overall (see pages 3-4). There were ten recommendations for improvement (pages 4-6), most around structures, focus and process but one around IT infrastructure has potential budgetary implications.

Scope and Focus of the Peer Challenge

7. The LGA's Peer Challenge process is a robust and rigorous assurance and improvement tool managed by the sector, for the sector.

8. It complements and adds value to the Council's own performance and improvement focus.

9. Five core components are reviewed as standard in all LGA Peer Challenges:

    • Local priorities and outcomes.
    • Organisational and place leadership.
    • Governance and culture.
    • Financial planning and management.
    • Capacity for improvement.

10. At request of the Council, the Peer Challenge also considered the Council's:

    • Companies and investment portfolio.
    • Fit for the Future change programme.

<u>The Peer Challenge Review Process</u>

11. Peer Challenge reviews are improvement-focused and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus.

12. The Peer Team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on what they find and provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.

13. The Peer Team was made up of the:

   • Chief Executive, Lancaster City Council

   • Former Leader, Norwich City Council

   • Leader, Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council

   • Director of Financial Services, London Borough of Hounslow

   • Chief Operating Officer and S151 Officer, Cornwall County Council

   • Director of Strategy, Insight and Governance, Maidstone Borough Council.

14. The Peer Team familiarised themselves with the Council's challenges and plans for the future, held more than 65 meetings with individuals or groups of stakeholders to gather information, in addition to further research, and held interviews with more than 130 people including a range of Council staff, members and external stakeholders. The Council's senior officers and Members did not sit in on meetings with other stakeholders.

Summary of Feedback

<u>Overall observations</u>

15. The Council has ambitious plans and a successful record of delivery and core political message and priorities are well understood.

16. The Peer Team commended the calibre, engagement and enthusiasm of staff across the organisation.

17. The Council is a good employer, staff wellbeing is prioritised – officers enjoy working at Oxford City Council.

18. Capability of members and officers is widely held in high esteem both internally and externally, people trust in the leadership.

19. There are positive relations between members and officers based on mutual trust and understanding of their respective roles.

20. Management of the Council is good and can be trusted. It leads for its communities and effectively delivers services and is respected for its convening role in collaboration and place shaping.

21. The Council is sector leading in HMO licensing and a selective licensing scheme for the whole private rented sector, and the work on Net Zero is ahead of the curve.

22. IT infrastructure - this is even more important given the Council's focus on remote and hybrid working.

Findings

23. *Local priorities and outcomes*

   a) Core political messages and priorities are well understood - they are lived and breathed in the organisation and beyond.

   b) There is strong and evidence commitment to tackling inequality and its causes are apparent, with a wide range of strategies to tackle inequalities.

   c) There are impressive examples of housing delivery.

24. *Place Leadership*

   The Council is;

   a) A trusted and valued partner and partnership working runs through everything done.

   b) A place leader on a cross regional basis, working effectively with partners to unlock growth and importantly tackle infrastructure challenges.

   And,

   c) Has strong working relationships with voluntary sector partners.

25. *Organisational leadership*

   a) There is strong and effective leadership from the Leader and the Chief Executive, with committed, talented and passionate officers and members. The Chief Executive is visible and committed to communicating with all staff.

   b) The Leader and Chief Executive are respected by partners and across the political spectrum and have a clear set of priorities, effectively balancing internal and external facing roles.

   c) The Corporate Management Team operate openly and effectively with appropriate levels of challenge and influence collectively and individually. Senior managers are respected both internally and externally

   d) There are commendable efforts to be "a campaigning organisation".

26. *Culture*

   a) The Council are a good employer, staff wellbeing is prioritised.

   b) Members exhibit a wide variety of talents and backgrounds that bring a real strength to the Council.

   c) The importance of equality, diversity and inclusion is recognised.

   d) Relationship with the unions is good, with strong union representation.

Peer Challenge Key Recommendations

27. The Peer Team made ten key recommendations that they believe will help the Council progress the work on which it has embarked:

a) **Recommendation 1: Co-design shared outcomes** Convene the city's anchor institutions to work together in developing shared outcomes and collectively drive how these are delivered and procured.

b) **Recommendation 2: Prioritisation**

Match the Council's ambitious plans to the resources required for their delivery. Be deliberate about adding and removing projects when something new is added.
Strategically sequence the Council's projects. Look to upskill and agilely move around staff to resource priorities.

c) **Recommendation 3: Corporate centre / Programme management office**

Ensure there is corporate control on the many projects the Council is progressing. Consider making permanent the current Project Management Office structure and invest in the Council's project management specialists. Look to upskill and equip staff with the necessary training for performance and project management. A team based within the corporate centre of the organisation should oversee the Council's multiple projects including the Fit for the Future change projects, savings programme, capital programme and the IT improvements. This will help the Council in maintaining a corporate grip on project progress and see developments in the round.

d) **Recommendation 4: Performance management**

The Council should refresh its performance management framework in line with the new *Council Strategy*. This framework should be linked to outcomes. The Council should look to use data more intelligently to improve service quality. A consistent performance and data-driven culture needs to be embedded.

e) **Recommendation 5: Communicating the regeneration**

The Council should continue and go further with its inclusive economy campaign. Seeking to inform and demonstrate how the exciting regeneration projects can benefit all local residents.

f) **Recommendation 6: Organisational structure**

When looking at the organisational structure the Council should have an outcomefocused mindset, using its data to drive policy and performance. The Council should use its resources flexibly to allow for agility in serving the delivery of projects. Recruitment, retention and progression should be at the forefront when considering an organisational structure.

g) **Recommendation 7: Hybrid working / IT infrastructure**

The Council's IT systems need to be improved; this is particularly important now most staff are remotely based. The Council should look to put on more in-person events and team meetings, providing reasons for staff to come into the office. The team principles for hybrid working are important and should be refreshed and emphasised regularly.

h) **Recommendation 8: Corporate Management Team (CMT) and Cabinet**

Forward plan meetings between the CMT and Cabinet to co-design policy and keep all Cabinet members informed of projects across the Council.

i) **Recommendation 9: Member development**

In preparing for the May 2024 member induction process, the Council needs to strengthen its training provision for new and existing members. Training should also be developed for new and existing Cabinet members. An annual Cabinet development day should be considered. In strengthening the member development programme, the Council is building capacity and expertise for the future.

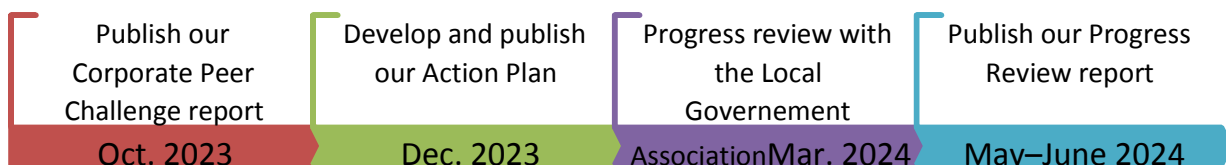j) **Recommendation 10: The Oxford Model**

- As with any model of delivery it is important the Council regularly and systematically assures itself it is getting value for money, quality of service and achievement of its intended outcomes. The Council should look to benchmark itself with other councils with wholly owned companies and consider an independent review to gain assurance on value for money and service quality.

- Ensure there is an alignment between the *Council Strategy* and the business plans of the wholly-owned companies.

- The Council should strengthen its client arrangements. This would then act as a mechanism to prevent the escalation of operational matters to the shareholder.

- The Council should deliver communications and dedicated training for all staff on the reasons for and the intended benefits of the Oxford Model. This will strengthen the organisation's understanding of the approach the council has taken.

Future Action Plan

28. The Council's Corporate Management Team and Organisational Delivery Group have proactively considered, discussed and reflected on these findings.

29. In response to the findings the Council commenced work early to start developing a draft Action Plan. The Action Plan will continue to be developed and is expected to be brought to Cabinet and published in line with the LGA reporting timelines "within eight weeks of the CPC report's publication".

Future key milestones

30.

Publish our Corporate Peer Challenge report	Develop and publish our Action Plan	Progress review with the Local Governement Association	Publish our Progress Review report
Oct. 2023	Dec. 2023	Mar. 2024	May–June 2024

Financial implications

31. There are no financial implications for the Council arising from this report.

Legal issues

32. There are no legal implications for the Council arising from this report.

Level of risk

33. There are no risk implications for the Council arising from this report.

Equalities impact

34. An Equalities Impact Assessment is not necessary for this report. Equalities Impact is intrinsically built into the Council's policies and alongside the key strategies. The Council will continue to monitor equalities impact as programmes grow and develop.

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

35. There are no carbon and environmental implications for the Council arising from this report.

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Background Papers:
1. Oxford City Council - Corporate Peer Challenge Position Statement, July 2023 (Confidential)

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