

REPORT OF **Leader of the Council and Chief Executive**

To: **Full Council**

Subject: **Torrige Corporate Peer Challenge**

Date: **15 July 2024**

Reference:

PURPOSE OF REPORT:

To present to Full Council the final report from the Corporate Peer Challenge that took place at the end of April 2024.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a visible and transparent framework of Local Government review and assurance conducted by the sector for the sector.

Torrige invited the LGA to carry out a CPC at the end of April 2024 the last such review too place in 2017.

The purpose of this report is to present the findings reported by the team to Full Council, which incorporates a series of recommendations, which are aimed at assisting along its improvement journey.

2. REPORT

Attached to this covering report is the LGA CPC report following the visit by the Peer Team between the 23 and 25 April 2024.

LGA CPC is a recognised system of assurance conducted by “Peers” both Councillors and Officers in senior political and officer roles at councils that are broadly similar to Torrige.

The process is intended to provide “critical friend” support and assurance and it is not an inspection. The key areas covered by the CPC are:

- Local priorities and outcomes
- Organisational and place leadership
- Governance and culture
- Financial planning and management
- Capacity for improvement:

The CPC team were provided with a considerable amount of background material, which was accompanied by a comprehensive position statement in advance of the on-site meetings and workshops. Other publicly available reports were also reviewed by the team prior to their visit.

The Peer team appointed were::

- Lead Officer Peer: Ian Knowles, Chief Executive at West Lindsey District Council
- Lead Member Peer (Independent): Cllr Hannah Dalton, Leader Epsom and Ewell District Council



- Member Peer (Lib Dem): Cllr Lisa Spivey, Cotswold District Council
- Officer Peer: Dr Alison Knight, Director of Place, Broxbourne Borough Council
- Officer Peer: Kirsten Burnett, Head of Policy and OD, Hyndburn Borough Council
- Officer Peer: David Clark, Service Director, Governance, Democratic and Legal Services, Somerset Council
- Peer Challenge Manager: Kathryn Trant, LGA Regional Adviser for South-West

During their visit to Torrridge the peer team met with people 85, which included councillors, staff and external partners & stakeholders and also held 30 workshops.

The report itself identifies and highlights many good things the peer team found that are already in place and happening at Torrridge that should be highlighted and celebrated.:

- Torrridge District Council (TDC) is clearly ambitious for the district and people of Torrridge as evidenced by their successful bid for Levelling Up Fund monies for regeneration at Appledore.
- The council understands the challenges that arise from the rurality of the area, the district is classified by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as 'mainly rural' with over 80% of residents living in areas defined as rural or in market towns, and this understanding has informed a review of the Council's Strategic Plan.
- Within the renewed Strategic Plan, one of the key themes is 'Local Economy'. The council's Economic Development team is highly regarded and is clearly making a positive impact.
- TDC appreciates that it cannot deliver on priorities without the support of partners, and as an organisation is itself well respected by partners it works with.
- TDC is engaged in a number of partnerships that it recognises could offer opportunities in achieving the priorities that support the Strategic Plan. The council should continue to proactively engage in those partnerships to ensure it is in the best position to maximise any benefits that may arise.
- The council has carried out successful consultation events, such as the public consultation on the renewed Strategic Plan.
- The council has a performance management system that has been recognised as good practice by the Local Government Association. TDC were asked to present on this topic at a round table event to which other councils were invited.
- TDC produces financial statements of good quality, as confirmed by the external auditor.
- It is understood across the council that councillors set strategic direction and officers are responsible for delivery of services.
- A Member Officer Protocol is in place which on paper appears fit for purpose.
- The council has a committed workforce who demonstrate a passion for the district and describe a positive working culture at the council

It is really pleasing on many fronts that these many good points were highlighted and we equally recognise that there are always things that can be done differently, which would help



us improve the way Torridge works and operates that would be beneficial to our residents, businesses, communities and visitors and there are a range of recommendations made

Levelling Up

- **Levelling up Fund** – consider what existing or new governance arrangements should be in place (to include key partners) to ensure governance is robust, the budget is monitored closely and importantly the wider benefits of this investment impact on the locality.
- **Levelling Up Partnership** - Address as a matter of urgency the capacity of the economic development team and major projects team to lead this scale of programme.
- **Levelling Up Partnership** - An appraisal process is needed to ensure that the projects recommended not only meet the key metrics, but are deliverable, are sustainable in the long term and will make a real difference to outcomes locally.
- **Levelling Up Partnership** - A clear governance structure is needed with roles, responsibilities and allocation of risk fully understood.
- **Levelling Up Partnership** - All projects within the wider LUP programme should follow a standard process, whether internal or external to the council

Capacity to Deliver

Take stock as to the sufficiency of the council's staff resources to continue to deliver everything that the council is seeking to do through the Strategic Plan as well as the resources needed to support delivery of major project programmes.

Member Development and Behaviour

Create a Member Development Working Group to empower councillors to drive their own development and address low attendance at councillor learning and development sessions. Invest in an ongoing programme of councillor development and political awareness training for staff, to ensure wider understanding of the roles and responsibilities of councillors and officers respectively. Include training using the resources available to promote Civility in Public Life to address instances of poor councillor behaviour.

Review of Procedures

Undertake a review of process and procedures such as the Leadership Team meetings, Lead Member roles, use of Full Council Motions, Call In, Scheme of Delegation and appropriate use of Part Two to ensure effective decision-making processes and governance that is widely understood across the council.

Golden Triangle

Formalise statutory officer meetings and develop a forward work programme around governance issues to include the Annual Governance Statement and the corporate risk register. Meeting regularly would allow for sharing of information and development of a 'united' approach to governance issues.

Financial Sustainability

Develop a transparent mechanism for seeking efficiencies and income generation to replace the use of Reserves in the Medium Term Financial Strategy. Action the improvement recommendations set out in the external auditor's annual report.

Risk Management



Strengthen how management of corporate risks is reviewed and reported to ensure it is transparent and implications linked to the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

Partnership Working

Proactively engage with partners to ensure that TDC is in a position to maximise the opportunities that may arise from the various partnerships that the council is involved in.

Climate Change

Embed clear performance measurements and milestones into service plans to meet the council's carbon neutral operational target of 2030, to demonstrate on track delivery.

Review of HR Policies

Review HR policies, terms and conditions and working arrangements, to address actual or perceived inconsistencies in their application across different council services and to ensure that the council is seen as an attractive place to work.

Communications

Improve external communications so that the council can proactively celebrate its success. Continue to develop a Strategic Communications Plan to ensure consistent messaging through internal and external communications at the same time.

3. IMPLICATIONS

Legal Implications

None directly related to this report.

Financial Implications

None directly related to this report

Human Resources Implications

None directly related to this report

Sustainability/Biodiversity Implications

None directly related to this report

Equality/Diversity

None directly related to this report

Risk Management

None directly related to this report

Compliance with Policies and Strategies

The report refers to the Council's Policies and Strategic plans



Data Protection (GDPR) Implications

None directly related to this report

Climate Change

None directly related to this report

Ward Member and Lead Member Views

Is a Council-wide report and plan so Ward member views not applicable

Comment from Leader of the Council Cllr Ken James

I would like to record my thanks to the Peer Team who covered a great deal of ground during their time with us at Torridge and also to our in-house officer team for the huge effort in preparing for and supporting this process.

It was the first LGA CPC I have had during my term as Leader of the Council and I have to admit it was quite a challenging experience, although as the title suggests it is meant to be a challenge.

With all that said I really pleased with the report that has been produced following the visit at the end of April 2024 as it illustrates clearly the good work our Councillors and Officers working together already do for the district. It has been a great opportunity to showcase our achievements, which we should all be proud of. We are a forward-looking Council with big ambitions and strong ideas for delivering improved outcomes for our residents, communities, businesses and visitors and the recommendations highlighted by the Peer Team will assist along this journey.

Date of Consultation – 03 July 2024

4. CONCLUSIONS

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge is a very well-respected improvement and assurance framework that operates within the Local Government Sector. It is not an inspection process although it does involve a comprehensive review of how the Council operates across key areas.

We welcomed the Peer Team to Torridge as critical friends and we equally welcome the report produced by the team, which will enable us to provide service and other improvements across the Council.

There were many areas of good performance and ambition highlighted throughout the report, which provides us the assurance that what we do is good, our direction of travel is clear, and our staff and partners are working well and collaboratively to achieve the best outcomes. However, there are always ways that things can be improved and as an organisation we proactively seek to improve and implementing the recommendations in the report will help us along that journey..



5. RECOMMENDATIONS

That:

- Members receive the Torridge Corporate Peer Challenge report and approve it to be published on the Council's website.
- Delegate to the Chief Executive to work with Group Leaders to prepare a draft action plan to be reported to Full Council on 9 September 2024 that considers the recommendations in the report, how they should be implemented and the arrangements for monitoring progress against the actions in advance of the LGA Corporate Peer Review progress scheduled for February 2025

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Consultations: Date of Consultation – 02 July 2024

Officers Consulted –
Staci Dorey, Head of Legal and Governance
Sean Kearney, Head of Communities and Place

Contact Officer: Steve Hearse, Chief Executive

Background Papers:

