

## **Committee: Cabinet**

**Date: 23 March 2020**

Wards: All

## **Subject: LGA Corporate Peer Challenge**

Lead officer: Ged Curran, Chief Executive

Lead member: Cllr Mark Allison, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

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### **Recommendations:**

1. That Cabinet notes the findings and recommendations from the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge as set out at Appendix 1
  2. That Cabinet approves the approach to implementing the recommendations as set out in section 4
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## **1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report sets out the key findings from an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge undertaken in November 2019 and work to implement its recommendations.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Since the demise of the Audit Commission in 2010 the local government sector has come together to introduce Corporate Peer Challenges as a way of helping local authorities improve. They provide a mechanism for local authorities to support each other, to get an external view of how they are doing in meeting their corporate priorities and to share best practice. Local authorities are encouraged to have one every four years.
- 2.2 We recently invited the LGA to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge. This took place from 11 to 15 November 2019. We have now received their feedback report – see Appendix 1.
- 2.3 The Corporate Peer Challenge involved a senior team of local government peers spending the week in Merton talking to our staff and partners, holding focus groups and reviewing documents. The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge team comprised:
  - Will Tuckley – Chief Executive of Tower Hamlets (Peer Challenge Lead Officer)
  - Paul Clarke – Deputy Director of Finance for Barnet
  - Sally Hamberger – AD Policy, Performance and Community for Havering and Newham Shared Services
  - Cllr Clare Coghill – Leader of Waltham Forest

- Cllr Daniel Fitzhenry – Leader of the Conservative group on Southampton Council
  - John Tench – Programme Manager for the LGA
- 2.4 There are five core components of a Corporate Peer Challenge that the team are asked to gather evidence on and assess performance:
1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting;
  2. Leadership of place;
  3. Organisational leadership and governance;
  4. Financial planning and viability;
  5. Capacity to deliver.
- 2.5 The peer team spoke to over 100 people and attended over 45 meetings including Cabinet, Scutiny and the Corporate Management Team.
- 2.6 In the build up to the Corporate Peer Challenge the council undertook its own internal review of corporate working to prepare for the assessment and also produced a position statement which was sent to the peer team in advance.
- 2.7 The internal review resulted in a number of recommendations for improvement which have been taken forward by the senior management team.
- 2.8 There is no requirement to publish a Corporate Peer Challenge feedback report but the Leader and Chief Executive agreed before the Corporate Peer Challenge to publish the report.

### **3 KEY FINDINGS**

- 3.1 The Corporate Peer Challenge team presented their draft findings to CMT and the Leaders of Merton's political parties on 15 November 2019 and sent their final feedback report to the Council at the end of January 2020.
- 3.2 Overall they found that the council is well led and run and has a solid base. Through strong leadership we have managed a difficult financial situation well and been able to maintain and improve outcomes for the residents of Merton. Our services are improving and delivering better outcomes for residents despite challenging circumstances. We have staff who are knowledgeable and committed. There is a palpable sense of ambition amongst staff.
- 3.3 The council is a well-regarded partner locally and regionally, respected and trusted to lead. The quality of office-member relationship is good and there are mature working relationships between politicians who work in the best interests of the borough.
- 3.4 The council is self-aware and understands the challenges that we face. The peer team agreed with the issues and recommendations arising from our own internal review and emphasised the need to address these quickly.
- 3.5 They suggested we should develop a clear and well understood narrative for Merton that describes the ambition for people and place. They felt we could

improve both external and internal communications, in particular to tell residents and staff about our achievements. They felt that some elements of internal organisational governance and decision making could be simplified. They suggested we should review support to elected members in terms of training and governance processes.

#### **4 NEXT STEPS**

- 4.1 The council accepts the findings from the Corporate Peer Challenge. As noted above a number of actions were already underway to improve systems and processes as a result of the internal review of corporate working.
- 4.2 We have established the Modernising Merton Programme to take forward the remaining actions from the internal review and any additional areas identified by the Corporate Peer Challenge. This will be short-term programme chaired by the Chief Executive over a three month period.
- 4.3 Will Tuckley, the Peer Challenge lead, and John Tench, the LGA Programme Manager, will return to Merton in June to review progress on implementing the recommendations.

#### **5 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 5.1. The council could take no further action on the feedback report, however, this is not recommended.

#### **6 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED**

- 6.1 Staff, partners and politicians were all engaged in the process for undertaking the Corporate Peer Challenge.

#### **7 TIMETABLE**

- 7.1 Work has already commenced on many of the recommendations arising from the Corporate Peer Challenge. The Modernising Merton Programme will take place from March to June 2020 to consider how to implement the remaining recommendations from the internal review and additional areas for action not already covered by the internal review. The LGA will return in June 2020 to review progress.

#### **8 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1. There are no direct costs arising from this report but there could potentially be additional costs in implementing the recommendations. Any additional costs will be subject to the normal budget setting process.

#### **9 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1. There is no legal requirement to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge but it is recognised good practice.

- 10 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS**
- 10.1. N/A
- 11 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**
- 11.1. N/A
- 12 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**
- 12.1. N/A
- 13 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT**  
Appendix 1 – London Borough of Merton Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report
- 14 BACKGROUND PAPERS**
- 14.1. Guidance on LGA Corporate Peer Challenges:  
<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/peer-challenges>