

---

**PEER CHALLENGE**

---

**Responsible Cabinet Members - Councillor Bill Dixon Leader,  
Councillor Stephen Harker, Efficiency and Resources Portfolio**

**Ada Burns - Chief Executive**

---

**SUMMARY REPORT**

**Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to update Cabinet on the Corporate Peer Challenge taking place from the 4 – 7 June 2013.

**Summary**

2. Introduced in 2011 Corporate Peer Challenge is a core component of the Local Government Association's (LGA) 'Taking the Lead' strategy.
3. Every council has the opportunity to have one Corporate Peer Challenge, at no cost, between 2011 and 2014. By May 2012, a total of 25 councils had received a Corporate Peer Challenge and a further 70 had either been booked or were under active discussion.
4. Peer Challenges involve a visit of three to four days; for Darlington, this is scheduled to take place over the period 4-7 June 2013.
5. Councils are required to submit a brief 'Position Statement' in advance of the Peer Challenge visit. Darlington's statement is attached as appendix 1.

**Recommendation**

6. It is recommended that Cabinet:-
  - (a) Note that the Peer Challenge is taking place in June.
  - (b) Agree on the content of the Position Statement.
  - (c) Agree that the Peer Challenge report, expected in the summer should be considered by Cabinet in September.

## Reasons

7. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons :-
- (a) The Peer Challenge is an excellent opportunity to review the Council's progress in implementing the new business model 'Darlington 2015' and to assess the approach to building a sustainable medium term strategy.
  - (b) The Peer Challenge Team will expect to meet Cabinet Members, Chairs of Scrutiny and a representative group of non-executive Members.
  - (c) The Position Statement is an important document in setting the context for Darlington's Peer Challenge.
  - (d) Feedback from the Peer Challenge will support the Council's forward planning.

**Ada Burns**  
**Chief Executive**

## Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Owen Wilson : Extension 2464

S17 Crime and Disorder	There are no specific Crime and Disorder implications
Health and Well Being	There are no specific implications on Health and Wellbeing
Carbon Impact	The carbon impact is limited.
Diversity	There are no specific diversity implications.
Wards Affected	All wards are affected equally.
Groups Affected	All groups are affected equally.
Budget and Policy Framework	This decision does not represent a change to the budget and policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision.
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	The peer challenge is a tool to enable the Council to understand how well its delivering its key objectives.
Efficiency	The Peer Challenge is a sector led approach designed to help councils take responsibility for their improvement

## MAIN REPORT

### Information and Analysis

8. Introduced in 2011 Corporate Peer Challenge is a core component of the Local Government Association's (LGA) 'Taking the Lead' strategy. Managed and delivered by the sector for the sector, the process is designed to help councils take responsibility for their improvement. The scope and timing of each challenge is agreed between the LGA and the Council to ensure it is tailored to local needs and priorities.
9. Every council has the opportunity to have one Corporate Peer Challenge, at no cost, between 2011 and 2014. By May 2012, a total of 25 councils had received a Corporate Peer Challenge and a further 70 had either been booked or were under active discussion.
10. The challenge process is very different from old CPA / CAA inspections, it is not rules based, has no template or scoring system, rather it relies on the expert judgement of the challenge teams. The process should be seen as an improvement tool, not as a means of providing public assurance and therefore in addition to five core components the challenge can focus specifically on issues identified by the participating Council.
11. Peer Challenges involve a visit of three to four days; for Darlington, this is scheduled to take place over the period 4 - 7 June 2013.
12. Core components of the Peer Challenge are:
  - (a) Understanding of local context and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and has it established a clear set of priorities?
  - (b) Financial planning and viability: Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long-term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
  - (c) Political and managerial leadership: Does the council have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?
  - (d) Governance and decision-making: Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?
  - (e) Organisational capacity: Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?
13. Additional areas the Council have asked the Challenge Team to consider:
  - (a) Look at the actions already taken to deliver change and drive down costs.

- (b) Test and constructively challenge current plans and proposals.
- (c) Identify any other potential measures to manage down demand, reduce or deliver services in more cost-effective ways including through whatever delivery mechanism.

### **Peer Challenge Team**

- 14. The Council has requested that the Peer Team be led by a Chief Executive, with an understanding and appreciation of the scale of the authority and of the characteristics of the place and ideally with a clear track record of having delivered transformational change or significant budget reductions.
- 15. Darlington's Peer Team will be:
  - (a) Barbara Spicer - Chief Executive Salford City Council
  - (b) Cllr Sir Merrick Cockell - Leader Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea and Chair of the Local Government Association.
  - (c) Cllr Tudor Evans - Leader of Plymouth City Council
  - (d) Lucy Robinson the Deputy Chief Executive at Suffolk County Council
  - (e) Michael Laing - Director Community Based Services, Gateshead Council
  - (f) LGA peer challenge manager - Marcus Coulson

### **Position Statement**

- 16. The Council is required to produce a short Position Statement in advance of the Peer Challenge visit; this is attached as **Appendix 1**.
- 17. The Position Statement provides contextual information on Darlington, (our location, economy, population characteristics etc.); sets out our vision encapsulated in One Darlington: Perfectly Placed; our journey towards implementation of the Darlington 2015 Business Model and details the challenges we face, in managing increased demand on services with significantly reduced funding.
- 18. The Statement concludes that 'we are keen that the Peer Challenge team examine what we have done, are doing, and could do, to address the financial challenge and enable us to serve Darlington well. We are particularly interested in your reflections on driving down costs, on scope to grow our tax base and economy, and on the relationships the Council needs to forge to build a medium-term strategy for the Council'.

### **Peer Challenge visit**

- 19. The Peer Challenge visit will take place from Tuesday 4 to Friday 7 June.

20. During the visit the Challenge Team will meet with the Leader of the Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny Chairs and a representative group of non-executive Members; also with the Corporate Management Team; Assistant Directors and with representative focus groups of employees from all levels of the authority.
21. Key partners to be invited to meet members of the Challenge Team, include Leaders and Chief Executives from our Tees Valley partner local authorities, representatives from Darlington Partnership, the health sector, voluntary sector and from Darlington businesses.
22. The visit will conclude with a presentation on Friday 7 June feeding back the Challenge Team's findings. It is proposed that all Members are invited to attend the presentation, which is scheduled to take place in the Council Chamber at 12:30 pm.

### **Conclusions**

23. The Peer Challenge is an excellent opportunity to draw upon the experience and expertise of a team of leading local authority experts to review the Council's progress in implementing the new business model 'Darlington 2015' and to assess our approach to building a sustainable medium term strategy.