

CABINET
11 OCTOBER 2022

CORPORATE PEER REVIEW REPORT AND ACTION PLAN

**Responsible Cabinet Member -
Councillor Jonathan Dulston, Leader of the Council**

**Responsible Director -
Ian Williams – Chief Executive
(on behalf of Chief Officers Executive)**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report provides details of the Corporate Peer Review that was requested by the Council and conducted by the Local Government Association (LGA) in June 2022. A copy of the Peer Review report can be found in **Appendix 1**.
2. The purpose of this Cabinet Report is to seek approval of the action plan that has been developed in response to the recommendations made by the LGA following the Corporate Peer Review.

Summary

3. Corporate Peer Reviews are seen as good practice within the local government sector and they typically look at 5 main areas;
 - (a) Local priorities and outcomes
 - (b) Organisational and place leadership
 - (c) Governance and culture
 - (d) Financial planning and management
 - (e) Capacity for improvement.
4. The Council invited the LGA to undertake a Peer Review, and in addition to the 5 main areas it requested the team also assesses 'The Council's customer/citizen engagement and how the it interacts with them to see if there are improvements to be made within the context of resources available.'
5. A Council Leader, a Chief Executive, three further senior officers and a programme manager from other organisations formed the independent Peer Review Team and a programme was developed to assess the Council to help it develop and learn as an organisation.
6. In advance of the review the Council produced a position statement that was shared with the Peer Review Team. This self-assessment of the Council and Borough as a whole was used by the team to inform areas of analysis throughout the review.

7. In addition to an organised tour of the borough, during the review week the team interviewed over 120 people across 38 meetings. Interviewees included staff, members and a wide range of external stakeholders.
8. The Council welcomes the Corporate Peer Review report and its recommendations. The report recognises Darlington Borough Council as 'an ambitious organisation with a track record and reputation for the delivery of good quality services and exciting regeneration projects that are transforming the town'. Furthermore it notes the Council has a 'clear and powerful vision focused on driving the economic growth of the Borough' which is a strong fit with the opportunities presented by the Government's levelling up agenda.
9. The report goes on to acknowledge the Council is well led both politically and managerially. It has a proud, enthusiastic and committed workforce, with a positive culture.
10. A key objective of the Corporate Peer Review is to help the Council develop and learn. The team made six recommendations (some of which were already in progress) which are intended to help the Council meet this objective. The recommendations are;
 - (a) **R1** - Develop a strategic framework to ensure that economic growth is linked to tackling the challenges of inequality and deprivation in Darlington.
 - (b) **R2** - Undertake further work to ensure the whole of the organisation understands their role in Council priorities, including making the link between economic growth and improving opportunities for the most vulnerable in the Borough.
 - (c) **R3** - Establish a refreshed strategic partnership for Darlington which can engage all partners in the delivery of the Levelling Up Darlington Plan, including the business community and the community & voluntary sector.
 - (d) **R4** - Further lever the Council's strategic influence in the region.
 - (e) **R5** - Review the assumptions in the MTFP - particularly the reliance on reserves over the medium term - in the light of rising costs, increased demand for social care services and greater economic uncertainty.
 - (f) **R6** - Develop, with partners and local people, a compelling narrative as to how economic growth brings benefits to residents and communities.
11. In response to the key recommendations made by the Peer Review Team, the council has agreed to develop and publish an action plan. The proposed plan is contained within this report.

Recommendation

12. It is recommended that Cabinet:
 - (a) Notes and accepts the LGA Corporate Peer Review report.

- (b) Approves the action plan developed in response to the recommendations in the report.
- (c) Thanks the Peer Review team for their work conducting the review and for the production of a helpful report.

Reasons

13. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons :-

- (a) The council is required to develop an action plan in response to the LGA Corporate Peer Review report.
- (b) The council wishes to develop and learn as an organisation and the recommendations in the report will help to achieve this objective.

**Ian Williams – Chief Executive
(on behalf of Chief Officers Executive)**

Background Papers

The following background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

- (i) LGA Peer Review Position Statement
- (ii) LGA Peer Review Report
- (iii) Levelling Up Darlington Plan

S17 Crime and Disorder	The report proposes the adoption of an action plan that compliments delivery of the Council Plan and the Borough wide Levelling Up Darlington Plan. This in turn will help to address crime and disorder.
Health and Wellbeing	The report proposes the adoption of an action plan that compliments delivery of the Council Plan and the Borough wide Levelling Up Darlington Plan. This in turn will help to address health and wellbeing.
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	The report proposes the adoption of an action plan that compliments delivery of the Council Plan. This in turn will help to address carbon impact and climate change.
Diversity	The report proposes the adoption of an action plan that compliments delivery of the Council Plan and the Borough wide Levelling Up Darlington Plan. This in turn will help to address equality and diversity.
Wards Affected	The proposals in the action plan effects all wards.
Groups Affected	The proposals in the action plan effects all groups within the community.
Budget and Policy Framework	The report does not represent a change to Council's budget or policy framework.
Key Decision	The proposal does not represent a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent item.
Council Plan	This report supports the Council plan by raising awareness of the Council's priorities.
Efficiency	This report does not contain proposals but refers to ongoing initiatives to increase income and reduce costs.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no direct impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers but supports delivery of the Council Plan.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

14. In advance of the Peer Review taking place the Council committed to developing an action plan in response to recommendations made following the review. The Peer Review Team made 6 key recommendations following their review of the Council and the environment in which it operates. These are:
- (a) **R1** - Develop a strategic framework to ensure that economic growth is linked to tackling the challenges of inequality and deprivation in Darlington
 - (b) **R2** - Undertake further work to ensure the whole of the organisation understands their role in Council priorities, including making the link between economic growth and improving opportunities for the most vulnerable in the Borough
 - (c) **R3** - Establish a refreshed strategic partnership for Darlington which can engage all partners in the delivery of the Levelling Up Darlington Plan, including the business community and the community & voluntary sector
 - (d) **R4** - Further lever the Council's strategic influence in the region
 - (e) **R5** - Review the assumptions in the MTFP - particularly the reliance on reserves over the medium term - in the light of rising costs, increased demand for social care services and greater economic uncertainty
 - (f) **R6** - Develop, with partners and local people, a compelling narrative as to how economic growth brings benefits to residents and communities.
15. Detailed below are the actions proposed by the council in response to the recommendations.

Corporate Peer Review (2022) Action Plan

16. R1 - Develop a strategic framework to ensure that economic growth is linked to tackling the challenges of inequality and deprivation in Darlington.
- (a) The Council will continue to work with partners to develop and deliver the Levelling Up Darlington (LUD) Action Plan, which is due to launch in the Autumn (2022). It has 3 priority areas:
 - (i) Quality jobs
 - (ii) Access to opportunities for young people
 - (iii) Addressing health inequality.
 - (b) The LUD plan directly supports two of the key priorities within the Council Plan, these being 'Working with communities to maximise their potential' and 'Supporting the most vulnerable in the borough'. A performance framework associated with the LUD plan will be used to monitor its delivery and impact.

17. R2 - Undertake further work to ensure the whole of the organisation understands their role in Council priorities, including making the link between economic growth and improving opportunities for the most vulnerable in the Borough.

- (a) The annual service planning process requires managers to consider how activities within their service areas contribute to the delivery of the priorities within the Council Plan. This requirement will be reaffirmed in advance of the next round of service planning (Q4, 2022-23), with particular attention being given to the 'Working with communities to maximise their potential' and 'Supporting the most vulnerable in the borough' priorities. Performance against the Council plan is reported to Cabinet twice a year, presenting an opportunity to highlight to staff the impact of their collective work.
- (b) An internal communications plan will be developed before the end of the financial year. Its implementation will be rolled out over the subsequent 12 months and will aim to ensure that new staff (via the induction process) and existing staff (via various channels and established mechanisms) have a greater understanding of the Council's main priorities and how their roles help to achieve these priorities. The plan will highlight links between economic growth and improving opportunities for the most vulnerable.
- (c) New members are offered an induction programme, with additional training, briefings and support offered to all members throughout their term in office. Where appropriate, some of the materials produced in line with the internal communications plan can be reused to help members understand the Council's priorities and the roles they can play in helping to achieve them.

18. R3 - Establish a refreshed strategic partnership for Darlington which can engage all partners in the delivery of the Levelling Up Darlington Plan, including the business community and the community & voluntary sector.

- (a) Work to refresh Darlington Partnership commenced prior to the Corporate Peer Review with the creation of the Public Sector Executive Group (PSEG). This consists of senior representatives from local and sub regional public bodies who have the interest and ability to have a significant positive impact in the delivery of a shared vision (Levelling Up Darlington).
- (b) Further work is underway to strengthen engagement with *Inclusion North*, a formalised group of representatives from the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), which moving forward will meet regularly throughout the year.
- (c) A newly established overarching 'Stronger Communities Board' (SCB) will have its inaugural meeting in November (2022). Where possible, this will include board level representatives from the public, voluntary and community, and business communities. The SCB will maintain oversight of the Levelling Up Darlington Plan.

19. R4 - Further lever the Council's strategic influence in the region.

- (a) The Council will continue to build on its numerous formal and informal relationships at political and senior officer levels throughout the region in which key decisions can be influenced. Examples include roles within the Tees Valley Combined Authority, the Association of North East Councils (ANEC), and arrangements with various health related organisations and blue light services.
- (b) The Council will continue to explore opportunities at a regional level (and beyond) to strengthen the Borough's position on the world stage as a rail heritage visitor destination in line with the development of the rail heritage quarter.
- (c) The Council will establish and maintain an active role within forthcoming local NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB) to help improve the health of the local population.

20. R5 - Review the assumptions in the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) - particularly the reliance on reserves over the medium term - in the light of rising costs, increased demand for social care services and greater economic uncertainty.

- (a) The MTFP planning timetable typically runs from October to February, but intermittent reviews of the MTFP also occur when there are events that could significantly influence income or costs such as the current cost of living and inflation pressures, including increasing energy bills. The MTFP is a standing item on the weekly Chief Officers Executive and Chief Officers Board meetings, and cabinet members are regularly briefed on developments.
- (b) The current year budget is reviewed by finance officers and budget managers monthly with any issues reported through departmental management teams and chief officers as appropriate. Formal quarterly budget reports, which identify the current budget position, trends and future projections are reported to Cabinet. This allows early identification of issues which may impact on future years MTFP to be considered in advance of the annual MTFP planning cycle.
- (c) Finance staff and budget holders began reviewing and refreshing budgets for the next 4 years of the MTFP over the summer (2022) in advance of the scheduled planning activities between October and February which will involve officers at various levels across the council. The planning activities explore established and innovative approaches for income generation and cost reduction.

21. R6 - Develop, with partners and local people, a compelling narrative as to how economic growth brings benefits to residents and communities.

- (a) Work will commence in October 2022 to develop an economic growth narrative with key stakeholders and an associated action plan with performance measures will be created to ensure the message is clearly communicated to and understood by the target audiences. This narrative will also be used to support R2, 'Undertake further work to ensure the whole of the organisation understands their role in Council priorities'.

- (b) The narrative will be developed in conjunction with partners within the refreshed strategic partnership (see R3) and their endorsement and support will be sought to help amplify the narrative.

Reviewing delivery against the action plan

- 22. As agreed with the LGA prior to the review, a representative from the LGA Peer Review Team will meet with the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive approximately 6 months after the review to see how progress against the action plan is going. In advance of this and until the action plan is delivered the Chief Executive will keep the Leader of the Council apprised of progress.