

REPORT TO: Executive Board
DATE: 19 March 2020
REPORTING OFFICER: Chief Executive
PORTFOLIO: Leader
SUBJECT: Corporate Peer Challenge 2019 - Response
WARDS: Borough Wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to publish the Corporate Peer Challenge report produced by the Local Government Association for the Council and to suggest a series of actions to address the recommendations in the report.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS: That

- 1) the Corporate Peer Challenge report be received and welcomed; and**
- 2) the Action Plan attached at Appendix B be approved and adopted.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 The Council invited the Local Government Association to visit the authority and undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge towards the end of 2019, as it was some years since the Council last had one.

3.2 The Peer Team considered five key questions which form the core components of the Peer Challenge. Those five questions can be found in the Peer Report attached to this report as Appendix A. In addition, the Council asked the Team to look at three other issues:

- How progress made in the Borough can be maintained.
- How the Council acted in the Borough as an influencer and enabler of others.
- How the Council approached organisational development and how its workforce is being supported and shaped to meet future priorities.

3.3 The Peer Team (details of the make up of the Team can be seen in their final report at Appendix A) spent four days in Halton and during that time:

- Spoke to over 130 people.
- Gathered information and views at over 40 meetings.
- Collectively spent over 300 hours in determining their findings.

3.4 It is worth stressing that the Corporate Peer Challenge is not an inspection but is improvement focused and tailored to meet the Council's needs. It recognises that issues that the Council is already aware of and doing something about may well feature in the report.

3.5 Having undertaken their review the Peer Team produced a detailed report (Appendix A) for the Council to consider. As mentioned earlier, it is not an inspection report and it is therefore a matter for the Council to decide how it deals with the report and the recommendations made within it.

The Peer report outlines eleven key recommendations and at Appendix B to this report there are a series of suggested responses to each of those recommendations.

If those suggestions are accepted by the Board, then that Appendix will effectively become the Council Action Plan in response to the Peer report.

3.6 In addition to the recommendations in their report the Peer Team make many positive comments about the Council and its recent performance. A few key quotes from the report are listed below:

“Whilst in population terms the Council is small its achievements have been and continue to be significant”.

“The Council's achievements to date have happened in spite of a significantly challenging financial position”.

“The Council is held in high regard by its partners as a strong place leader for Halton”.

“In addition, positive member and officer relations over a significant period have been observed in Halton which have helped the Council focus on tasks at hand and 'protecting the most vulnerable' ”.

3.7 Perhaps, most importantly, is the following quote from the Team, as this is the one from which they have developed their recommendations:

“To sustain existing levels of performance and to achieve future priorities, it is the view of the Peer Team that the Council must now adapt the way in which it operates”.

3.8 There are two key issues that will have a significant bearing on the Council's ability and capacity to deliver over the coming months.

They are, the all-out elections in May 2020 and the outcome of the Government's "Fair Funding Review". The Fair Funding Review will provide a clearer picture of the resources that will be available to the Council over the next three to four years. The all-out elections signal the beginning of a 'new' Council and are therefore seen as the most appropriate time for the Council to review its priorities and the way it operates with both its partners and the public.

3.9 Those two key issues and their respective timings have been influential in developing the Council's Action Plan and response to the Peer Team's recommendations. It is clear that the greatest threat to the Council's ability to deliver good services and to continue the economic growth of the Borough, as recognised in the report, is the lack of funding. The outcome of the Fair Funding Review is the most significant issue facing the Council and it is therefore important that it continues to work with both the Liverpool City Region authorities and Sigoma (Special Interest Group of Metropolitan Authorities) to lobby the Government to ensure Halton's needs are recognised and reflected in any new funding arrangements.

3.10 The timings of some of the Actions in the Appendix B are therefore related to the two issues highlighted above.

3.11 The Board is asked to approve the Action Plan at Appendix B.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The development and delivery of the actions in the Action Plan may well result in the introduction of new policies for the Council and, indeed, the amendment of existing ones.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There may well be resource implications attached to the delivery of the Actions in the Plan. One of the key observations of the Peer Review Team was that the Council had a lack of corporate capacity within the organisation as a result of budget reductions and that this was being felt across the organisation. In part of its overall budget considerations the Council is being asked to set aside £500,000 to support the delivery of the Peer Review Team's recommendations.

5.2 Clear justifications for accessing that resource will have to be made before any of it is released.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

- 6.1 The delivery of the Peer Team's recommendations will have implications for the continued delivery of all of the Council's priorities.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

- 7.1 The ongoing reduction in resources will continue to place risks on the effective delivery of Council's services. Delivering priorities and the way it works is one way to ensure that the Council focuses on the most important issues. The Peer Team recognised that the overwhelming priority of the Council was to look after the most vulnerable members of the community. Reflecting and reviewing the Council's priorities will help in continuing that focus but that may well continue to have consequences for other services.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

- 8.1 There are no equality and diversity issues associated with this report. However, issues may emerge during the delivery of the actions and any equality and diversity implications will be picked up through the Council's normal arrangements.

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

- 9.1 None.