

Committee:	Cabinet	Date:	27 March 2025
Title:	Corporate Peer Challenge		
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Petrina Lees, Leader of the Council		
Report Author:	Richard Auty, Director of Corporate Services	Key decision:	No

Summary

1. This report presents the feedback report from the Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge team, following the review which took place in December 2024 and the council's response to the recommendations.

Recommendations

2. Cabinet notes the report at Appendix A and approves the actions contained in Appendix B.

Financial Implications

3. None

Background Papers

4. The following papers were referred to by the author in the preparation of this report and are available for inspection from the author of the report.

None

Impact

- 5.

Communication/Consultation	Recommendations around communications are included in the report
Community Safety	None
Equalities	None
Health and Safety	None
Human Rights/Legal Implications	None

Sustainability	None
Ward-specific impacts	None
Workforce/Workplace	Recommendations will impact positively on the workforce

Situation

6. The council welcomed a Corporate Peer Challenge team at the end of 2024, who spent three days on site speaking to dozens of members of staff, councillors and stakeholders.
7. The Corporate Peer Challenge programme is run by the LGA and is an opportunity for councils to bring in independent expert colleagues to perform a health check on how well they are performing across a range of headings including governance, partnerships, financial management and leadership.
8. Ahead of the team's visit, an extensive set of documents was submitted to provide background and context.
9. Over the course of three days, the team spoke to more than 120 members of staff, councillors and representatives from partner organisations through a series of one-on-one interviews, small group sessions and larger focus groups.
10. The peer challenge is not an inspection, and it is something that a council requests although there is an expectation from government that a council will have a Corporate Peer Challenge every five years. A Corporate Peer Challenge is an improvement and assurance tool developed by the local government sector and provides a "practitioner perspective" and critical friend challenge.
11. A peer challenge team comprises officers and councillors from other local authorities – in Uttlesford's case the team consisted of a chief executive, a deputy chief executive, a S151 officer and another director, plus an independent councillor, all supported by a Peer Challenge Manager from the LGA.
12. The feedback report following the Uttlesford Corporate Peer Challenge is attached as Appendix A. In their Executive Summary, the team notes:
13. "There is a strong sense of an Administration that has been growing further into its role during this, its second term leading the council. This is reflected in it maintaining a strong sense of ambition for Uttlesford whilst balancing that with pragmatism born out of experience around the complexity of the challenges facing the district and the organisation. Ambition around the Local Plan is high and addressing climate change and securing "genuinely affordable" housing in the district are key priorities of the Administration.

14. "The council is seen both internally and externally to be a very different organisation to that of a few years ago. Central to this is the strong drive that is being seen for improvement. This includes a clear willingness now to invite external challenge and to engage and draw in learning from others."
15. Among the findings of the team is that officers and members have put effort into drawing constructive learning from some recent high-profile errors, that the council is seen by partners to attach importance to partnership working and that there are strong relationships between Cabinet Members and senior officers, and largely good relationships between officers and members generally. Overview and Scrutiny is recognised as a constructive and enabling environment which has progressed a long way in recent years.
16. There are of course various areas where the Peer Challenge team has identified a need for improvement. While partners in the business community acknowledge the council's willingness to work collaboratively, they also said there was a need to focus more strongly on economic development, including at a regional level.
17. Within the council, greater engagement with the Senior Management Team (service managers) was highlighted along with a need for better information flow from the Corporate Management Team.
18. The council's financial position was comprehensively examined as part of the review and the need to ensure the council continues to monitor very closely both its asset portfolio was a key recommendation.
19. The council's Blueprint Uttlesford transformation programme was considered and recommendations made around savings targets, engagement and assurance.
20. In all, the Corporate Peer Challenge team made eight recommendations, which are set out in the table at Appendix B. This table comprises the action plan to address the recommendations, although Cabinet Members should note the comments in this report at paragraph 22 onwards.
21. An area raised by the team, which was not crystallised into a recommendation was that the take-up of councillor development/training opportunities was variable and there was a desire to see a wider range of councillors participating. Cabinet Members should note that the upcoming Member Development Strategy should help address this point.
22. Since the Corporate Peer Challenge took place late last year, the prospect of Local Government Reorganisation has become a reality. This represents the biggest change in the structure of local government in Essex in 50 years and fundamentally changes the way Uttlesford District Council will approach the next few years as work commences to merge with other councils to form a new unitary authority.
23. It is difficult to overstate the impact of Local Government Reorganisation on the council, which will ultimately see the council cease to exist. Therefore

many areas of work which previously were of great importance to the council, including its transformation programme Blueprint Uttlesford which features in more than one recommendation, are now being comprehensively reviewed in light of the huge resourcing requirements Local Government Reorganisation brings and the relatively short amount of time that Uttlesford District Council will continue to exist. The response to the Corporate Peer Challenge is therefore proportionate in light of these new, significant, challenges.

Risk Analysis

24.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
That the council does not make improvements following the Corporate Peer Challenge	1 – the council accepts the recommendations and will act accordingly	2 – opportunities for real improvement would be lost	An action plan has been developed to address as far as possible the recommendations in the Corporate Peer Challenge feedback report

1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.