

Report to: Cabinet



Date of Meeting 29 November 2023

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

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## Peer challenge update report

### Report summary:

To provide Cabinet with an update on the progress towards the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) and other items following the Council motion passed on the 19 July 2023.

### Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes  No

Policy Framework Yes  No

### Recommendation:

1. That Cabinet note the update and the direction of travel.

### Reason for recommendation:

To ensure that the Cabinet are up to date in relation to progress towards implementation of the Council motion of 19 July 2023.

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### Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action and Emergency Response
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- Communications and Democracy
- Economy
- Finance and Assets
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities
- Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism

**Equalities impact** Low Impact

**Climate change** Low Impact

**Risk:** Medium Risk;

### Links to background information

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- Better homes and communities for all
  - A greener East Devon
  - A resilient economy
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## Report in full

This report is intended to update Cabinet on the progress towards the motions passed by the Council on the 19<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

*1. Undertake a skills and knowledge audit of all Cabinet Members and key councillors to ensure that they are fully equipped to undertake their roles in the challenging times in which we find ourselves. This will lead to individual support for those members including specific mentoring and placement on appropriate courses and conferences.*

Member Development Working Group will meet at the end of November to consider proposals for undertaking a skills and knowledge audit of all cabinet and key councillors. MDW Group to identify questions to be used and set a timetable for reviewing the results and preparing an action plan to identifying the individual support for each member and how that support will be delivered.

*2. Work to bring together the Cabinet and Senior Management to become a unified team which, whilst respecting the different roles of officers and members, can move forward as one body in dealing with the issues faced by the council and its partners. In the first instance this would involve a facilitated Cabinet/SLT awayday and such work as may flow from that.*

Cabinet and Senior Management have taken the opportunity over the last couple of months to hold joint meetings one on the 20th September to discuss a variety of issues including the council plan, the corporate peer challenge and leadership arrangements. There have also been two joint council plan sessions held on the 6th October and the 23rd October. There are two more joint council plan sessions planned for the 20 and 27th November. All of the joint sessions so far have been well attended and have been positive and collaborative.

*3. Ask the LGA to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge in September using leading and respected officers and members from other councils to look at the core of the council and recommend ways forward with a particular emphasis on:*

*i) Reviewing the member/officer protocol.*

*ii) Reviewing the Council's communications strategy in the light of experiences gained with Covid.*

*iii) Reviewing the procedural standing orders as part of a constitutional review and make all parts of the constitution become clearer, both to the public and members, and encourage more members to participate in discussions & decisions around both the development, and the scrutiny, of those strategies.*

*iv) Reviewing all safeguarding strategies to ensure the continued protection of our vulnerable residents.*

*v) Reviewing the relationships between the District Council, the County Council and town & parish councils to ensure appropriate place-based working and the joining up of the public sector and partners to deliver cost-effective and locally relevant services.*

Preparations for the Corporate Peer Challenge ("CPC") are progressing well. A Peer Challenge officer team has been set up and tasks allocated. There is a biweekly catch up between all of the officers involved, led by members of the ELT to update on the progress of actions being taken. Work on the position statement and supporting documents that are required by the Peer

Challenge team beforehand has been assigned to officers and is moving forward and will be ready in early January 2024.

Experienced political and managerial peers with local government experience will conduct review.

There will be a team of six consisting of a lead chief executive, liberal democrat peer, conservative peer, officer with governance background, officer with community background and a peer challenge manager. Their role will be to provide challenge, insight and guidance to help us to address our priorities and enable continuous improvement moving forward.

The key areas covered by the review are:

- Local priorities and outcomes
- Organisational and place leadership
- Governance and culture
- Financial planning and management
- Capacity for improvement.

Staff and Member briefing sessions will be held in the lead up to the Peer Challenge in the week commencing 15th January 2024.

The Peer Challenge team will be on site at Blackdown House from 6th to 8th February 2024 when they will meet with councillors, officers, partners and residents. On their final day they will give verbal feedback to senior members and officers and will then prepare a report on their findings (feedback report). The Council will need to consider that report and come up with an action plan. The feedback report must be published on our website within 3 months, together with our action plan in response.

Around ten months after the CPC, the LGA will organise a visit to review our progress against the action plan.

*4. Ask the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to conduct, as soon as is practicable, a review of the scrutiny processes to ensure that:*

*i) The Cabinet and Officers continue to cooperate in the preparation of strategies to ensure that the undoubted professionalism of our staff is supported by the undoubted skills and knowledge of all local councillors from across the political spectrum in the development of those strategies from the outset.*

*ii) A suite of performance indicators are put in place to ensure that service delivery can be scrutinised by both Councillors and the public and to ensure that modifications can be made to service delivery by a due process of review.*

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny have been engaged and have conducted interviews with councillors and officers, this includes a survey seeking views on the current overview and scrutiny process at East Devon District Council. The officer leading the review also attended the Overview Committee meeting on 9th November 2023. Once the review has been completed (end of November 2023) the CGfS will present its recommendations that will help to shape performance indicators and how overview and scrutiny can monitor and review service delivery in the future.

*5. Ask SW Employers to undertake a review of the training and support needs of the SLT and the methodologies by which the SLT functions as a coherent team.*

The Motion proposed that this be undertaken by South West Councils (SWC) but the Corporate Lead - HR has been exploring this with SWC and the Local Government Association (LGA).

The proposed purpose of the work is to identify the development needs of SLT as a group and individually and then use this to inform a costed development plan. Although this action focuses on SLT, it is proposed that it links with the separate action to 'undertake a skills and knowledge audit of all Cabinet Members and key councillors', thus providing a means of considering collective

member/officer leadership requirements and development needs and continuing to build positive working relations between SLT and Cabinet. This is also the advice of the LGA, who have suggested some means of achieving this, which is reflected in the proposal below.

It is proposed that the work has four stages:

1. Clarity about the competencies required of senior leaders (individually and as a team) within the Council – i.e. the benchmark. It is proposed that this will be informed by the new Chief Executive Development Framework recently published by the LGA and Solace.
2. Identification of any development gaps for each individual and the whole senior leadership team, assessed against the benchmark.
3. Clear and costed development plan in place for each individual and the whole senior leadership team.
4. Evaluation of impact of the development plan, on individual, team and organisational performance.

It is proposed that this work commences with facilitated preparatory/exploratory workshop sessions, one with Cabinet and one with SLT, in January 2024, in advance of the Peer Challenge, and then a further joint Cabinet/SLT workshop post the Peer Challenge. The purpose of the first two workshops would be for Cabinet and SLT to have time to reflect on where we are now, to set out priorities for the next 6-8 months, agree the key messages and challenges we want to share with the Peer Challenge team, and to start to explore what good collective leadership looks like in this context. Each group will undertake the exercises over a day or part day from the perspective of their roles within the Council and an output from each session will be produced. If participants agree, it would be helpful to share the outputs across both groups post the workshop, so that officers and members have a collective view.

Following the first workshops, a further Cabinet/SLT workshop will be planned for after the Peer Challenge to consider the impact of the feedback from the challenge, to revise or update priorities and plans and to consider the implications of the feedback on the leadership development needs of individuals and the whole senior leadership team.

We recommend that all three workshops have external facilitation and input to allow all SLT members to participate fully as a member of the team and the LGA have offered to assist with identifying a suitable facilitator.

The insight and intelligence gained from the three workshops will be used to shape the future officer development programme to ensure it fully aligns with the needs of the Council, from which a costed development plan would be brought to Cabinet in June 2024, which also allows for SLT individual development needs to be considered as part of the annual Performance Excellence Review (appraisal) cycle in April/May 2024.

The 2023/24 HR Service Plan includes a planned review of the Council's wider leadership and management development offer. It is proposed that this is delayed, enabling resources to initially be focused on senior leaders, and the learning from this work is then used to inform that wider piece of work from late 2024 onwards.

*6. Ask the Council's S151 Officer, in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, to prepare a report outlining the likely costs to the Council of these recommendations and to ascertain any risks associated with them, both financially and reputationally.*

This action is complete and the Cabinet agreed to allocate a sum of £25K from the transformation budget for implementation of the motion on 6th September 2023.

The Leader of Council received a letter from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on 13 November 2023 acknowledging the progress that is being made by the Council. A copy of that letter is attached at Appendix A to this report.

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**Financial implications:**

There are no substantive financial issues to be added to this report

**Legal implications:**

There are no substantive legal issues to be added to this report