

Independent Evaluation of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Programme: responding to the recommendations

Purpose

For information and discussion.

Summary

The Centre for Local & Regional Government Research at Cardiff University has recently completed an evaluation of the Corporate Peer Challenge programme. This report sets out the recommendations made by the Centre for Local & Regional Government Research (**Appendix A**) and provides an initial response to each of them (**Appendix B**), for members' consideration.

Recommendations

Members of the Improvement and Innovation Board are asked to:

1. Note the key findings of the evaluation report (**Appendix A**).
2. Consider the recommendations from the evaluation, including the initial response proposed, as set out in paragraph 7 and **Appendix B**.

Action

As agreed by members.

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Background

1. Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a core element of the LGA's support to sector-led improvement launched in 2011. Feedback is regularly and routinely collated from councils who have had a peer challenge. External challenge and independent assessment is sought on a regular basis to ensure the offer remains fit for purpose and continues to be an effective tool to support improvement in councils.
2. The Centre for Local & Regional Government Research at Cardiff University has recently completed their evaluation of the Corporate Peer Challenge programme. The purpose of the evaluation was to provide an independent assessment of the effectiveness, impact, and value for money of the CPC programme. Dr James Downe attended the Board meeting on 24th January 2017 to present the interim findings.
3. The evaluation tells us that CPC remains a highly effective tool at the heart of the Sector-Led Improvement programme, has a positive impact for participating councils and the sector as a whole, and provides value for money. The research carried out shows that:
 - 3.1. CPCs are commissioned for a variety of reasons. The ability for councils to choose the timing of their CPC continues to be an important feature, as is the focus on the five core components of priority setting, leadership, governance, finance and capacity. The quality of peer teams, and the role of the LGA and its peer challenge managers in managing and delivering the CPC programme, are recognised as important factors.
 - 3.2. There are clear examples of CPCs providing positive impacts for councils. These tend to occur in five main areas, all of which are of significance to ensuring councils are best placed to meet the challenges they face - including: providing reassurance, improving external reputation, prompting behaviour change, informing organisational change and supporting service transformation and financial sustainability.
 - 3.3. The CPC is a good example of the sector helping itself by providing improvement support at a lower cost than is available through external consultancy. While there are costs to the LGA in managing CPCs and officer time is needed by councils receiving CPCs, there are a range of benefits that offer a return on the cost and investment, including peer learning and sharing of practice. CPCs can also be a catalyst for a range of support that can help prevent failure and the costs of intervention.
4. The evaluation findings are summarised in 'Rising to the Challenge - An Independent Evaluation of the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge Programme – Executive Summary' which is attached at Appendix 1.

Issues for consideration

5. The evaluation stresses the importance of the CPC continuing to evolve, and identifies areas for further improvement and development. It suggests the LGA needs to:
 - 5.1. Market and promote CPC more pro-actively by using 'impact stories' from those who have had a CPC to show how the process helps councils to improve and to encourage more councils to have one.
 - 5.2. Ensure more rigorous preparation of CPC teams and consider ways to make sure the CPC process is consistent – including earlier provision of background information and standardisation of questions.
 - 5.3. Continue to plan-ahead to ensure that CPC is future-proofed and can take account of new forms of collaboration such as shared services and management, commercialisation and devolution.
 - 5.4. Put a greater emphasis on sharing learning on 'good practice' both within the CPC process and across the whole sector.
 - 5.5. Do more to emphasise the importance of activities that follow a CPC, and show the value of the whole sector-led improvement system.

6. The Centre for Local & Regional Government Research make a number of recommendations to address these. Appendix 2 provides the full list of recommendations and sets out an initial response to each of them for members' consideration.

7. Many of the recommendations helpfully reinforce work that is already planned or in progress. Some of the recommendations require further consideration and will benefit from members' consideration. The views of the Board are sought on the following recommendations and proposed responses:

Recommendation	Comments and proposed response
7.1. Consider offering CPC's to councils where the bespoke element focuses solely on one of the core components (for example the leadership of place)	7.2. Given the inter-dependencies of the five core components and their importance in terms of council performance and improvement, all need to be considered as part of a CPC. The current CPC offer allows councils to focus on certain aspects of the core components so that the emphasis is proportionate to requirements and context. We have a Finance Peer Review and other peer challenge offers which can be tailored.
7.3. Not allow any council to select a lead peer that it has had previous significant dealings with	7.4. Peer teams are assembled in response to the scope/focus of the CPC agreed with the council. As part of the set up/scoping meeting there is a discussion about the peer team required. Sometimes this involves identifying specific chief executives and leaders that might

	<p>potentially be approached. This is intended to ensure peer teams are seen as credible by the council, which is an important consideration given the improvement focus of the CPC process. Obviously for second CPCs and follow up visits it is often helpful to have some of the original peer team.</p> <p>7.5. Those involved in set up/scoping meetings will be asked to ensure this is considered and any concerns registered.</p>
7.6. Widen and refresh the pool of member peers	7.7. Whilst there has been recruitment of new member peers over the past couple of years, this will be considered further with LGA Political Group Offices.
7.8. Make it a requirement that all member peers who are council leaders or cabinet members have a CPC in their own council	<p>7.9. Political Group Offices have been asked to consider this when sourcing member peers for CPCs.</p> <p>7.10. This may not be practicable to implement in reality (e.g. in instances where member peers are part of a coalition administration). It is also likely to adversely impact on the existing peer capacity we have to draw on for other peer challenges (where specific portfolio experience is required).</p>
7.11. Provide training for all member peers	<p>7.12. Training is currently offered to all new member peers. In addition all peers receive a briefing and guidance from the Peer Challenge Manager before any CPC they are deployed to.</p> <p>7.13. More peer training sessions to be arranged, in liaison with Political Group Offices, to ensure that existing and experienced member peers are offered refresher training.</p>
7.14. Consider publishing a list of councils that have not yet engaged with CPC nor appear to have used other similar processes, so that the sector can see the extent of non-engagement with sector-led improvement	<p>7.15. Views of members on this recommendation are required as it may have impact for LGA membership.</p> <p>7.16. CPC take-up is currently monitored and there is a narrative/intelligence on all councils that have not yet had a CPC and the reasons/rationale behind that. CPC is one part of the wider SLI offer, so including take-up of other parts of the offer would need to be considered.</p>
7.17. Discuss with member peers the reasons why some have not had a CPC in their own authority	7.18. We know from our monitoring of take-up and demand that there are a number of different reasons why some councils have not yet committed to a CPC.

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	7.19. Members views are sought on whether as part of the future recruitment of new peers there should be a requirement of having had a CPC in their council
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Implications for Wales

- 8. The Corporate Peer Challenge programme applies to councils in England only. The WLGA does not commission us to work on wider improvement issues, including peer challenge.

Financial Implications

- 9. No financial implications arising directly from this report. However, some actions considered and agreed in response to recommendations may potentially have an impact on the CPC budget and costs.

Next steps

- 10. Actions agreed in response to the recommendations will be progressed accordingly.
- 11. A copy of the full evaluation report ('Rising to the Challenge') will be made available on the LGA website.