

15 July 2014

## **Peer learning: the benefits of being a peer as part of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Programme**

### **Purpose**

For information.

### **Summary**

This report summarises common themes and learning emerging from the experiences of officers, councillors and others who have participated as peers in the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Programme.

At the Board meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2014, members considered a report on the Corporate Peer Challenge Programme. Members acknowledged the importance of continuing to promote the advantages for peers of taking part in Corporate Peer Challenges and requested a report summarising key learning from peers.

### **Recommendation**

Members are asked to note the report.

### **Action**

Members are asked to promote the benefits of participating as a peer within their own councils, networks and other forums they are involved in.

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## **Peer learning: the benefits of being a peer as part of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Programme**

### **Background**

1. Corporate Peer Challenges are delivered by teams of local government officers and councillors. Working as a team led by a serving chief executive and supported by an LGA peer challenge manager, peers spend time onsite at a council to help with its improvement and learning. Peer teams are put together by the LGA and their make-up reflects the focus of the peer challenge. Peers are selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise, and agreed with the council receiving the peer challenge.
2. The current LGA Peer Challenge programme has been in place since June 2011. Since then, over two thirds of the sector has participated in it by receiving a peer challenge or providing peers. The Corporate Peer Challenge programme alone has seen over 130 councils receiving a peer challenge (as of March 2014), enabling more than 2,500 days of peer support and challenge to be provided to councils. If other peer challenge programmes were included, the figure more than doubles. It is anticipated that a further 50 Corporate Peer Challenges will be delivered during 2014/15.
3. The recent independent external evaluation of the Corporate Peer Challenge programme ('Supporting Councils to Succeed', January 2014) by Cardiff Business School concluded that peer challenge has a positive impact for the council receiving it. We know that peer challenges help facilitate better councillor-officer relationships, and bring about improvements in medium term financial planning, partnership working, performance management and engagement with communities.
4. But the benefits stretch beyond that which the receiving council derives. Essentially for every council that commissions and receives a peer challenge, four or five other councils, organisations or individuals benefit directly too.
5. The evaluation report makes the point that the sustained success of the Corporate Peer Challenge programme relies upon the participation of high-quality peers. It stresses the importance of councils continuing to understand the benefits of releasing their senior officers and councillors to participate in peer challenges.
6. A series of insights from officers, councillors and others who have participated as peers have been collated to help demonstrate those benefits. They will be published on the LGA website and form a publication that can be used to promote being a peer. The experiences of peers suggest that benefits are wide, varied and sometimes personal. But there are some clear themes that emerge from many of the experiences shared. We know that councils who have experienced an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge are strong advocates for it. Similarly, officers, councillors and others who participate as

peers positively and enthusiastically promote the peer role. Most who have been a peer are keen to repeat the experience.

### **Peer Insights: common themes**

7. Officers, councillors and others who have participated in the programme consistently cite the following benefits of being a peer.

#### *A means by which to share learning and practice across the sector*

8. Being a peer is about giving and receiving. Officers and councillors are motivated to participate in a peer challenge by the opportunity to gain ideas and good practice and make comparisons with their own authority. Sharing knowledge and learning is a key feature of the engagement that occurs during the peer challenge process. Peers provide challenge and reassurance and in doing so draw on practice from their own organisations, helping to challenge poor practice and raise performance standards across the sector. They almost always take something 'back to the ranch' too.
9. Often the peer challenge is a catalyst for continued informal relationships, networks and sharing of knowledge and learning. Mutual learning not only occurs between council and peers, but amongst and across the peer team too. Peers learn about practice in the council they are visiting, but can also benefit from the learning they gain from the other councils and organisations represented on the peer team. There is clearly considerable added value generated by the learning, which peers take back to their own authorities.

#### *Building the capacity of the sector, now and for the future*

10. Being a peer offers an unrivalled personal learning and development experience, even for the most accomplished professionals and long-serving members. Many describe it as a form of 'action learning'. For some, peer work is a way for strategic leaders to hone the new and much more complex skills set needed for the local government of tomorrow.
11. The Programme is also helping to support the professional and personal development for the leaders of tomorrow. National Management Trainees from the National Graduate Development Programme (ngdp) are offered opportunities to join a peer team, which provides a robust induction to local government and unparalleled access to senior figures in the sector.
12. Acquaintances made and relationships formed through peer challenges help join practitioners up across the sector, encourage collaboration and make a contribution to the sector becoming more joined up and resilient.

*Providing value for money*

13. Councils have, as of March 2014, contributed more than 2,500 days of senior councillor and officer time to Corporate Peer Challenge teams. This represents a considerable investment by the sector in its own improvement, which is equivalent to millions of pounds worth of consultancy. Peers offer the current practitioner experience and political awareness and understanding that consultants cannot, and in that sense are often more relevant and cost the sector significantly less.
14. At the heart of the peer challenge process are officers, councillors and others who voluntarily spend their time as 'peers' onsite at a council they have no direct association with, to contribute to its improvement and learning. It is an incredibly powerful demonstration of 'sector-led' improvement. Participating in peer challenges demonstrates the realism of officers and councillors recognising a wider responsibility to the sector and its reputation and improvement, and being willing to volunteer time to contribute to this. It is clear that for a relatively small investment of time, the benefits to individuals, authorities and the sector are huge.
15. Senior executives from organisations from outside of the sector are also giving their time in return for benefits and learning. Fujitsu, Serco, British Telecom and BDO (an international firm of accountants and business advisers) for example have all provided peers to the programme. Peer teams have also benefitted from civil service, academic and voluntary sector input. In fact, nearly one in five of the Corporate Peer Challenges delivered to date have involved peers from beyond local government. Whilst peer challenge needs to remain sector-led, additional expertise and experience from other sectors is something many councils value as part of their peer challenge. As such, one of the key challenges moving forward is to increase the supply of non-local government peers, particularly from the private sector.

**Peer recruitment**

16. Peer teams are put together in response to a council's requirements and the agreed scope and focus of their peer challenge. The independent evaluation report concluded that, to date, we have fielded high-quality peer teams that have possessed the necessary expertise to undertake peer challenges effectively. To sustain this, we need councils to continue to make senior officers available to participate as peers. We need a diverse range of people we can call on as peers, and a peer pool that is regularly refreshed.
17. To achieve this, we continue to provide regular peer briefing events, aimed at officers interested in being a peer. We also continue to work through partner organisations and networks such as Whitehall Industry Group and the LEP Network to identify peers from beyond local government. LGA Principal Advisers also promote being a peer with the councils and networks they engage with.

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18. Peer challenges themselves are a great mechanism for recruiting new peers, both through officers from the host council becoming interested as a result of their engagement in the process, but also through peers themselves recommending colleagues after they have experienced the process.
19. We continue to welcome expressions of interest from chief executives, and from directors or senior officers with roles and experience involving transformation and service re-design; economic development and growth; commissioning and contracting; governance; and finance.

#### **Next steps**

20. Members are asked to:
  - 20.1. Note the report.
  - 20.2. Promote the benefits of being a peer within their own councils, networks and other forums they are involved in.

#### **Financial Implications**

21. None.