

Peer Support Review Update

Purpose of Report

For information.

Is this report confidential? No

Summary

This paper provides an update against the actions agreed arising from the peer support review, carried out last year and supported by discussions involving national lead member peers and the Heads of Political Group Offices.

The action plan (Appendix 7A) has been updated with progress marked against each action.

LGA Plan Theme: Support for councillors

Recommendation

That the Board note progress in implementing actions arising from the peer support review.

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Peer Support Review Update

Background

1. The Board received a report at its October 2022 meeting which outlined the findings of a review of the LGA's use of peers in its improvement support offers. The review found that member and officer peers make a vital contribution to these offers and are, on the whole, highly regarded. The report highlighted recommendations arising from the review which related to:
 - Recruitment of Member peers;
 - Member Peer Mentoring;
 - Feedback on the quality of support provided by Member peers;
 - Particular challenges experienced by the Independent Group;
 - Member Peer Training and Development;
 - National and regional lead member peers;
 - Diversity of Member peers;
 - Member Peer profiles.
2. In February and May 2023, the Board received a further update and were provided a full action plan for comment. These comments have been worked into the action plan which has been updated. A full breakdown of the actions with updates against each can be found in **Appendix 7A**.

Progress Update – Highlights

3. The following section highlights the progress achieved since the last Board update in May. The section is separated based on the 5 themes of the agreed action plan and progress continues to be made across each of the themes. For several actions the agreed timescale has been extended from May to September as the regional teams and PGO's have had to prioritise work on change of control activity which was significantly greater than envisaged initially.

Recruitment and retention of an appropriately experienced, skilled and diverse cohort of peers

4. The LGA has continued to promote the excellent experience and opportunities being a peer presents. At LGA conference, a session was carried out in the Innovation Zone, supported by Cllr Abi Brown, Chair of the Improvement and Innovation Board and Peter Fleming, chair of the Innovation Zone Member

Working Group. The session highlighted the excellent achievements of our peers in the last year and the unique experiences being a peer enables. In addition, all speakers on the IZ received information on the peer experience to further promote the opportunity.

5. Following the finalisation of negotiations for the 2023/2024 sector support programme and the outcome of the May elections, the local government landscape has shifted leading to changes in the demands for peers including the backgrounds of peers required. The LGA will continue to sign up peers proactively but is confident in its ability to deliver Corporate Peer Challenges, Finance Peer Challenges and Governance Peer Challenges. An example of wider work achieved to enable this work is the 30+ new officer peers recruited who are Monitoring Officers, Heads of Legal or Heads of Democratic Services to enable governance support.
6. With the initial review of the peer pool completed, per the annual report shared at the last board. The LGA will continue to work with the IIB's Lead Members, Political Group Offices and our member councils to increase the diversity of the peer pool and the proportion of peers sharing equalities information. Our work to ensure peer profiles are more up to date (including equalities information where peers are willing to share this) will support this.

Mentoring

7. The LGA has continued to progress improvement actions related to mentoring. The first mentoring training session took place in May 2023. The training was delivered by the existing provider and attended by 20 peers. Further training dates are scheduled in September 2023, December 2023, March 2023 and June 2024 delivered both online and in-person.
8. A refreshed mentoring handbook has been out to tender with the aim of publishing in Autumn 2023. The handbook will go alongside the refreshed training outlined as above and will provide clear guidance to mentors on best values and approaches to maximise the positive impact of mentorships arranged.

Member Peer Training

9. The LGA is in the process of scheduling a series of member training sessions which will look to cover:
 - continued delivery of refreshed remote peer briefings,
 - a new programme of regionally delivered training,
 - a new programme of national member training.

10. Training will include a focus on the delivery of corporate peer challenges. Political Group Offices have been contacted to progress the member training with all 4 groups agreeing to mixed sessions, these are being scheduled with proposed dates in September 2023, November 2023, January 2024 and March 2024.
11. The LGA has progressed actions on Member Peer Training to increase the development opportunities available to peers and enhance aspects of the current offer. In previous meetings, it was agreed by both Lead Members and the Improvement and Innovation Board that unless special circumstances were in place, all member peers would be expected to have attended or booked onto relevant peer training and to have attended a member peer conference at least once in the last 3 three years.
12. In the previous meeting, it was flagged peer training attendance capacity would need to increase to enable the above or risk delivery of valuable improvement support and peer activity. Allocations have not yet been provided for the relevant member training sessions set out above. However, the LGA is committed to ensuring allocations are proportionate to avoid this risk and ensure all are able to attend peer training on a timely basis. We will also review proposed capacity to ensure it is sufficient.
13. In the last meeting it was noted the LGA has agreed to pilot a peer challenge shadowing process for member peers on a non-payment basis. This has been agreed by all four Political Group Offices with a draft protocol produced.

Quality Assurance

14. Internally, the LGA has continued to introduce and enhance internal processes and systems to inform the usage of peers. Peer Challenge Manager (PCM) meetings have continued focussed on the delivery of this year's sector support programme targets and our messaging to councils on peer challenges as a whole. Lead Principal Advisers have been identified to work with each Political Group Office and will support the joining up of work including actions within this peer support review. They will be developing with the PGO's a protocol to clarify respective roles and responsibilities.
15. Following agreement of the 2023/24 sector support programme, work is underway looking at the prospect of more formal peer appraisal, as well as examining the pros and cons of strengthening peer accreditation.

Management and Administration

16. The proposed technical solution to prompt member peers to update their own peer profiles online continues to be progressed with the aim of being operational

by September 2023. Political Group Offices will be asked to approve the approach prior to implementation.

17. Peer profiles are an essential tool to match peers with improvement support opportunities. Additionally, updated peer profiles will ensure the LGA has richer information on our peers including their skills and backgrounds. As the LGA gets richer information it will be able to better identify gaps in the peer pool to take active measures to address them.

Implications for Wales

18. Improvement support is provided directly to Welsh councils by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA). On occasion, the LGA has responded to requests from Welsh councils to provide peer reviews to Welsh councils on a paid for basis, and there are some Welsh members in the LGA's peer pool. The improvements resulting from recommendations in the Peer Support Review will benefit those member peers and Welsh councils who receive peer support albeit on a paid for basis.

Financial Implications

19. Peer support activity is funded through the Sector Support Programme grant received from DLUHC.
20. Prioritisation of activities within the peer support review action plan will ensure that work is carried out within existing resources.

Equalities implications

21. The Peer Support Review explicitly considered equality, diversity and inclusion issues in respect of the LGA's peer support offer. Recommendations to increase the equalities data available on LGA peers (where they wish to share that information) will support the LGA to meet the needs of councils seeking peers to match the diversity of their own councillor cohort and populations, and to ensure that member peers with protected characteristics are not negatively impacted by processes for their selection for assignments and associated support.

Next steps

22. Lead Members and the Improvement and Innovation Board will continue to oversee progress against priority actions, informed by capacity and financial implications. A further update on progress will be brought to the next board.