


<b>CABINET</b>	 <b>TOWER HAMLETS</b>
9 February 2022	
<b>Report of:</b> Sharon Godman, Director, Strategy, Improvement and Transformation	<b>Classification:</b> Unrestricted
<b>LGA Corporate Peer Challenge revisit</b>	

<b>Lead Member</b>	<b>Mayor John Biggs</b>
<b>Originating Officer(s)</b>	Daniel Kerr, Strategy and Policy Manager (Corporate)
<b>Wards affected</b>	All
<b>Key Decision?</b>	No
<b>Reason for Key Decision</b>	N/A
<b>Forward Plan Notice Published</b>	1 June 2021
<b>Strategic Plan Priority / Outcome</b>	All themes of the Tower Hamlets Plan

### **Executive Summary**

An LGA peer team revisited the council in September 2021 and considered progress made since the 2018 LGA Corporate Peer Challenge. Their feedback report acknowledges the council continues to make good progress on its improvement journey, notes the plans in place to address issues raised during the revisit and makes six key recommendations to shape our future direction. The purpose of this report is to acknowledge the LGA findings and provide a high-level overview of actions that support our future ambitions.

### **Recommendations:**

Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Note the LGA Peer Review revisit report and recommendations as set out in Appendix 2;
2. Comment on the council's high-level response to the recommendations.

## **1 REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS**

- 1.1 An LGA peer team revisited the council in September 2021, looking at progress made since the 2018 LGA Corporate Peer Challenge. To get the most from this opportunity we need to ensure the recommendations from

the peer team are considered and used to shape the future direction of the council's priorities.

## **2 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 2.1 The council could ignore the feedback from the LGA peer team visit however this is not recommended. The council has made considerable progress across all services since the Secretary of State's Directions were revoked and the commissioners left. External challenge provides the confidence that our progress is embedded, and the council's improvement journey is continuing in the right direction, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **3 DETAILS OF THE REPORT**

### **Background**

- 3.1 The context and background to the September 2021 LGA peer team visit was outlined in a briefing paper to CLT on 22 June and MAB on 14 July 2021. It highlighted the peer team were revisiting the council following a full Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in June 2018.
- 3.2 The council is committed to continuous improvement and this CPC revisit comes at a time when we are rebuilding from the COVID-19 pandemic and moving towards recovery. It is an opportune moment to ensure our improvement journey remains on track and feedback from the visit informs our future priorities.
- 3.3 Drawing on their knowledge from the previous CPC, the peer team met with Members, officers, partners, and residents and reviewed a range of documents and information to consider progress made since 2018. They also set out to identify key recommendations that could help shape future priorities for the council.

### **CPC Revisit Report**

- 3.4 The peer team shared their final findings report in October 2021 (Appendix 2).
- 3.5 This report acknowledges that the council continues to make good progress on its improvement journey. It highlights the Mayor's understanding of community needs and that, alongside Cabinet Members, he provides a stable and community focused political leadership. It also acknowledges good member-officer relationships, as well as our strong and cohesive Senior Leadership Team.
- 3.6 The peer review team found our partners are strongly committed to the ambitions of the borough. The findings recognise how partnership working came to the fore during the pandemic and this continues to strengthen for the benefit of residents.

- 3.7 The council's response to the pandemic was praised by the peer review team along with the progress made to improve services for our communities and how we continually strive to improve the lives of residents in as many ways as is possible.
- 3.8 The findings report also acknowledges several areas of priorities highlighted by stakeholders as important. Taking forward the recommendations of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and the Poverty Commissions was highlighted along with community safety, with a focus on dealing with gangs, knife crime, domestic violence, and the safeguarding of children. They also suggested job opportunities for young people and access to good quality employment at all levels, and the promotion of good employment practices to go with them.
- 3.9 The report sets out the need for the council to continue work to reduce health inequalities such as diabetes, child obesity and mental health and that climate change and pollution needs serious attention due to the rising levels of asthma. They highlighted the benefits of local traffic calming schemes and stated for some there is a perceived lack of youth provision and accommodation. The peer team acknowledged existing plans in place to address these issues.
- 3.10 The report highlights the following six key recommendations to shape the future priorities of the council.

### **Response to the recommendations**

#### **Recommendation 1 - A clear understanding of the Mayor's priorities for all and a continued focus on delivery within clear timescales.**

- 3.11 The Mayor's priorities were clearly outlined in his 2018 manifesto which were translated into the council's strategic planning process. From the strategic plan to directorate plans, down to team plans, these priorities are integrated into service delivery. As activities have been achieved and other issues emerged, for example responding to the pandemic through to moving into recovery, so too the council's Strategic Plan has evolved.
- 3.12 Ahead of the 2022 Mayoral and council elections, preparations are already underway to grasp the opportunity to create a strong transformational long-term vision from the start that translates a new administration's priorities into action. The approach to the strategic plan process is being revised and strengthened to provide greater focus on delivery and a better understanding of the longer-term vision and ambition beyond electoral cycles. We will be strengthening the golden thread from the strategic plan through to individual plans as well as updating our performance and accountability framework. Also, the Mayor will facilitate discussions at our strategic partnership to refresh the Tower Hamlets Plans ensuring leadership of shared focus on priorities that improve the lives of our residents.

**Recommendation 2 - It is imperative to continue the work currently underway to close previous years' accounts as a matter of urgency, and to have procedures in place to prevent a recurrence of the late or delayed sign off.**

- 3.13 The 2016/17 and 2017/18 accounts were audited by KPMG with unqualified audit opinions, but certificates completing the audit were not issued by KPMG. Due to errors identified in subsequent years the council has had to restate the primary accounting statements for those years to obtain KPMG certification. Most of the work has been completed for this restatement and KPMG are currently reviewing the submissions from the council, working toward issuing certificates in the first quarter of 2022.
- 3.14 The 2018/19 and 2019/20 accounts have been significantly restated following external audit review by Deloitte and the amended draft accounts were published on the council's website in October 2021. The auditors presented their final ISA260 reports for those two years to audit committee in January 2022. There are a small number of outstanding queries from Deloitte that are still being resolved and the auditors will sign their audit opinion on the accounts once certificates are received from KPMG for the prior years.
- 3.15 The 2020/21 accounts, delayed due to work on previous years accounts taking priority, are ready in draft and have been shared with Deloitte in January 2022. Deloitte have advised that they will audit the Statements between January – April 2022.
- 3.16 Therefore, by the end of the financial year all prior year accounts should have been audited and published, with most of the audit field work complete for 2020/21 accounts.
- 3.17 Following an independent review by Worth Technical Accounting Solutions Ltd in August 2020 a Finance Improvement Plan was setup to prevent a recurrence of issues faced with the statement of accounts. A number of work streams have been established and progressed including a review of how the Council's financial system is utilised, a review of recharges and journals across the council, ensuring key reconciliations are in place and reviewing asset valuations and pensions. CIPFA have supported a series of training sessions for Budget Managers between November 2021 and January 2022, with training provided to Finance staff in January 2022. The work of the Finance Improvement Plan has been overseen by the Finance Improvement Board and progress against the plan has been reported regularly to the council's Audit Committee.

**Recommendation 3 - Continue to improve and embed the council's governance, including decision-making and scrutiny arrangements, the TOWER values and compliance with the Constitution.**

- 3.18 The council has an improvement programme in place, this was highlighted to MAB on 14 July, and details can be found at appendix 1.

3.19 Alongside this work, there are a range of actions that will take the improvement journey forward in the areas highlighted by the peer team, including:

#### **Standards**

- Successfully introduce (and provide training for) the new Member Code of Conduct based on the new LGA Model Code of Conduct
- Undertake review of the Member / Officer (And Member / Member) Relations Protocol

#### **Decision Making processes**

- Continue to review the Constitution to eliminate unnecessary restrictions and inefficiencies in the council's decision-making processes and ensure executive arrangements, around the transparency and delegations, are fully set out and understood
- Develop new intranet pages to guide officers through report writing and decision-making processes and to link to the more detailed training/videos and documentation available.

#### **Governance Improvement Plan**

- Continue delivery against the Governance Improvement Plan

#### **New administration 2022**

- Develop an Induction Plan that provides a full programme of seminars and training sessions for new and returning Members.

#### **Support to Members**

- Review the support provided to Members who are appointed to Outside Bodies.

#### **Scrutiny**

- Review the scrutiny structure and process to ensure it adds value to the decision-making process in the new administration

#### **TOWER values**

- Tower Rewards will become integral to the work being undertaken across the council to design and embed the future proof governance and decision-making frameworks.

### **Recommendation 4 - Continue to strengthen the senior leadership team by completing the current recruitment programme.**

3.20 Our programme of Senior Recruitment continues with offers / appointments made in 2021 for the following:

- Director of Workforce, OD, and Business Support
- Director of Supporting Families,
- Director of Adult Social Care
- Director of Finance
- Director of Customer Services
- Director of Education

3.21 The recruitment to the permanent Corporate Director of Resources and Governance will commence in May 2022. On-going cover with the current interim director has been agreed until October 2022.

**Recommendation 5 - Accelerate the delivery of your communication strategy and face-to-face contact with residents and businesses.**

- 3.22 Initially the pandemic meant we scaled back or even stopped most of our face-to-face contacts with residents and businesses. However, as restrictions have changed and we've learnt to deliver services in a different way, many of these contacts have been reintroduced. Working with government restrictions we have used measures such as social distancing and face coverings to phase back most services. For example, our Ideas Stores and libraries, Adults Services, Children's Centres and Leisure Centres are now open again, resuming vital services for our communities.
- 3.23 We have also reintroduced face to face consultation and engagement and phased back community events such as the recent Tower Hamlets remembers events.
- 3.24 The need for greater face to face engagement by officers in our communities has been an issue discussed by MAB and CLT in our June 2021 away day and can be linked to falling rates of residents feelings of trust, involvement and being informed. COVID-19 and associated issues such as home working has hampered this area, however since the end of restrictions we have been getting out in the borough more and this now needs to be accelerated as the Peer Review recommends.
- 3.25 As a result, we have used internal communications channels to update staff on the Peer Review findings; we have discussed the findings with all directors at SLT to in turn raise with their services; and it was the central theme of our Managers Conference on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2021.
- 3.26 Prior to the latest government COVID-19 restrictions introduced in December due to the Omicron variant, it was planned that from the 3 January, staff were expected to come into the office a minimum of one day a week. This would then increase to two days a week following a review in January. We are now following government guidelines and will continue with our return-to-work plans as soon as the current restrictions are lifted. We need to make sure that, when those staff come in, they get out in the borough to visit their services and talk to the residents and businesses using them, rather than come in the office to just take part in Teams meetings which they could do at home.
- 3.27 Our Communications Strategy will be refreshed next year to align with our new strategic plan.

**Recommendation 6 - Speed up the return to a new normal working and further take forward your work on recovery ensuring pace and delivery.**

- 3.28 The council's return to work processes have closely followed government guidance, and throughout the pandemic, have adapted to integrate the latest updates.
- 3.29 As outlined above, we are closely following government guidance and will continue with our plans for staff to return to the office when it is safe and

permissible for them to do so. This will allow officers to return to the office for a minimum of 1-2 days per week, strengthening collaborative working and kick starting our new normal. All proposals will be subject to change depending on the government advice at that time.

- 3.30 As we move from responding to recovering from the pandemic these refreshed and revised priorities are being embedded as business as usual. This will be strengthened as we review and develop the new Strategic Plan, and Tower Hamlets Plan over the coming year. Work is also on-going through our range of partnership boards and groups to support recovery of the borough and our communities.
- 3.31 Since the summer work has begun on delivering the Mayor's Covid Recovery Fund. This is a £3m programme which aims to kickstart our community's recovery from the pandemic over the next 12-24 months and help to ensure we build a brighter post-pandemic future for our borough". The Fund seeks to address some of the damage caused by the pandemic by prioritising initiatives that support:
- residents to access jobs and our businesses and high streets recover
  - residents to address mental and physical health and wellbeing including people with disabilities
  - children and young people to deal with the impact of the pandemic on learning, and physical and mental health and wellbeing, including those with disabilities
  - residents to access welfare advice and guidance
  - communities to come together in celebration and recognition
  - residents to access a range of Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) services

### **Next Steps**

- 3.32 The LGA Peer Revisit report can be found on the council's [website](#) .The actions outlined above will continue to be delivered as planned. Delivery against these actions will be monitored through existing boards such as the Performance Improvement Board. If Cabinet identify the need to undertake further work to implement the peer team's recommendations, then this will be taken forward.
- 3.33 The council will look to undertake a full LGA Corporate Peer Challenge in 2022 and consideration needs to be given as to how this process can be of most help to the council's improvement journey.

## **4 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 While the six recommendations do not explicitly mention equalities, continued focus on delivery and understanding of the Mayor's priorities as advised in recommendation 1, ensures the importance of the plans for addressing inequalities. This includes delivering the Black, Asian and minority ethnic

Commission actions and Poverty Commission recommendations, which are also highlighted in the peer team's report under issues raised.

## **5 OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 This section of the report is used to highlight further specific statutory implications that are either not covered in the main body of the report or are required to be highlighted to ensure decision makers give them proper consideration. Examples of other implications may be:

- Best Value Implications,
- Consultations,
- Environmental (including air quality),
- Risk Management,
- Crime Reduction,
- Safeguarding.
- Data Protection / Privacy Impact Assessment.

## **6 COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER**

6.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

## **7 COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES**

7.1 Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972 permits local authorities to do anything which is calculated to facilitate the discharge of any of their functions.

7.2 The matters proposed in this report fall within the above legislation.

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## **Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents**

### **Linked Report**

- LGA Peer Review Process Briefing MAB report, 14 July 2021
- LGA Peer Review Position Statement MAB report, 1 September 2021

### **Appendices**

- **Appendix 1 Council's Improvement Programme**
- **Appendix 2 – CPC Revisit Report Sept 2021**

### **Background Documents – Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements)(Access to Information)(England) Regulations 2012**

- List any background documents not already in the public domain including officer contact information.



- None

**Officer contact details for documents:**

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## Appendix 1 – Council’s Improvement Programme

Improvement programme	Lead officer/ Member	Governance	Key timeline	Comment
Finance Improvement Plan	Kevin Bartle Cllr Ronald	Internal: CLT – Performance and Improvement Board Public: Audit Committee	One year plan	Detailed Finance Improvement Plan in place, being managed through an internal programme board. Plan in two phases given some significant changes required that will take time and thus in phase two. Related to CPC
Adult social care improvement & transformation programme	Denise Radley Cllr Blake	Performance Improvement Board	Two year plan	Programme of work overseen by Adult Social Care Transformation and Improvement Board (established September 2021)
Investors in People Improvement plan	Ali Littlewood Cllr Ronald	CLT - Transformation Board	One year plan	Next formal accreditation assessment is Dec 2023 – with interim assessment Dec 22 – CLT wish to attain Gold
Business Intelligence and Analytics Improvement Plan	Sharon Godman Mayor	Performance Improvement Board	Annual Plan	Related CPC, SEND and Ofsted.
SEND Improvement Plan	James Thomas Cllr Begum	Children’s Improvement Board	Annual Plan	Related to SEND Inspection activity
Corporate Governance Improvement Actions	Sharon Godman Janet Fasan Mayor	CLT Audit		Related to CPC
LGA Peer Review of Children Social Care	James Thomas Cllr Begum	Children’s Improvement Board	March 2022	