



Northumberland

County Council

COMMITTEE: COUNCIL

DATE: 22 MARCH 2023

Challenge Board Interim Report 2 for the Member Oversight Group

Report of: Cllr. Glen Sanderson, Leader of the Council

Responsible Officer: Philip Hunter, Interim Senior Service Director

Purpose of report

To consider and respond to the second interim report of the Challenge Board, provided to the Member Oversight Group on the 3rd March 2023.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Council:

1. Note the findings and suggested next steps proposed in the Challenge Board's second interim report.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report links to all aims and priorities of the Corporate Plan.

Key issues

- The Independent Governance Review ('Caller Review') was reported to Council at its Extraordinary meeting of 8th June 2022. The Caller Review and the Council's response to its recommendations represent a critical opportunity to revise the ways in which we work, improving and strengthening our structures, governance, culture and values.

Background

2. In 2021, the Leader of Council commissioned an independent review of governance in the Council. The final report of the Independent Review of Governance (known as the 'Caller Report') was presented to Full Council in June 2022. In line with the Caller Report recommendations a cross-party, Member Oversight Group, ("the MOG"), was established to oversee the development and delivery of an Improvement Plan.
3. Again, following the Caller recommendations, the Leader of Council asked the Local Government Association (LGA) to establish an external Challenge Board of

experienced local government Elected Members and Officers to advise the Council on its improvement journey as a “critical friend.” The Challenge Board was established and met formally for the first time in October 2022.

4. Following its latest round of meetings, the Challenge Board drafted its second, interim report and presented its findings to the MOG on the 3rd March. This is attached as Appendix 1. These are the Board’s findings, based on the documents and discussions they have held so far.
5. In its Report, the Challenge Board states it has heard from people inside and outside the organisation, that the Council feels ‘better’ and ‘calmer’. The Report points out the appointment of the new Chief Executive and her top team have brought certainty and stability, creating a ‘different feel about the place’ and that “[The] mood has changed.”
6. In addition to the Challenge Board’s Report, Council Officers, working with Members have continued to make significant and positive progress on delivering on the Council’s Improvement Action Plan. These actions address all recommendations set out in the ‘Caller Report’ last year.
7. The Report makes recommendations on areas where the Council can continue to make progress including:
 - a. Creating an improvement narrative – linking all the key areas of improvement and change being taken forward across the organisation (including Strategic Change as well as the Improvement Action Plan).
 - b. Ensuring the work on updating and implementing the new Constitution and Code of Conduct is inclusive.
 - c. Using the refresh of the Corporate Plan to engage and involve Members and partners in the priorities.
 - d. Allowing time for reflection on the corporate governance of Advance.
 - e. Making progress on an agreed protocol on appropriate access to information, whilst also defining the personal responsibility of Members to respect confidentiality, in order to rebuild trust.
8. The Leader of Council and Chief Executive thank the Challenge Board for their continued advice and support to the Council. As with the previous Report to Council (January 2023), Officers and Members will give detailed consideration to the Board’s advice and ideas. Since the Report was produced, there have been productive conversations between the Board, Leader of Council, Chief Executive (and Officers) and the other Group Leaders. Members will also note the report on the appointment of a new Monitoring Officer at March Council.
9. Officers and Members continue the very positive work on the Corporate Plan refresh. There has been very constructive engagement with Members on this (e.g. Policy Conference held in January) as well as wider engagement with Towns and Parishes through a series of conferences also held in January this year. Officers have, of course, taken account of the suggestions made by the Challenge Board. Where the Board feels there are opportunities for Officers and Members to engage more with Board, we will maximise these over the next few months.

Implications

Policy	This report links to all aims and priorities of the Corporate Plan.
Finance and value for money	Value for money, transparency and accountability are key aims of the Council. Whilst this Report contains no direct financial implications, the delivery of the individual actions of the Improvement Plan may have financial implications. Any financial implications will be the subject of separate reports in relation to specific actions at the appropriate time.
Legal	Whilst this report contains no immediate legal implications, the delivery of the individual actions in the Improvement Plan may have legal implications. Any legal implications arising from the delivery of specific actions will be brought forward in future reports.
Procurement	N/A
Human Resources	Links to the appraisal and performance frameworks.
Property	N/A
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Risk Assessment	Failure to implement specific actions from the Improvement Plan in response to the Caller Review recommendations could impact negatively on the Council's Strategic Risks
Crime & Disorder	N/A
Customer Consideration	N/A
Carbon reduction	N/A
Health and Wellbeing	N/A
Wards	All Wards

Background papers:

Independent Governance Review Report

Challenge Board Interim Report 1 for Member Oversight Group

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	Full Name of Officer
Acting Chief Executive	Audrey Kingham
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Suki Binjal
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis
Relevant Executive Director	-
Portfolio Holder(s)	Cllr Glen Sanderson

Author and contact details:

Philip Hunter, Interim Senior Service Director
Philip.hunter@northumberland.gov.uk