

The LGA's corporate peer challenge offer



Introduction

Peer Challenge is a core element of the Local Government Association's sector-led improvement offer to local authorities, the approach to which is set out in 'Sector-led improvement in local government' (June 2012) and which has received high levels of support from councils who overwhelmingly endorse the key principles on which it is based:

- councils are responsible for their own performance
- stronger local accountability leads to further improvement
- councils have a sense of collective responsibility for performance in the sector as a whole
- the role of the Local Government Association (LGA) is to help councils by providing the necessary support

- and that we all need to continue to lobby for further reductions in inspection, assessment and data reporting.

The offer of support set out in 'Sector-led improvement in local government' is a core part of the LGA's offer to councils and includes a range of free of charge/subsidised tools and support for councils.

You can read more about sector-led improvement, the approach and our offer, at: www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement

A major part of the support is the offer to each council and fire and rescue service to have a corporate peer challenge (at no charge) at a time of its choosing.

This document explains the corporate peer challenge offer in more detail. Further details about other similar offers are set out in Q17.

Peer challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. They are improvement focused; the scope will be agreed with the council and tailored to reflect their local needs and specific requirements.

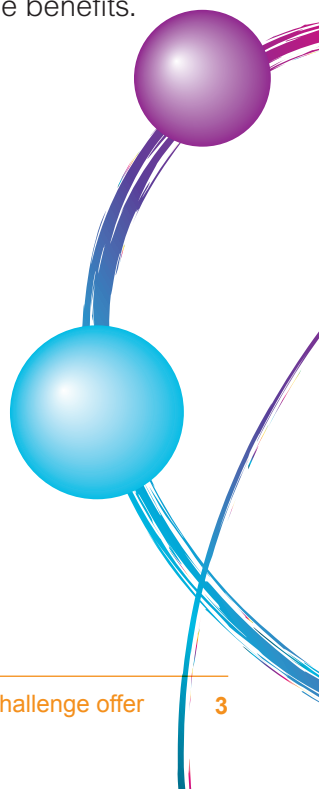
The peer team will involve peers from across the sector and beyond. Their ambition is to help your council respond to its local priorities and issues in its own way to greatest effect.

There are some design principles that it is important to understand:

- Peer challenge is not an inspection like CPA or CAA, it is instead a tool for improvement. Peer challenge is carried out to your specification aimed at improving, not judging, your council.
- Peer challenge should be undertaken at a time which most suits a council and focus on what is of most importance to a council.
- A scoping meeting at the outset involving a visit by LGA representatives will be an essential feature. The council's specific needs, the areas it

wants to focus on, the make-up of the team and the results it wants to achieve will be discussed and agreed.

- Peer Challenge should include some focus on leadership, governance, corporate capacity and financial resilience. These will form a core component of all corporate peer challenges.
- The process should be proportionate – minimising the burden (rather than making unnecessary demands that absorb capacity and divert attention) focusing on making appropriate preparation and maximising the benefits.



Overview

Q1: Do councils have to have a peer challenge?

Answer: No, but councils are invited and entitled to one. We want to encourage all councils to take up this offer because experience demonstrates that a peer challenge every 3-4 years is an effective tool for improvement. Peer challenge is a tried, tested and trusted tool to support improvement. We know that during the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) and comprehensive area assessment (CAA) era, councils that had a peer challenge improved their ratings to a greater extent than those that did not. An independent evaluation of the Corporate Peer Challenge programme 'Supporting Councils to Succeed' (January 2014) concluded that peer challenge has a positive impact for the council receiving it. The current LGA Peer Challenge programme

has been in place since June 2011. Since then over two thirds of the sector have participated in it. The Corporate Peer Challenge programme alone has seen more than 130 councils receiving a peer challenge (as of March 2014).

Q2: Does each peer challenge follow a standard template?

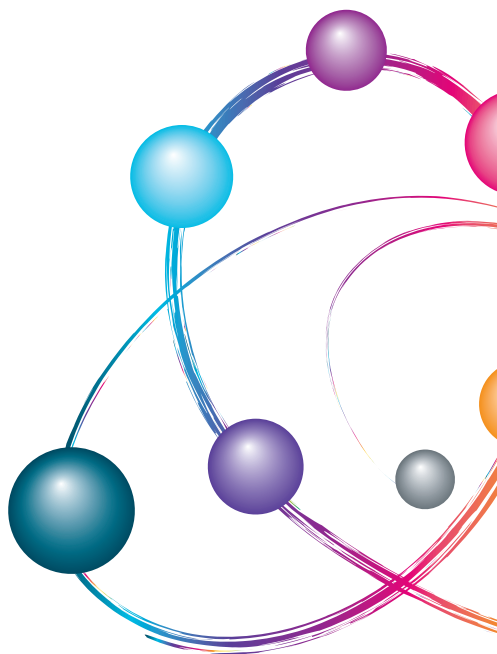
Answer: No, the focus of the peer challenge will be worked up with each council individually and will be flexible to your needs. The peer challenge will be pitched at a broad organisational level and we would not expect them to include in-depth service reviews since this would duplicate other services we provide. There is significant flexibility to enable the peer challenge to focus on those local priorities, outcomes and ambitions which are important locally.

This could for example include:

- productivity
- future organisational design options and transformation programmes
- shared services and joint arrangements
- local growth and the economy

- the voluntary and community sector
- working with statutory and other partners in the area.

Additionally the peer challenge will have some focus on leadership, financial resilience and corporate capacity (see Q6) – because we know these are key factors in council performance and improvement and this will help provide reassurance about future performance.



Q3: Who is it for?

Answer: Again, there is great flexibility. Depending on the focus of peer challenge it can be delivered:

- for a single council
- for two or more authorities, eg councils with shared management arrangements or a county council and one or more district councils
- for a group of councils within a sub region
- or with strategic partners; whichever most meets the council's needs.

Q4: When is it best to have a peer challenge?

Answer: There is no set time – it depends when it is best from your council's perspective. It might be following a change of political control to help the new administration think through certain local challenges; it might be as new issues rise up the agenda as a result of local or national circumstances or it might be integrated within your normal business and review cycles. In short: whenever makes most sense to you.

We simply recommend that you plan ahead (between four to six month lead in period is ideal).

We want to help you get the peer team you want, at the time you need it – but our ability to deliver this will depend on the number of peer challenges scheduled for a similar time and the availability of suitable peers.

The more notice you can give us, the more likely we are to be able to meet your expectations.



The detail

Q5: I have booked up for a peer challenge – what is the next step?

Answer: One of the most important elements of the peer challenge (and what makes it so different from what went before) is the initial scoping meeting. It is key to success. We are not following a rigid set of key lines of enquiry (KLOE) or starting from an ideal local authority benchmark. The intention is that the peer challenge is flexible to focus on what is most important for councils locally – and this is the purpose of the initial scoping meeting.

We would like to meet with the leader and chief executive normally (four to six months) in advance of the peer challenge to discuss and agree:

- the main focus of the challenge
- the nature and composition of the peer team
- when it would be best to undertake the peer challenge
- the value and purpose of any preparatory work/material
- the nature and form of the feedback at the end of the peer challenge.

But this is not the only dialogue that will take place in advance of the on-site visit. Once the peer team is agreed it is really helpful if the respective leaders and chief executives make contact to discuss the forthcoming peer challenge and confirm their expectations. We encourage this as an important part of the preparation stage.

Q6: You say that you would expect each peer challenge to include some focus on leadership, financial resilience and corporate capacity. Why is that?

Answer: While the overall focus will be on those matters councils determine, there will be a core component that looks at issues of leadership, governance, corporate capacity and financial resilience.

Councils continue to face unprecedented challenges as they seek to maintain front line services with sharply decreasing resources and there is no sign that this will get any easier in the near future.

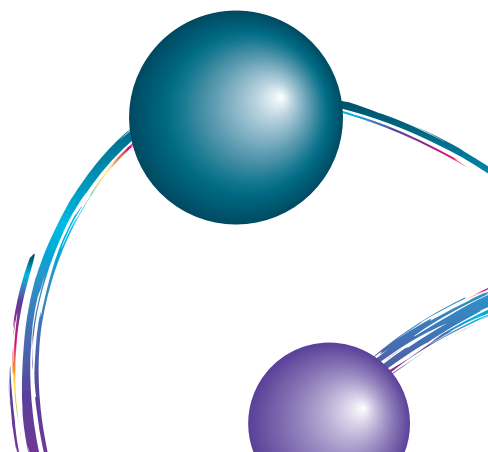
This presents a huge challenge for councils and the core element will help them check they have the capacity to continue to deliver their local priorities.

At the same time councils recognise that service or organisational failure is bad for local people and damages the

reputation of the sector as a whole. Councils wanted to find a way of managing that risk and of helping the sector to assure itself.

Peer challenge is one of the ways we will try to do this – but we will keep it constrained around the following key areas:

- understanding the local context and priority setting
- financial planning and viability
- political and managerial leadership
- governance and decision making
- organisational capacity.



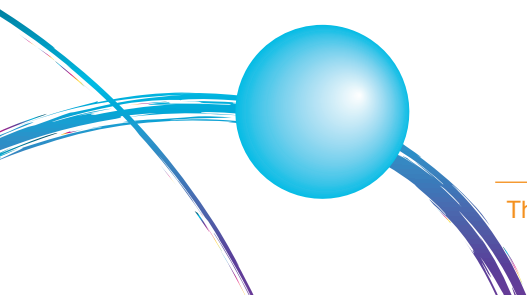
Q7: Will we need to provide you with lots of documentation in advance?

Answer: No. To avoid unnecessary burdens on councils, we will be seeking far less documentation than councils experienced previously with inspection. We anticipate that virtually all of the background information the peer team needs should already be in existence and we will only ask you for other documents if these are considered essential, and only if we can't find them in the public domain. That said, the peer team will be better able to make a more effective contribution when they fully understand the issues involved – so you might find it worthwhile preparing a short 'position statement' about the main focus of the challenge. This is something that can be discussed at the scoping meeting, ensuring a proportionate approach.

Q8: Who delivers the peer challenge?

Answer: Peers will very much be at the heart of the process. From across the sector and beyond experienced officers and councillors as 'peers' will be used to ensure councils get the most appropriate challenge, support and ideas for their specific needs. Each peer challenge team will be drawn up in line with the council's needs and will reflect the main focus of the peer challenge. The composition of the teams will be agreed with councils.

Typically they will comprise senior and experienced officer and councillors. There is scope to involve other peers including from across the public, private or voluntary sectors depending on the focus of the peer challenge. So a team could include for example a business representative or civil servant. Each team will have an LGA peer challenge manager.



Q9: What does a typical peer challenge involve?

Answer: We are keen to explore new ways of working that reflect a shift in focus from a diagnostic approach based on past performance, to one designed to be forward looking, facilitative and problem solving – providing a robust challenge where this is needed. The peer team will undertake a short intensive period working with the council (usually three to four days) to gain a better understanding of the issues it is grappling with and to explore barriers, opportunities and potential areas for improvement. We can be flexible about how this time is used. Either way, time spent at the council will be interactive, involving meetings with political leaders and senior managers and discussion groups, including with staff and partners.

The council is very much in control of this process and will decide who it is best for the team to meet. All of which can be agreed at the scoping meeting.

Q10: What about citizen involvement in the process?

Answer: This is a question we would like to answer with you in the scoping meeting. It could be as simple as exploring the extent to which citizen views have informed priorities. We know that effective engagement of citizens and making the most of customer insight is a key element of successful councils. So one approach is to use the process to challenge the council to show it has a mandate for local difference based on true engagement.

Q11: How long does a peer challenge last?

Answer: Generally speaking, and based on past experience, we would expect for upper tier councils the peer challenge would involve four days on-site, whilst for district councils the challenge would last for three days. We can be flexible about this and will explore this at the scoping meeting.

Q12: How will the results of the peer challenge be fed back to the authority?

Answer: We will discuss and agree this with the council so that the approach is the best for them. But based on experience to date, we envisage that feedback will take place in a number of different ways:

- A roundtable feedback discussion on the final day on-site at the council involving an audience of the council's choosing. The team will share its views and offer advice on the main focus of the challenge and key leadership and corporate capacity issues.
- A feedback letter to the council addressing the main focus of the challenge, outlining the main findings and conclusions, recommendations for improvement and innovation, and signposting examples of good practice and case study material.

- The offer of an improvement planning session, wider feedback event, or other activity to enable discussion and development of plans to take forward the feedback from the peer challenge.
- Whether some or all of these approaches are adopted experience demonstrates that an inclusive approach involving those outside the executive and senior management team can provide a firm basis for subsequent action.

The peer team will provide continuous feedback throughout the peer challenge process. The intelligence gained from the key leadership and corporate capacity research will be fed back into the LGA to inform the planning of future support. It will also contribute to our sector knowledge base which we need to continue to prove sector-led improvement works for local government.

Q13: Will the results of the peer challenge be published?

Answer: It is for the council itself to decide how it uses the feedback provided and if, when and in what form it plans to publish the results of the peer challenge. The LGA strongly encourages councils to publish the results and we know that many do so as part of their continuing commitment to be accountable to the communities they serve. One approach might be to publish a statement setting out the findings and recommendations of the peer challenge team along with any improvement actions the council has agreed to.

Most councils who have received a peer challenge have published the findings and more information on these is available on our website:
www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenge

Q14: Is that it? What happens after the challenge?

Answer: We will offer a follow-up session (typically within the next three to six months) to support the council with any improvement planning. This will provide an opportunity to agree with you what, if any, improvement needs you have and to make links to the support on offer from the LGA or other sector owned improvement bodies.

In addition experience demonstrates that on-going dialogue with members of the peer team often develops and that this can be very valuable.

The LGA principal adviser responsible for your region will of course continue to maintain ongoing contact with your authority.

Finally we will also get feedback so we can continue to refine and improve our approach to peer challenge.

Q15: Peer challenge – what it is not

Answer: Our approach to peer challenge continues to evolve but seeks to retain the tried, tested and trusted peer review model:

- it is not a sector-owned form of inspection
- it does not deliver a scored assessment
- it is not a detailed service assessment
- it is not driven by external requirements or a standard set of KLOE
- it is not reported to government.

Ultimately this is your resource.

Our objective is to work with you to help you maximise the benefit; to help you define the scope and process so that it best meets your needs and the needs of your council and community, and to help improve your productivity and effectiveness.

Q16: How can I make sure my authority gets the most value out of the peer challenge?

Answer: See it as a tool for improvement and use the resource to focus on areas of perceived weakness or where you are facing a particular challenge.

Plan well in advance so you get the team that is right for you.

Be open and transparent. Don't try and stage manage the process – it is not an inspection.

Be inclusive – consider how you can secure ownership beyond the executive and senior management team.

Talk to other councils that have taken part to glean their insights into how best to plan and prepare to maximise the opportunity.

We also provide feedback on other council's experiences on our website: www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenge

Some other issues

Q17: I have heard that the LGA is offering other peer challenge/ reviews – can you explain how do they fit together?

Answer: We have a range of peer-led improvement support options available. Sometimes the funding routes are different and this may lead to slight differences in the terms of their availability.

- Corporate peer challenge: free peer challenge for each council and fire and rescue service at a time of their choosing. Focus to be agreed with the council but will include a small core element around leadership and corporate capacity (as described above).
- Safeguarding children and children in care peer

reviews and diagnostics:
In response to demand from local authorities and the commencement of the new Ofsted inspection framework, we are continuing to offer safeguarding peer reviews alongside care and safeguarding diagnostics, details of which can be found on our website at: www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenges/children

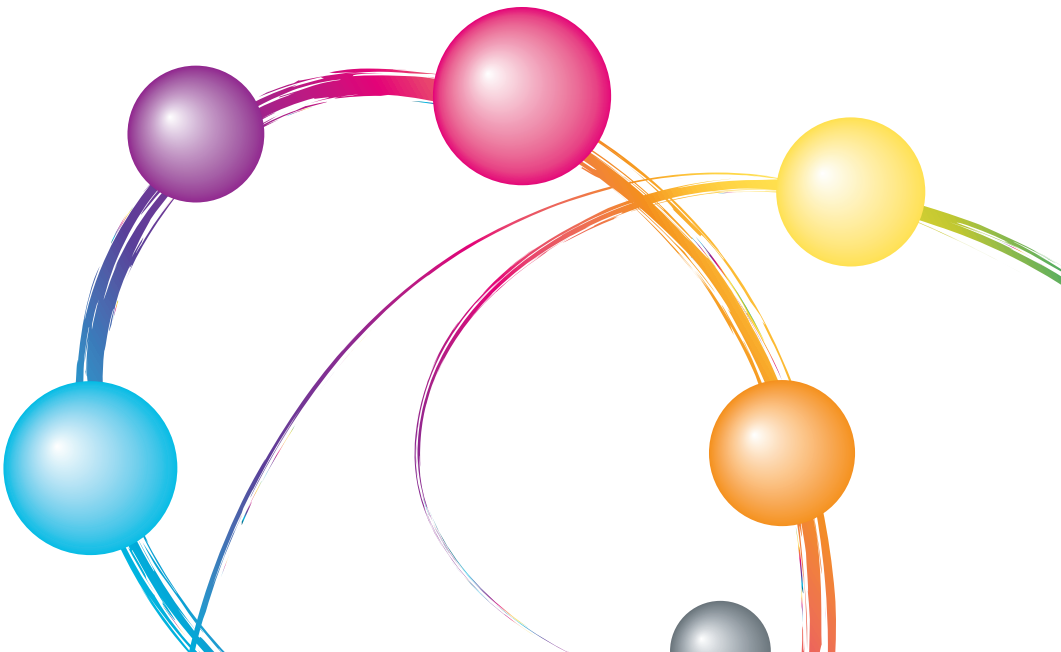
- Health & Well Being peer challenge: Peer Challenge is the cornerstone of our Health and Wellbeing Systems Improvement Support Programme. These peer challenges are free to councils and health and wellbeing boards, are improvement focussed and involve bespoke teams of peers from a range of organisations working on site with the council and its partners for four days. More information can be found on our website at:

www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenges/health

- Adult social care peer challenge: Following the removal of national targets and assessments, councils are working through the opportunities and challenges of self-regulation, improvement and innovation in adult social care. We continue to work with partners to develop and deliver a programme for sector-led support in adult services, including a peer challenge offer, more information about which can be found on our website at: www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenges/adults
- Peer based finance offer: Our offer relies on making use of

expertise in the sector, both officer and councillor peers. It currently includes a financial health check; a budget challenge; and tools to allow councils to assess their own financial position and consider opportunities and threats to their financial strategy. The offer continues to evolve.

- Other peer challenges: In addition, the LGA can offer a number of service specific peer challenges (including for housing, planning, highways, and community safety). Further details (including costs) can be found on our website at: www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenges



Q18: Colleagues tell me that being involved as a member of a peer team is a really good learning experience, how can I get involved?

Answer: It is. Peers tell us that they really enjoy being part of a peer team and value the opportunity this provides to see what is happening in other parts of the country. We know that the benefits of being a peer are wide, varied and sometimes personal. The publication 'Enabling learning, development and improvement' (July 2014) provides a series of insights and experiences from officers, councillors and others who have been peers. See: www.local.gov.uk/call-for-peers

For councillors in particular, it represents a chance to see another political culture at close quarters – unlike senior officers, many councillors do not have experience of serving in different parts of the country. In addition, it provides an opportunity for peers to share their own knowledge and expertise and to bring back learning for their own authority. We currently need more chief executives and senior officers to become peers – so if you are interested in finding out more please get in touch!

A final word. If we are to deliver such a significant commitment we need your help. We need councils to make available the high quality peers that are required. In order to ensure a cost-effective way of delivering such a commitment we also need you or your colleagues to invest time in being a peer and to book slots in advance over the coming three year period to have a peer challenge.

To discuss or enquire about a peer challenge at your council please contact the relevant LGA Principal Adviser:

East Midlands, North East & Yorkshire and the Humber:

Mark Edgell

Tel: 07747 636910

Email: mark.edgell@local.gov.uk

North West:

Gill Taylor

Tel: 07789 512173

Email: gill.taylor@local.gov.uk

East of England & London:

Rachel Litherland

Tel: 07795 076834

Email: rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk

West Midlands:

Howard Davis

Tel: 07920 061197

Email: howard.davis@local.gov.uk

South West:

Andy Bates

Tel: 07919 562849

Email: andy.bates@local.gov.uk

South East (Buckinghamshire, Hampshire, IOW, Kent & West Sussex):

Heather Wills

Tel: 07770 701188

Email: heather.wills@local.gov.uk

South East (Berkshire, East Sussex, Oxfordshire & Surrey):

Mona Sehgal

Tel: 07795 291006

Email: mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk

For more information about how to become a peer please contact:

Paul Clarke

Programme Manager

(Local Government Support)

Tel: 07887 706960

Email: paul.clarke2@local.gov.uk



Local Government Association

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Fax 020 7664 3030

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

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please contact us on 020 7664 3000.
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