

## Cabinet – 1 October 2025

### Corporate Peer Challenge Follow-Up Report

Purpose	For review
Classification	Public
Executive Summary	<p>This report provides a progress update on the council's response to the Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC), held in December 2024.</p> <p>It outlines the actions taken against the ten formal recommendations and additional observations made by the peer team, ahead of their follow-up visit scheduled for October 2025.</p>
<b>Recommendation(s)</b>	<p><b>That Cabinet:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>1. Note the progress update against each of the CPC recommendations</b></li><li><b>2. Consider the action plan progress at appendix 2 of the report</b></li><li><b>3. Note the review of key deliverables at appendix 3</b></li></ol>
Reasons for recommendation(s)	<p>The CPC provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on the performance of the organisation and highlight areas where improvements could be made.</p> <p>The recommendations seek consideration of the progress against these areas for improvement and further consideration of the</p>

	Corporate Plan key deliverables in light of local government reorganisation (LGR).
Ward(s)	All
Portfolio Holder(s)	Councillor Jill Cleary – Leader
Strategic Director(s)	Alan Bethune – Strategic Director Corporate Resources S151 and Transformation
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## **Introduction and background**

1. In December 2024, NFDC invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to conduct a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) to assess our performance and support future improvement. Over three days, a team of peers from councils across the country engaged with over 130 people through 40+ meetings.
2. The team praised NFDC’s clear vision, strong leadership, and dedicated staff, highlighting the council’s positive culture and commitment to residents. Their feedback, now detailed in the LGA feedback report (background paper), includes constructive recommendations to support our ongoing improvement journey.
3. The CPC Action Plan (appendix 2) was approved by Cabinet in April 2025 and EMT have kept progress under review. This report provides an update as of September 2025 in preparation for the CPC follow up visit, scheduled for November 2025.
4. Since the CPC, significant progress has been made in aligning strategic priorities with the evolving context of local government reorganisation (LGR). The opportunity has also been taken to further consider and update the Corporate Plan key deliverables and ensure focus remains on these strategic priorities (appendix 3).

## **Current context and impacts of local government reorganisation**

5. The feedback report refers to the fact the Devolution White Paper, including LGR, was published after the CPC visit and its initial findings. LGR proposes to replace the current two-tier system with new single-tier unitary authorities that will deliver all local government services from April 2028.
6. It is appropriate that the action plan and consideration of priorities is now framed in this new context and its developing and ongoing impacts.
7. The announcement of LGR has necessitated engagement and input into a unique, unknown and complex strategic planning process. This has undoubtedly drawn significant resources from across the council, requiring prioritisation from senior leadership team, EMT and the leader.
8. The council has played an active role in shaping the regional response to LGR, contributing to consultations, engagement activities with the public, partners and staff, and coordinated communications planning. This has included the development and submission of detailed proposals, supporting documentation and appendices, working in collaboration with consultants and neighbouring authorities across the wider region. Additionally, there are differing views on which future unitary configuration the New Forest should be part of. As a result the district has to be represented across multiple geographies with efforts to inform and shape alternative options, above and beyond comparable authorities. This is exacerbated by the added complexity of a significant boundary change proposal supported by some other Hampshire authorities.
9. A draft LGR programme brief is currently being considered aiming to embed a structured, multi-phase programme that manages risk, aligns with regional priorities, and supports a responsible transition to a future unitary authority. This will be further supported by the development of the Programme Management Office (PMO) that will bring increased structure and assurance to the development and delivery of priorities and management of resources.
10. LGR has and will increasingly present significant delivery and capacity challenges. Additionally, the Chief Executive and key officers are proactively engaging and influencing devolution discussions, with the Chief Executive representing district and boroughs on the Hampshire Devolution Board. Capacity has also been stretched by the waste roll out where unanticipated operational challenges have necessitated a more significant

corporate response including listening to residents' feedback and learning from issues identified in phase 1 of the rollout before the next phase commences.

### **Updated position statement**

11. In preparation for the upcoming CPC follow-up visit, this report and its appendices act as an updated position statement to provide a snapshot of key organisational activity, development and initiatives undertaken since the original review.
12. Highlights include significant service changes, such as the ongoing waste service roll-out, community engagement efforts, such as supporting a local Totton-based charity with funding to provide a weekly drop-in for those facing housing difficulties, and strategic responses to ongoing challenges, such as the impacts of LGR and the continuation of the organisational transformation programme.
13. It has been a significantly busy and challenging period for the organisation, since the CPC visit in December 2024 and with all the challenges being faced there is still much to celebrate. A summary of some of the highlights and key achievements from each directorate can be read at appendix 1.

### **Progress against Corporate Peer Challenge recommendations**

14. The feedback report presented 10 clear recommendations for the authority to consider ahead of the peer team's follow-up visit.
15. These recommendations formed the foundation of the action plan at appendix 2 and provide a strategic response. A brief overview of activity in each area is outlined below.
  - i. *Clarify priorities and timelines for delivery – Delivered/Ongoing*

Strategic priorities have been realigned in response to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), resulting in a refined set of key deliverables approved by Cabinet in April 2025 which can be read Appendix 3. This followed an EMT-led workshop in January that categorised existing activities into 'continue', 'consider', or 'stop', and identified new priority initiatives aligned with LGR.

Resources were reallocated in the 2025/26 budget to support these updated priorities, and corporate KPI targets were reassessed to reflect the new strategic direction.

To ensure successful delivery, ongoing attention is needed to balance ambition with capacity, especially as LGR continues to place increasing demands on staff. A new Programme Management Office

(PMO) is being established to provide structure and oversight, enabling more effective prioritisation and monitoring of key programmes including transformation, digital, capital projects, and LGR implementation.

*ii. Create an overarching corporate narrative and communicate proactively with staff, members and local people – In progress*

The pace at which devolution and LGR is being delivered has meant that development in this area is evolving. Efforts are underway to develop a clear corporate narrative, which includes maintaining service delivery, aligns with revised priorities and the broader LGR context.

The creation of a visual summary of priorities will be developed to support this, ensuring alignment with future messaging once the implications of LGR are clearer.

The Communications team is now prioritising work tasks which directly support strategic aims, ensuring messaging is targeted and effective.

Staff engagement with corporate priorities is being strengthened through improvements to performance development processes. This includes enhanced one-to-one tools and guidance that link individual roles to team and organisational goals. A modernised performance framework, 'Growth and Goals', is set for EMT approval in September, with launch planned for October 2025.

*iii. Design and deliver a robust member and senior officer development programme – In progress*

Management development continues to progress, focusing on strengthening leadership skills, particularly in the context of LGR. Training for new cohort of managers began in April 2025, and a leadership development day in July focussed on embedding the behaviour framework, EDI principles, and recognition practices.

Further targeted development, linked with the launch of the 'Growth and Goals' framework and 'brief-bite' training sessions, are planned for the autumn to embed consistent leadership practices.

While elected member development and support is ongoing, the priority has shifted towards supporting councillors through the LGR process and a facilitated session for Cabinet Members and EMT was well received. Regular briefings on core programme areas such as waste, transformation, and housing are ensuring councillors stay well informed.

*iv. Consider ways to strengthen Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) function – Ongoing*

Recent improvements to the O&S function have strengthened member engagement. Strategic Directors are now formally linked to each panel, providing direct support and strategic insight, resulting in more informed discussions and better alignment with corporate priorities.

Pre-panel briefings and regular agenda planning meetings have enhanced member understanding and ensured discussions remain relevant and strategic. Topic-specific briefings such as the Housing Regulation session in March 2025 are deepening member knowledge and supporting more effective scrutiny

v. *Ensure there is collective ownership of the transformation programme by the Executive Management Team – In progress*

Good progress has been made toward embedding a collective ownership of the transformation programme across EMT officers supported by a clear governance structure and regular board meetings.

The revised Transformation Strategy and Business Case, approved by Cabinet in August, aligns with updated strategic priorities and potential LGR impacts and was shaped through EMT workshopping and engagement.

Governance for LGR and Transformation is now unified, with integration into the PMO underway to improve oversight and coordination. Future focus will ensure programme scope remains clear and widely understood, with increased engagement to support service-level change.

To enhance delivery, refinements are being considered around board meeting structure, information flow, and stakeholder involvement. A simplified 'plan on a page' will support clarity, while ongoing review of transformation ambitions will ensure resource optimisation and sustained value.

vi. *Apply internal policies and practices consistently across the Council – In progress*

A more consistent application of internal policies and practices is being achieved through investment in Organisational Development and Employee Engagement. Two new staff members have enabled active delivery of the People Strategy action plan, driving consistency across the organisation.

The newly approved behaviours framework, shaped through broad staff engagement, is reinforcing shared expectations. Improvements to induction, such as accessible video content and manager guidance will ensure a consistent onboarding experience for new staff from autumn 2025.

Recognising our varied work force, efforts to improve internal communication have progressed with the development of a staff communications framework. Work has been focused on tailoring toward different staff persona groups, aiming to ensure key messages are accessible, relevant and timely to all colleagues, no matter their working arrangement. These approaches are also being embedded into the Employee Engagement Plan for LGR.

Enhanced use of the iTrent HR system is improving workforce data quality, with dashboards in development to support consistent monitoring and informed decision-making.

*vii. Develop an Assets Strategy and Action Plan – Delivered with ongoing implementation work.*

The Strategic Asset Management Plan (SAMP), approved by Cabinet in July 2025, provides a clear framework for managing property assets over the next three years. Closely aligned with the Future New Forest Transformation Programme, it supports LGR readiness and strategic asset planning.

Efforts are focused on maintaining strong relationships with town and parish councils, ensuring clear communication, managing expectations, and guiding clerks through the post-adoption process. Regular updates at Clerk meetings will support smooth delivery and shared understanding.

*viii. Demonstrate further commitment to carbon reduction with a clear action plan – Ongoing.*

The Climate Change and Nature Emergency Action Plan is being refreshed to drive ambitious outcomes across carbon reduction, climate adaptation, and nature recovery. A Member Task and Finish Group is guiding this work, with a progress review of the current plan due in Q3 2025.

Low carbon development continues to influence planning decisions through the Climate Change Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), and climate priorities are embedded in the early stages of the Local Plan Review. Additionally, the new service planning template now requires climate risk assessments, ensuring climate considerations are integrated across operations.

Over £1.49m funding has been secured, supporting annual budgets, enabling the upgrade of approximately 200 council homes to EPC 'C' or higher in 2025/26. This is working towards our ambition of ensuring all housing stock is upgraded to EPC 'C' or above. A long-term contractor will be procured to support ongoing delivery. This work is now embedded as an ongoing programme.

Additionally, £1.8m from the public sector decarbonisation fund is enabling a 3-year project at Applemore Health and Leisure Centre, to improve efficiencies and reduce energy consumption and costs. The project aims to install new air source heat pumps, insulation and solar panelling amongst other planned carbon reduction improvements. Design work is underway, including the appointment of external consultants to deliver the project.

*ix. Continue the good practice in housing and consider applying successful approaches to the wider organisation – Ongoing.*

Improvements to the Housing and Communities O&S panel, including the introduction of a standard summary slide deck for presenting officers, highlighting recommendations, issues and impacts, and the provision of example questions ahead of the session, are being considered as a potential model for other panels.

A Monthly Meet staff session titled, Housing: Best practices and future readiness, has been booked for early September to share examples of best practice and improvement programmes, supporting a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration. A list of key good practice items and outcomes is currently being developed and will guide the session.

To promote cross-departmental learning, a knowledge transfer programme is being developed, featuring quarterly 15-minute sessions within leadership meetings. Topics will include performance, compliance, ICT, and organisational change, aiming to embed successful approaches beyond Housing.

*x. Remember to celebrate your achievements no matter how small or big they are - Ongoing.*

The approval of the People Strategy in March 2025 has driven progress in embedding a culture of recognition, inclusion, and continuous improvement. A multi-level recognition approach and values-based scheme are being developed, supported by a new behaviour framework

Staff achievements are being actively celebrated through team events, directorate sessions, and planned all-staff celebrations, reinforcing positive culture and engagement. A cross-site BBQ planned for operational staff in October 2025 and a long service event was also held celebrating our longest service staff members. In addition, leadership development has included focused sessions on recognition.

Media releases, internal and external communications channels are used to showcase success stories from improved tenant satisfaction and food waste achievements to new community initiatives enhancing visibility of impact and organisational pride.

The annual performance report has been used to highlight key achievements to staff and residents, supporting transparency and reinforcing progress against strategic goals.

### **Additional actions**

16. Alongside the 10 formal recommendations from the CPC feedback report, 11 additional actions were identified by EMT, arising from peer team's commentary and observations.
17. Specific activity towards delivery of these additional actions, as well as progress updates can be read at appendix 2.

### **Corporate plan priorities**

18. A core component of the CPC review is to assess the clarity of the council's priorities, how well informed they are by the local context and whether the council is delivering effectively on these priorities contained within the Corporate Plan.
19. The Corporate Plan key deliverables were revisited in April to reflect on the peer team's recommendation but also in the emerging context of LGR. This has been kept under review and an updated list can be read at appendix 3. The review doesn't look to remove significant activities but to highlight where they've been delivered and where it's appropriate to move items to 'business as usual' where the activity is being delivered wholly within existing team capacity.

### **Options appraisal**

20. The council has published the findings of the CPC and an associated action plan, as required. The council welcomed the review and is keen to act upon the observations made to ensure continuous improvement. There are no alternative options.

### **Consultation undertaken**

21. Internal consultation has been undertaken with the Executive Management Team and relevant members of the Senior Leadership Team to inform the action plan.
22. The update position was also considered by the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny panel. The Panel raised that there was an absence of opportunities for opposition members to undertake the role of Chairman or Vice-Chairman on Scrutiny Panels.

23. The Resources and Transformation Housing Overview and Scrutiny Panel supported the report.

### **Financial and resource implications**

24. Actions identified are within existing resources.

### **Legal implications**

25. There are none arising directly from this report and the reprioritising of planned activities has had due regard to statutory requirements.

### **Risk assessment**

26. A formal risk assessment is deemed not to be required.

### **Environmental / Climate and nature implications**

27. The action plan directly responds to the CPC recommendation for the council to demonstrate further commitment to carbon reduction with a clear action plan.

### **Equalities implications**

28. The CPC feedback report makes a few observations on how equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) can be improved, acknowledging that the council has already driven forward efforts in this regard. These observations have been included in the action plan to further enhance our commitments in this area.

### **Crime and disorder implications**

29. There are none arising directly from this report.

### **Data protection / Information governance / ICT implications**

30. The CPC feedback report makes an observation on how the consistent use of technology can be improved. This observation has been included in the action plan.

### **Appendices:**

Appendix 1 – Directorate achievements  
Appendix 2 – CPC Action Plan October Update  
Appendix 3 – Corporate Plan Key Deliverable

### **Background Papers:**

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge NFDC (10-12 December 2024) Feedback report  
NFDC Corporate Peer Challenge Position Statement December 2024