

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

New Forest District Council

6 November 2025

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

New Forest District Council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during December 2024 and published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the CPC process. Taking place after the CPC, it is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- Receive feedback from peers on the early progress made by the council against the CPC recommendations and the council's RAG rated CPC Action Plan.
- Consider peers' reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site' including any further support needs
- Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date

The LGA would like to thank New Forest District Council (the council) for their commitment to sector led improvement. This Progress Review was the next step in an ongoing, open and close relationship that the council has with LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at New Forest District Council took place (onsite) on 6 November 2025, with the following members of the original CPC team involved:

- Lead officer peer: Jonathan Stephenson, Chief Executive, Brentwood Borough Council and Rochford District Council
- Lead member peer: Cllr William Nunn, Breckland Council and Norfolk County Council
- Member peer: Cllr Sarah Osborne, East Sussex County Council
- Officer peer: Claire Astbury, Head of Housing Strategy and Development, Luton Borough Council
- Officer peer: Jane Wilson, Chief Operating Officer, Cambridge City Council
- Nick Searle, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The Progress Review considered the ten recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge under the following theme headings:

- Vision and priorities
- Member development
- Communication
- Transformation

3. Progress Review – Feedback

Peers returned to the council after a period of significant change for local government following the publication of the English Devolution White Paper in December 2024. More locally in the New Forest, in February 2025, the government confirmed that Hampshire and the Solent would be one of the six areas part of the Devolution Priority Programme.

On their return to the council, peers welcomed the honesty and willingness to engage from everyone spoken to throughout the progress review. Although it was acknowledged that local government reorganisation (LGR) would bring significant change to the council and the wider Hampshire and Solent sub-region, the council is working effectively to manage the challenges and opportunities of LGR. For example, the Leader and CEX are both proactive players with leading roles in LGR discussions across Hampshire and Solent.

The council submitted a final LGR proposal setting out its desire to keep the New Forest district whole, yet potential boundary changes in other proposals could see the district split and this uncertainty is understandably causing concerns.

Nevertheless, LGR is broadly seen as an opportunity for the council to promote the economic growth, development and cultural prospects of the area. Regular updates and engagement with staff on LGR are welcomed, and staff remain committed and positive about working for the council. Overall, from the peers' engagement with staff, it is evident that staff continue to enjoy working at the council, with staff commenting that they feel appreciated.

Amidst this background of substantial change, the council has accomplished many

things since the peer team were on site. One of the council's biggest achievements has been the ongoing roll-out of waste service changes, which has represented the most significant operational transformation the council has ever undertaken. Other achievements include the opening of the Hardley Depot in March 2025; proactive preparations for the new housing regulatory standards inspection; increases in tenant satisfaction from 81% in 2023/24 to 84% in 2024/25; and the adoption of the People Strategy in April 2025. The council is rightly very proud of these achievements, amongst many others.

Out of the CPC's ten recommendations, the council's RAG rated action plan reported that 100 per cent of actions are completed or in progress and on track. On their return to the council, the peer team felt that the council has made good progress against many of their CPC recommendations.

More detailed feedback on each thematic area is set out below.

3.1. Vision and priorities

- Recommendation 1: Clarify priorities and timelines for delivery
- Recommendation 8: Demonstrate further commitment to carbon reduction with a clear action plan
- Recommendation 9: Continue the good practice in housing and consider applying successful approaches to the wider organisation

Against the context of LGR, the council's Executive Management Team (EMT) undertook a review of its priorities and deliverables. As a result, Key Performance Indicator (KPI) targets have been adjusted, and Cabinet subsequently approved the revised Corporate Plan deliverables. The new Deputy Chief Executive / Chief Operating Officer post and the establishment of the Programme Management Office (PMO), both welcomed by the peer team, will further help with priority rationalisation and delivery assurance. It will also help ensure that staff capacity is managed and resources are aligned accordingly. The peer team recognise these changes are in their early stages of implementation, but show encouraging promise.

Whilst staff remain clear on the council's priorities, they still feel that there are too many. Peers therefore encourage the council to be clear on what is a priority and what is not deliverable considering the capacity challenges because of LGR. For members, peers encourage them to have a well-defined understanding of the legacy they want to leave as part of LGR, along with an agreed delivery timeframe. Despite there being so much underway as part of LGR, the council must continue to seek effective ways to keep residents updated about the delivery of its wider priorities too.

On carbon reduction, peers heard that the Climate Change and Nature Emergency Action Plan refresh is underway, and this is supported by a newly formed Member Task and Finish Group. This Group has already started its work and will continue to meet over the coming months before issuing recommendations around April 2026. Low carbon development continues to be a key priority for the council. This is evident in the new service planning template, which outlines a commitment to prioritise climate concerns through the completion of a climate risk assessment. The council has also secured £1.49m of funding to upgrade approximately 200 homes to EPC C+ in 2025/26. Furthermore, whilst the Local Plan Review is in the early stages of development, climate change has already been identified as a key issue, with a strong desire to ensure high sustainability standards for new developments.

During the corporate peer challenge in 2024, peers observed good practice in housing and encouraged the council to apply successful approaches to the wider organisation. With the former Strategic Director of Housing recently appointed as Deputy Chief Executive / Chief Operating Officer, there is a clear opportunity to embed and share successful housing practices across the organisation. This new post also supports the establishment of a PMO which will embed methods, processes and approaches learned from work in housing across the council as a whole.

During the revisit peers were pleased to hear that the council has made good progress in this area. In September 2025, the topic based 'Monthly Meet' staff engagement forum focused on housing and had a spotlight on performance management, as well as on using technology to meet compliance needs and improve performance. The council is now scoping a programme of 15-minute sessions to be

delivered quarterly at leadership meetings to ensure the sharing of knowledge with the wider Senior Leadership Team.

3.2. Member development

- Recommendation 3: Design and deliver a robust member and senior officer development programme
- Recommendation 4: Consider ways to strengthen your overview and scrutiny function

Since the peer challenge, the council has strengthened its training offer for all members, with member briefings covering the general responsibilities of a councillor as well as briefings on specific areas of focus, such as waste. Understandably, it was clear to peers that member development has shifted to focus on improving member understanding of the LGR process, with all-member briefings on LGR and specific LGR training for Cabinet members too. On a similar point, the peer team observed that much of the Leader's time is taken up by the demands of LGR; given this, the council is encouraged to consider how the Leader can be better supported in overseeing the delivery of internal priorities.

On member training more broadly, the council has created a dedicated training and development area on the councillor SharePoint site, which provides a single point of access for resources and supports members' continuous development. The feedback on all these changes has been positive, and councillors are now better informed. Looking forward, the peer team encourages all members to maximise external training opportunities, for example from the Local Government Association and the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny. Peers also encourage those members that might seek election to any new unitary authority to take advantage of training available in order to upskill themselves in service areas that district councils do not currently manage.

The council has also established joint Executive Management Team (EMT) / Cabinet development sessions, with an initial session covering the Local Plan Review.

Following positive feedback plans are now underway for additional EMT / Cabinet development sessions covering areas such as LGR, housing regulation and community asset transfer.

In relation to officers, the council has continued its leadership and management development programmes. A new management development cohort began in April 2025, and focused on strengthening leadership skills. The Leadership Team have undertaken development initiatives focusing on behaviours, EDI and recognition, and had an away day in December 2025 focusing on LGR and resilience.

As well as enhancing its training offer to all members, the council has undertaken efforts to strengthen its overview and scrutiny function. For example, each Strategic Director is now formally linked to a specific Overview and Scrutiny panel to provide support. Regular meetings between Strategic Directors and the chairs of each Overview and Scrutiny Panel have covered activities such as agenda planning, which has helped ensure a more strategic focus. In addition, both pre-panel briefings and topic specific briefings, such as on Housing Regulation, have helped increase member understanding and have led to more informed discussions. The council is considering rolling out the changes made by the Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel, for example summary slides and example questions, to the other panels. The peer team welcomes this approach.

Nevertheless, peers felt there is still scope for overview and scrutiny to be further strengthened. Peers see there is potential for overview and scrutiny to act as a 'critical friend' to assist with policy development and regulatory expectations, for example in preparations for the forthcoming inspection by the Regulatory of Social Housing. Peers also welcomed the inclusion of tenant representation in the housing scrutiny group. It is important that this is supported by meaningful engagement and two-way communication with wider tenant representative bodies to support the continued succession planning within this scrutiny.

On a broader point regarding member development, peers noted effective cross-party collaboration, for example on the deferment of the Local Plan and whole council agreement for the council's LGR submission. Peers strongly welcomed this approach and encourage all members to pursue further opportunities for joint working.

3.3. Communication

- Recommendation 2: Create an overarching corporate narrative and communicate proactively with staff, members and local people
- Recommendation 10: Remember to celebrate your achievements no matter how small or big they are

During the corporate peer challenge, the peer team encouraged the council to create a narrative to 'help staff, members, partners, and residents look towards the future and help them see how they can support the delivery of the corporate plan'. Whilst a draft corporate narrative was presented to EMT in May 2025, the council has postponed its publication. The council explained that this was because the corporate narrative will be revised in the coming months following LGR developments and decisions. Whilst understanding the significant external factors at play, peers continue to encourage the council to consider what it wants to achieve with a corporate narrative as this will determine the most suitable timing for its publication.

The adoption of the People Strategy in 2025 has led to increased efforts to recognise staff achievements. Successes have and continue to be celebrated in team meetings, directorate sessions and staff events, such as a BBQ for waste operatives in October 2025. Other channels are used too, such as internal communications, media releases and the annual performance report. A significant all-staff celebration for summer 2026 is also being planned. Alongside doing more to acknowledge staff achievements, the council has also established a wellbeing quiet room for employees. The peer team welcome these initiatives, but want the council to ensure the approach is applied and promoted consistently across the organisation.

On internal communications specifically, the peer team consistently heard positive feedback that the chief executive effectively communicates with staff, through different channels. Furthermore, improvements have been made to internal communications through the development of a staff framework. The appointment of an Employee Engagement Officer has made a substantial difference, helping to identify staff persona groups and tailor communication channels and messages. Staff personas are now being developed to ensure communications and engagement are

appropriately targeted. The Employee Engagement Plan for LGR also outlines various communication methods to ensure messages are suitably adapted to different teams, making sure they are effective as possible.

3.4. Transformation

- Recommendation 5: Ensure there is collective ownership of the transformation programme by the executive management team
- Recommendation 6: Apply internal policies and practices consistently across the council
- Recommendation 7: Develop an assets strategy and action plan

Since the peer challenge, the focus of council's transformation programme has understandably shifted to LGR preparedness. Despite this shift in focus, the transformation programme continues to have strong commitment from all political groups and staff at all levels. Leadership of the programme remains effective, with the new Deputy Chief Executive / Chief Operating Officer appointment giving it fresh impetus as well as responsibility for delivery.

The council has taken effective steps to ensure that the transformation programme is fully aligned with LGR objectives and delivers long-term outcomes. For example, after reviewing the strategic priorities an updated Transformation Strategy was approved by Cabinet in August 2025; the council has also developed a clear governance structure with directorate board meetings feeding into the monthly LGR and Transformation Board; and the establishment of the PMO will bring together a single set of projects and provide oversight and coordination on the delivery of priorities. It will bring consistency and clarity, and enable the effective use of data to ensure focus stays in the right place.

Staying with the considered and evidence based approach they are establishing will stand the council in good stead through LGR. Peers saw that there is already evidence demonstrating that the council has been using this approach to help focus on what is essential and in best interests of residents with LGR on the horizon. As

with all councils there is a risk that they get pulled off track, but it is encouraging that the council has the tools to mitigate this.

As part of the People Strategy, new organisational development (OD) initiatives have been launched. These initiatives, spearheaded by the appointment of two new OD roles, are showing encouraging promise and playing a key role in ensuring the consistent application of internal policies and practices. For example, the new Behaviours Framework was approved in July 2025. It was soft launched through chief executive staff sessions in July 2025, covered at the Leadership team development day, and training is being implemented across the council. The induction process has also been reviewed. There are now 'induction essentials' videos for new starters and enhanced guidance for managers too. Furthermore, the peer team heard about changes to performance and development, namely the forthcoming launch of 'Growth and Goals' conversations. Every manager is undertaking training and staff will have three conversations a year, replacing the existing format which was described as 'transactional'.

Following consideration at the Resources and Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Panel in June 2025, the Cabinet approved the council's three-year Asset Strategy and Action Plan in July 2025. Peers welcomed the council's plans to regularly update Cabinet on progress to maintain focus on political priorities, as well as the desire to maintain close working between Estates colleagues and the Transformation Programme, against the backdrop of LGR preparations. Initial discussions have taken place with town and parish councils to support implementation, although the peer team encourages the careful management of expectations.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank New Forest District Council for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.



Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this.

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