

Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge progress review 2025

Committee considering report:	Executive
Date of Committee:	22 May 2025
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Jeff Brooks
Report Author:	Gabrielle Mancini
Forward Plan Ref:	EX4689

1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To publish the results of the Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge progress review for West Berkshire Council, which was received by the Council on the 10th April 2025.

2 Recommendations

Executive is asked to consider:

- (a) the Corporate Peer Challenge progress review report produced by the LGA following a visit in January 2025; and
- (b) the progress made since the Council's Corporate Peer Challenge report was published in 2024.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report.
Human Resource:	There are no direct HR implications as a result of this report.
Legal:	There are no direct Legal implications as a result of this report.
Risk Management:	There are no significant risk management issues as a result of this report.

Property:	N/A			
Policy:	There are no direct Policy implications as a result of this report.			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		x		N/A
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		x		N/A
Environmental Impact:		x		N/A
Health Impact:		x		N/A
ICT Impact:		x		N/A
Digital Services Impact:		x		N/A

Council Strategy Priorities:	x			The report highlights strengths and progress made following the Corporate Peer Challenge undertaken in 2024. Additional commentary is provided to consider further improvements which could be made to deliver the Council Strategy and core services.
Core Business:	x			The report highlights strengths and progress made following the Corporate Peer Challenge undertaken in 2024. Additional commentary is provided to consider further improvements which could be made to deliver the Council Strategy and core services.
Data Impact:		x		N/A
Consultation and Engagement:	SLT, Portfolio Holders			

4 Executive Summary

- 4.1 This paper disseminates the results of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge progress review which took place in January 2025 (Appendix A). This progress review took place in order for the LGA to provide West Berkshire Council with feedback as to the progress made in response to recommendations made during a full Corporate Peer Challenge which took place in February 2024 (Appendix B).

5 Supporting Information

Introduction

- 5.1 The Local Government Association (LGA) offers a range of support for local authorities as part of a 'sector led improvement' programme. A component of the programme is the Corporate Peer Challenge, as a solution to reduce the inspection burden on local government, whilst aiming to provide robust, strategic and credible challenge and support to councils, by involving member and officer peers from other local authorities in the country. There are a number of different types offered, but all local authorities should have a Corporate Peer Challenge every four or five years. The Council's last Peer Challenge was in 2024, so the Council's request for a progress review in early 2025 was within expected timescales.

Background

- 5.2 The Corporate Peer Challenge progress report appended to this report was compiled by the LGA team following a visit which took place January 2025. The report covers the

findings, commentary on progress made, and details of the peer team (which was made up of senior officers, and councillors from other local authorities, with an LGA supporting officer).

5.3 The report gives details of the 11 recommendations made within the 2024 report, which formed the primary basis of an action plan, developed and implemented in the period between visits. They are namely:

- **Recommendation 1** – Urgently address overspending in children’s and adult services and build reserves, develop a clear plan that has buy-in from the whole organisation.
- **Recommendation 2** – Ensure that there is traction on the delivery of the Delivering Better Value SEND programme and have a plan to resolve the High Needs Block Deficit.
- **Recommendation 3** – Transformation needs to be embedded across the organisation with strong leadership from the political leadership, CLT, and an empowered central team to drive and enable transformation activity. Linked to this, the transformation programme needs to be bolder to help ensure that the council can get a grip of finances, particularly the overspends in children’s and adult services, and home to school transport.
- **Recommendation 4** – Invest time to strengthen relationships and ensure that the newly formed CLT are equipped as an effective senior officer leadership team to provide clear and consistent direction and stewardship for the organisation. This should be an ongoing area of work. Similarly, create more space for the Executive and CLT to jointly develop as a ‘Top Team’ to reinforce close working relationships and trust. Now that you have a permanent CLT in place, urgently stabilise the leadership below executive director level.
- **Recommendation 5** – Give greater clarity regarding priorities and focus on things that will make the most difference and that can be delivered within the council’s financial envelope and capacity. This will involve deprioritising things.
- **Recommendation 6** – Executive members should continue the good work settling into their new roles, taking up opportunities to develop their skills, and owning and leading their portfolios to ensure effective political leadership for the council.
- **Recommendation 7** – Simplify the governance structure to increase pace and agility.
- **Recommendation 8** – Ensure that strategic legal, HR, communications and transformation expertise has a place at the ‘top table’ in a meaningful way and at the right point of policy development and delivery.
- **Recommendation 9** – Test the extent to which the behaviour framework has been embedded within the organisation (e.g. through staff survey/ pulse survey).

- **Recommendation 10** – Strengthen communications and engagement activity further, by using internal communications expertise earlier in project planning, closing the communications loop via consistent feedback on outcomes of consultations, and embedding approaches that engage wider groups of people earlier in the process and in more meaningful ways.
 - **Recommendation 11** – Build on strong and positive operational relationships between the council and partners, including contractors, and develop strategic relationships that create opportunities to deliver activity that will support wider council and partner objectives (e.g. apprenticeships, social value). As part of this, develop a strategic Memorandum of Understanding with the Voluntary and Community Sector.
- 5.4 The progress review report notes that two thirds of these actions have been completed as of January 2025, with progress being made towards the remaining third. The report details the positive impact this has had on the Council's effectiveness, in particular with respect to the strengthening effect of permanent political leadership being put in place and changes to leadership at officer level.
- 5.5 One of the most urgent recommendations within the original report related to the Council's financial position and the need to address overspends in Adult Social Care and Children and Family Services. The progress review reflected that the Council's financial challenges remain acute and that effective prioritisation and a whole organisation approach to budgetary management will be key to its future sustainability.
- 5.6 As well as the standard areas of focus included within all Corporate Peer Challenges, the Council has asked the LGA to look at SEND and Transformation in more detail. The progress report reflects that in both of these areas progress has been made, which has had a meaningful impact on outcomes and the Council's financial position. It will be important, however, to continue to focus on these areas to ensure that the benefits of work done to date can be fully realised.
- 5.7 The report also makes reference to the Council's willingness and capability to participate in, and benefit from, the objectives of the Government's Devolution White Paper. This has been particularly evident since the report was compiled through initial work done to compile an interim proposal for the formation of a new Ridgeway unitary authority in partnership with South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils.

Proposals

The following recommendations are made:

- Executive is informed of the Corporate Peer Challenge progress review report produced by the LGA following a visit in January 2025.
- Executive is updated with the progress made since the Council's Corporate Peer Challenge report was published in 2024

6 Other options considered

- 6.1 Not considering this report is an option; however, the Council found the Corporate Peer Challenge and associated progress review visit very valuable as part of its commitment to continuous improvement. The reports produced after each of these visits reflect on the Council's strengths and areas for further improvement. A careful consideration of the feedback, and recognition of the progress made in the period between visits, will ensure the maximum benefit from undertaking the Corporate Peer Challenge.

7 Conclusion

- 7.1 The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge undertaken in February 2024 highlighted many of the Council's strengths and successes and identified key recommendations for further improvement. Since then, significant work has been done to address these recommendations as part of a comprehensive action plan. The progress review visit in January 2025 provided a timely opportunity to review the effectiveness of this work to date in order to identify where the Council is performing well, as well as where it might benefit from additional focus.
- 7.2 The progress review report is a useful tool which will inform West Berkshire Council's continuous improvement work, and it is therefore recommended that the report be noted as proposed in this report.

8 Appendices

- 8.1 Appendix A – Corporate Peer Challenge progress review- 2025
- 8.2 Appendix B – Corporate Peer Challenge report and action plan- 2024

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: ☐ No: ☒

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Considered or reviewed by Scrutiny Commission or associated Committees, Task Groups within preceding six months | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Item is Urgent Key Decision | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Report is to note only | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

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