

# **LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review**

West Berkshire Council

Friday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2025

Feedback



**Corporate Peer Challenge**



## Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Summary of the approach .....	3
3. Progress Review – Feedback.....	5
4. Final thoughts and next steps.....	13

# 1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 6-9 February 2024, and published the [full report](#) with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the CPC process. Taking place approximately ten months 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 CPC Action Plan;
- Consider peers' reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team was 'on-site' including any further support needs; and
- Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.

The LGA would like to thank West Berkshire Council for their commitment to sector-led improvement. This Progress Review was the next step in the ongoing, open and close relationship that the council has with LGA sector support.

## 2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at West Berkshire Council took place at the council on Friday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2025.

The Progress Review focussed on the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge:

- **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.

West Berkshire Council accepted all the recommendations made during the LGA CPC and subsequently produced an action plan outlining the steps the council would take to respond to these recommendations.

For this Progress Review, the following members of the original CPC team were involved:

- Cllr Gareth Roberts – Leader, Richmond Council
- Laura Church – Chief Executive, Bedford Council
- James Walton – Executive Director Resources, Shropshire Council
- Barbara Peacock – National SEND Children's Improvement Adviser, LGA
- Emily Bennett – NGDP management trainee, LGA (shadow peer)
- Kate Herbert – Principal Adviser for London, LGA (peer challenge manager)

The peer team would like to thank all those that they spoke to as part of the Progress Review for their participation and openness.

### 3. Progress Review – Feedback

The council's CPC action plan breaks down each of the 11 recommendations and identifies a number of actions to be delivered to respond to the recommendation. Of the 54 actions, 8 had deadlines for delivery that were not yet due at the point of the Progress Review. Of those that were due to be delivered, 67% were marked as complete or recurring actions that were being delivered, and 33% were marked as delivered slightly behind schedule or were in development.

## Local Priorities and Outcomes


Since the Corporate Peer Challenge took place, West Berkshire has achieved a number of positive developments: the Council's Adult Social Care service received a 'Good' rating from the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in February 2024; the introduction of a Residents Newsletter has improved communication with the community; and there has been encouraging progress on the Local Plan, with the Full Council deciding in November 2024 to proceed to a final public consultation over Spring and Summer 2025.

The peer team recommended that the Council should provide 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, flagging that this will involve deprioritising things. During the Progress Review, the peer team heard that the Council has reviewed the Council Strategy Delivery Plan for 2024.25 and sought to rationalise its priorities, with a paper due to be considered by the Executive in February 2025. The proposal is for a reduction of key measures from 200 to around 20, which will be the focus of quarterly reporting to members. The peer team also heard that internally the Extended Leadership Team (ELT) has focused on ten key measures, which have been shared with staff to highlight where staff can make a measurable impact in the short term. These are welcome developments. Given the financial context facing the Council, the peer team stressed that clarity on prioritisation and deprioritisation needs to lead to delivery at pace.

## Organisational and Place Leadership

Since the peer team was last in West Berkshire, there have been changes in both political and officer leadership at the Council. Cllr Jeff Brooks became the Leader of the Council in May 2024, with Cllr Denise Gaines as the Deputy Leader. This has resolved the uncertainty regarding the acting political leadership arrangements that the peer team observed during the Corporate Peer Challenge in February 2024.

Additionally, the former chief executive left the Council in November 2024, and Joseph Holmes has taken on the role of Interim Chief Executive, with Sarah Clarke stepping up as Interim Executive Director (Resources), and Shannon Coleman-



Slaughter as Section 151 Officer. The interim arrangements for the chief executive have been well-received, and staff spoke positively about the Leader and Interim Chief Executive walking the floor and talking to staff, answering any questions they might have.

The Corporate Peer Challenge recommended that the council should invest time to strengthen relationships and ensure that the (at the time) newly formed Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) were equipped as an effective senior officer leadership team to provide clear and consistent direction and stewardship for the organisation. The peer team also recommended that more space should be created for the Executive and CLT to jointly develop as a 'Top Team' to reinforce close working relationships and trust. During the Progress Review, the peer team heard that a LGA Top Team programme bringing together the CLT and Executive was underway, and had been well-received, identifying ways in which to enhance working relationships and practice, and supporting conversations around prioritisation.

The Corporate Peer Challenge also recommended that the leadership below executive director level needed to be urgently stabilised. During the Progress Review, the peer team heard that there has been a number of appointments to the Senior Leadership Team, resulting in fewer interim arrangements in place compared to when the Corporate Peer Challenge took place. Positively, in focus groups during the Progress Review, staff fed back to the peer team that senior officers are now more visible and accessible

Looking outward, the Corporate Peer Challenge recommended the Council to 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. During the Progress Review, the peer team heard about the forthcoming Vision 2050 work which will compile 'offers and asks' to clearly articulate opportunities for the area's development, examples of new inter-local authority links being made outside of Berkshire, partners from town councils being involved in town centre master planning work, and that the membership and remit of the Health & Wellbeing Board and its subgroups were being refreshed to encourage greater partner participation. The peer

team also heard that a strategic Memorandum of Understanding between the Council and the Voluntary and Community Sector has been developed and agreed.

The Devolution White Paper will significantly impact the Council's long-term role in place leadership. During the Progress Review it was clear to the peer team that the Council is keen to engage in Strategic Authority discussions and wants to play a key role in developing proposals. There was also recognition that Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) may also be a factor for the council to consider. The peer team felt that it was important that the council thinks carefully about the opportunities and implications of both devolution and potential LGR, but these topics should not distract members and officers from taking difficult decisions and delivering change at pace now.

### **Governance and Culture**

The Corporate Peer Challenge urged the Council to simplify the governance structure to increase pace and agility. Linked to this, the Council was recommended to 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. The peer team heard during the Progress Review that a review of governance has taken place, drawing on examples of approaches used elsewhere. The Council explained that the new arrangements represent a more streamlined internal governance approach, removing delivery boards and centralising corporate activity, and clarifying arrangements for HR, Legal and Finance to sign off reports. It was intended that this would improve information sharing and management of corporate programmes within the SLT, and ensure wider inclusion of key staff, e.g. communications and project management. The peer team could see that this work has been helpful, though flagged that the new arrangements had only been implemented from December 2024 and needed to bed in. Conversations with staff during the Progress Review highlighted gaps in understanding of the new governance framework, what was new, and what it meant for how they undertook their roles. There is a need to build understanding across the organisation of the new arrangements.

It was positive to see that new arrangements sought to include key staff more widely



in important discussions. The peer team would recommend that this be developed further by putting in place a culture of co-production – including staff and key corporate officers early to shape new ways of working. There would be benefits for the Council by extending opportunities for co-production with external partners too.

## **Financial Planning and Management**

With regard to the local authority's finances, the Corporate Peer Challenge stressed that the Council urgently needed to address overspending in children's and adult services and build reserves, and develop a clear plan that had buy-in from the whole organisation.

The Council reported that since the Corporate Peer Challenge it had made progress in understanding the financial challenge it faces and communicating this to the organisation, as well as developing a plan to address these challenges. However, since February 2024 the Council's financial position has become even more challenging and the in-year position remains acute, with rising demand for services and overspending particularly in housing, home to school transport, and social care unit costs. Furthermore, the increasing SEND deficit in the High Needs Block has placed significant pressure on the capital financing budget, and reserves have reduced further. Though the Council reports that it has achieved over £14 million of savings, and more than 80% of planned savings are likely to be achieved by the end of Q2, this will be insufficient. At the time of the Progress Review the Council was in active discussions with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) about a request for Exceptional Financial Support (EFS). At the time of writing this report, MHCLG has agreed to this in principle

During the Progress Review, the peer team also heard that the Council continues to build relationships with its new auditor, KPMG. Draft financial statements were provided in line with the end of May deadline for the second year running, and KPMG has undertaken significant audit work during 2024, which is a much-improved position. The Council also flagged that although previous auditors issued disclaimed opinions for the 2021-22 and 2022-23 financial years, KPMG is expected to issue a disclaimed opinion for 2023-24 as well. The Value for Money (VfM) work from KPMG is ongoing, with significant weaknesses likely to be highlighted in respect of financial

resilience.

The peer team remains of the view that there is a need for a whole organisation approach to tackling the financial challenge, at all levels of the council. Though all staff the peer team spoke to appeared to understand the scale of the challenge facing the council and the need to contribute to delivering solutions, some staff felt that they had heard mixed messages from senior management and members about the need to reduce spend, but without any reduction in expectations for volume or quality of delivery. The tight financial position has not improved and the application for EFS does not signal that a solution has been identified. The peer team recognised that the product of the ongoing work to rationalise Council priorities had yet to be agreed and communicated to staff – though this was imminent – and that this clarity may help to address this issue.

The peer team raised with the council the need to communicate clearly with residents on the financial challenges facing the council and highlighted opportunities such as the new resident newsletter to provide context to explain difficult decisions the council may need to make. There remains a risk that those difficult decisions are not yet owned by all officers and members across the authority.

### **Capacity for Improvement**

The Corporate Peer Challenge stressed that transformation needed 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. The peer team also recommended that the transformation programme needed 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. During the Progress Review, the peer team heard that the small transformation team has projected £3m of tangible savings for the council. For example, at the time of the Progress Review, the Council was in the process of outsourcing two of its three adult social care homes (projected to deliver more resilient services, providing significant savings of £976k and cost avoidance of £1.5m). The peer team also heard about work to repurpose a previous care home into 23 temporary accommodation units (delivering savings of £150k and cost avoidance of current additional housing costs of £600k), and

converting some of the accommodation into 'family time' provision for children's social care (reducing the cost of hired external facilities by £0.1m and providing a more permanent and better location for this service). The peer team heard that transformation resources across the council are due to be consolidated, and that this will provide scope for expansion of scale and impact of transformation activity, and agreed that opportunities for centralisation of some services would also enable greater join up and consistency. A more ambitious transformation programme will be necessary to create capacity for improvement in light of the difficult financial position

The peer team was also pleased to see that the Council was taking up opportunities to lever in additional capacity and challenge on areas for improvement, for example LGA support around IT and digital (including a digital 360 review), a LGA adult social care leadership review, support for the Health & Well-being Board from Partners in Care and Health, and an LGA children's services peer challenge.

The peer team heard that in response to their recommendations in the Corporate Peer Challenge, the Executive has approved a new risk management strategy with a revised risk appetite, bringing greater clarity that the Council is now more open to risk. It was noted that this will be embedded in 2025 through officer training and ensuring that this changed risk appetite is reflected in how the Council operates.

The peer team was informed that the Council remains committed to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) and that senior management are keen to model this commitment in their behaviour. New EDI training has been rolled out through the Council's new HR system, and this has been well received. The gender balance of the Council's senior leadership team has changed significantly from 15:2 male to female in 2019 to 5:11 now. Similarly, the Executive is much more reflective of the wider population, with a gender balance ratio of 6:4 compared to 7:2 at the 2019 peer review. The peer team was of the view that this is a good start and would encourage the council to consider EDI in its widest context now one of the basics has been improved.

The Corporate Peer Challenge recommended that Executive members should continue the good work they had evidenced of how they were settling into their new roles, by taking up opportunities to develop their skills, and owning and leading their

portfolios to ensure effective political leadership for the council. During the Progress Review, the peer team heard that the Council remains fully committed to enhancing member development and that a number of Executive members had been supported to take part in LGA-led courses in recent months, and the chair of the Scrutiny Commission had been able to attend a Centre for Governance and Scrutiny course. This senior member engagement in learning and development is positive and should be encouraged further.

It was also positive to hear that the Council is rolling out an officer leadership development programme in 2025, starting with the SLT and then extending to the Leadership Forum.

Work to strengthen communications and engagement activity has included publicising consultation responses externally using the 'You said, we did' approach to closing the consultation loop, reviewing the consultation toolkit, and increased senior corporate involvement in communications planning. A Residents Survey is planned for Summer 2025.

In response to the Corporate Peer Challenge's recommendation to test the extent to which the behaviour framework has been embedded within the organisation, the council has undertaken an Employee Engagement Survey to provide a rich set of feedback to inform future staff communication and engagement. Feedback from staff interviewed during the Progress Review acknowledged that the Council undertakes a lot of communication activity, but highlighted a need to consider tailoring the activity further to meet needs of staff with different working patterns. There was also a suggestion that some information gets blocked due to gaps in the structure, and some staff don't feel engaged or feel that they know what is going on. It would be helpful to consider how these points can be addressed as part of the wider work in this area.

### **Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)**

The Corporate Peer Challenge recommended that the Council needed to 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.

During the Progress Review, the peer team heard that since the Corporate Peer Challenge a range of activity has taken place: A SEND Self Evaluation has been completed, a revised SEND and Inclusion Strategy has been agreed, a Designated Social Care Officer (DSCO) has been appointed, and a SEND Strategic Improvement Board has brought together partners to address the challenges facing the partnership. The peer team recognised particular challenges with the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB) and noted that the Council was actively working with neighbouring councils to challenge the BOB ICB to ensure consistency of offer and approach across the ICB footprint, for example to influence BOB ICB neurodiversity pathways.


It was clear that SEND sufficiency continues to be a challenge. The Council has completed a SEND sufficiency exercise with a plan for short- and longer-term solutions to address the availability of placements. As mentioned above, the High Needs Block deficit continues to represent a significant challenge for the Council.

There was strong recognition across the peer team of the challenges in this area and they acknowledged that there were encouraging early steps to address these. The peer team also felt that the Council has made good use of the money and capacity that comes via the Delivering Better Value support programme.

The Council anticipates both an ILACS inspection and a SEND inspection in 2025. The peer team also heard that there has been a marked increase in the quantity and quality of children's and education service information shared with the Corporate Board and the Council's Executive Members in order to support greater corporate knowledge and ownership of the strengths and weaknesses across Children's Services and make improvements. This has also been complemented by enhanced reporting to the Scrutiny Commission.

## 4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank West Berkshire Council for undertaking a CPC Progress Review. We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order 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.

Mona Sehgal, Principal Adviser for the South East, is the main point of contact between the authority and the LGA and her e-mail address is [mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk](mailto:mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk).