

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Chorley Council

10th February 2026

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during May 2025 and published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process, and 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

2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at Chorley Council took place (onsite) on 10th February 2026. The Progress Review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge under three key headings, finance and property, strategic planning and communications and overview and scrutiny. In advance of the Progress Review, the council shared a RAG rated Action Plan (Red, Amber, Green) to update peers on the progress made to date. All of the 9 recommendations were rated by the council as green.

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

- Lead member – Cllr Gavin Callaghan (Leader of Basildon Council)
- Section 151 Peer – Claire Morris (Executive Head of Service, Mole Valley)
- Peer challenge manager – Cath Buckley (Senior Adviser, LGA)

Unfortunately, the lead officer peer had to drop out of the review at short notice due to ill health and a decision was taken to proceed with the review based on the strong reputation of the original team who would be on site.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Peers conducted this Progress Review against the backdrop of substantial changes across the local government landscape at a national level, with significant implications in Lancashire. This includes the formation of the Lancashire Combined County Authority (CCA), which held its inaugural meeting in March 2025, as well as the early stages of local government reorganisation (LGR), following the publication of the English Devolution White Paper.

During the review, peers heard how Chorley Council submitted its proposal in November 2025, expressing a preference for a four unitary model - 'Four Lancashire'. This proposal if enacted would group Chorley with South Ribble and West Lancashire into a single new

authority from April 2028. Four other proposals have been submitted to MHCLG for Lancashire alongside this proposal. All five proposals have since been incorporated within a public consultation which was ongoing at the time of the Progress Review.

Staff recognised that internal communications in relation to LGR were strong in terms of timelines and process. The council may wish to consider how best to support staff more widely as they head towards future reform. For example, providing information briefings to provide insights into the functions conducted at unitary authorities to assist officers with transition to future roles and ways of working. This may also include articulating what the proposed models other than 'Four Lancashire' might entail.

The peer team recognise that the council is operating in a different and pressured context at this time. It was within this context that the peer team have considered the progress that has been made by Chorley Council with the implementation of the CPC recommendations.

3.1. Theme 1 – Finance and Property

This theme related to the following recommendations from the original CPC report:

- **Financial management** - the council's budget includes variable sources of income (business rates and asset income) some of which are subject to market forces that are outside of the council's control. It is recommended that the council review the best way to mitigate the impact of this through a full assessment of how both the revenue and capital budget are funded.
- **Company governance** - complete a review of the governance arrangements surrounding the two companies owned by the council to help ensure the operation of the companies fully complies with, and benefits from current best practice from across the sector.
- **Property and planning** – retain oversight of the improvements being targeted in the property and planning directorate specifically on resourcing, long term strategy planning and financial management, to ensure they realise their intent and thus help mitigate against potential reputational and financial risks.

The council are working towards a balanced budget for 26/27, however, there is a budget gap for 27/28 and beyond which has not been fully addressed through transformation savings identified so far. The gap present for 27/28 is influenced by the recent outcome of the fair funding review, the business rates reset, and additional responsibilities in relation to food waste. Officers told the team that the gap is manageable and that there are a range of contingencies which could be explored should they need to be. This is likely to place additional pressure on the 'Fit for the Future' programme to deliver additional savings, whilst the council is planning for LGR implementation and ultimately transition.

The original CPC suggested a governance review of council owned companies which upon completion, concluded that the property company was no longer required, as a consequence the council have taken a decision to wind up the company and were in the process of doing so at the time of the progress review. The leisure company remains and has been subject to a review of its governance and decision making arrangements. An officer task group was established to deliver on the action plan arising from the review which is overseen by members of the audit and governance committee. At the time of the follow up review, officers were progressing through the agreed action plan. Officers reflected that this process has been positive, improving transparency and scrutiny and also assisting in broadening the understanding of this area amongst a wider cohort of officers and members.

Significant improvements have also been made in the property and planning services. The team heard how increased fee income in the planning service has been used to support investment in enforcement and biodiversity including a number of posts being created and recruited to – in addition, the establishment of a shared services arrangement for planning enforcement has improved resilience. This has enabled delivery on local plan priorities.

A strategic asset management plan (SAMP) is under development, and there has been extensive collaboration with partners including West Lancashire and South Ribble councils. Officers reported that this work has improved members understanding of the assets held by the council, which in turn has supported more positive and informed conversations about their management and future use. In addition, the council has gained a deeper insight into how the property budget connects to income streams and the risks attached to them, aided by the ongoing development of the CIVICA asset management system. The completion of the SAMP will help to strengthen this understanding further.

3.2. Theme 2 – Shared services, strategic planning and communications

The second theme related to the following financial recommendations:

- **Shared services** - evaluate the successes and lessons learnt from the shared services arrangement. Doing so can support organisational learning and help ensure that the opportunities and benefits for both councils are fully maximised.
- **Corporate priorities** – review the current priorities to see how they can more deeply reflect local need with the potential to include an additional inward focused priority around efficiency and releasing capacity.
- **Delivery of priorities** – consider how best to include members and external partners to coordinate the delivery and promotion of the corporate priorities.
- **Strategic communications** - the emerging communications strategy and plan should be adopted, implemented and its impact evaluated so that it is fully embraced across the council.
- **Climate change** – consider approaches used by regional exemplar authorities to

refocus the council's work on climate action. Doing so can help the council to more fully meet its ambitions in this regard, whilst realising both environmental and economic benefits.

It was noted that the approach towards shared services has been considered and reviewed, done so in a way which is relative to this wider current context of LGR. The review demonstrated that savings and efficiencies have been delivered whilst service performance has been maintained or improved, but that now the council was focused on LGR, the likely financial rewards from any further expansion of this would not be beneficial due to the level of investment and resource capacity required.

The council has strengthened its strategic planning and approach to communications. There are a number of new and refreshed strategies, including the corporate strategy, strategic partnership strategy, digital strategy and climate strategy. Officers told the peer team that these are bedding in well and members advised that they have good oversight of their delivery and impact. Whilst corporate priorities have been reviewed, it was noted that the option to include an inward focused priority had not been adopted and that there remains a lack of recognition of this area. The peer team heard that there is a risk that this lack of focus could impact on delivery of savings and efficiencies ('Fit for the Future programme') and more broadly on staff morale due to a potential perceived lack of appreciation for the vital statutory, regulatory and back office functions. This is perhaps an even more important consideration as the council heads further into an increasingly demanding period of LGR.

Members are rightly proud of the 'Making it Happen' programme which has been rolled out since the original review and has enhanced community visibility of the vital work that elected members do in / for the communities they represent. The peer team were impressed by the number of projects that have been promoted through this initiative, with over 100 projects on the programme, and how it has helped members highlight and showcase the value of their work in communities. Some examples include improvements to play areas and open spaces, community clean up days, school Healthy Eating projects, and upgrades for community centres.

The council are currently developing a commercial strategy linked to their events programme. The peer team recognised that there were opportunities to build on this area, for example, linking the destination management plan to the town of culture bid and therefore support improvements to the tourism offer more broadly.

Strategic communications have improved with the adoption and delivery of the new strategy. It was also apparent that the culture around strategic communications had improved where services felt that the relationship with the team had moved to a 'working together' approach. Despite this progress, the team felt that there were opportunities to do more in this area to improve reporting on performance and also to support proactive

messaging around bigger policy decisions. For example, members expressed concern on upcoming changes to food waste – and see an opportunity here to ensure that communication to residents is strong and well targeted. This would help mitigate the risks with such high profile visible service reforms. In terms of performance reporting on communication activity, whilst key performance data is provided to senior officers the peer team would encourage member oversight of communications KPIs.

The council has established a cross departmental climate change group to bring together expertise from across the organisation. Cabinet members consider this group to be functioning effectively, providing a clearer structure for oversight, challenge, and coordination of climate related activity. In developing its new strategy, the council proactively sought and applied learning from other local authorities, ensuring that emerging best practice is reflected in its own approach. As a result, both officers and members regard the new strategy as a success, noting that it has improved organisational understanding of climate issues and created a stronger platform for future delivery.

3.3. Theme 3 – Overview and Scrutiny

The third theme explored the following recommendation:

- **Overview and scrutiny** – further develop the role and impact of overview and scrutiny. Provide external training for members and officers on the role of scrutiny to ensure active engagement with the function and forward plan. This will support local assurance by providing sufficient, transparent and public challenge of key decisions and policy changes.

Much work has been done to embed scrutiny arrangements, with improvements noted by members and officers. Examples include the development of an executive/scrutiny protocol, task and finish reviews and a new annual work programming event. The peer team heard examples of positive working such as regular meetings between the chair of audit and governance and the chair of overview and scrutiny. A recent review into suicide prevention was highly regarded by both officers and members – and a new impact tracker helps to track recommendations made to understand the difference that scrutiny has made.

These successes provide a strong foundation for plans to develop a refreshed scrutiny annual report with a clearer focus on outcomes and impact. A more impact led report will allow the council to demonstrate how scrutiny has added value, influenced decision making, and contributed to service improvements over the past year. The peer team felt that this presents a valuable opportunity to enhance the external visibility and credibility of the council's scrutiny function and should be promoted with key stakeholders and through existing communications channels. It can also help in setting the platform and expectations for how effective overview and scrutiny can be discharged, moving into the new operating environment.

4. Next steps

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 several of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this.

Dan Archer is the regional lead for the North West and is the main contact between Chorley Council and the LGA. Dan is available to discuss any further support required, his email address is Daniel.archer@local.gov.uk

Further information, support, and resources on LGR/Devolution, can be found on the LGA's devolution and LGR Hub website.