

A year of **change**,  
**progress** and  
**community**.

# Chelmsford's Year in focus 2024-25.

We were pleased to welcome the Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge team to Chelmsford last December.

Over the course of their visit, the group of peers spoke with councillors, officers, partners and community representatives, gaining a close look at how we work and the difference we strive to make in our community. For us, it was an opportunity to step back and reflect, to show what makes Chelmsford different, and to hear honest views on where we could do better.

Chelmsford is proud to be a forward-looking council: pragmatic, collaborative and open to change. Those qualities have served us well this year as we have navigated the early stages of local government reorganisation across Essex. The peer challenge came at exactly the right time. It was wonderful to have reassurance about what we do well, but even more valuable to look carefully at how we can strengthen governance, performance and engagement for the future.

Since the visit, we have worked through every recommendation. Each has been taken seriously, with actions agreed, tracked and reported. Feedback from peers has influenced how we plan, how we involve our Members in decisionmaking, and how we manage change internally. It has also helped us to maintain momentum on key local projects, from housing and leisure to infrastructure and culture, that continue to improve life for people across the city.

Like councils everywhere, we face difficult financial choices and growing demand for services. We have approached these challenges in a measured and inclusive way, reviewing what we do, finding savings where necessary, and focusing resources on the actions that make the greatest difference to residents. None of this has been easy, but we are fortunate to have a culture of trust, collaboration, creativity, accountability and learning. Our staff and Members have worked well together in the face of great change to keep Chelmsford moving forward.

The peer challenge report and action plan were published earlier this year and endorsed by Cabinet. We are proud of the progress made since then. As the peers return to review our journey, we welcome the chance to share where we are now and how we got here.



**Nick Eveleigh**  
Chief Executive



**Cllr Stephen Robinson**  
Leader



## Executive summary

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge team visited Chelmsford City Council between 3 December and 6 December 2024. Guided by a detailed position statement prepared by the council, the peers gathered information and insights through a structured programme of meetings, focus groups and briefings.

They spoke to a wide range of councillors, senior officers, staff, partners, community members and external stakeholders. The team reviewed a broad range of material covering Chelmsford's operations, governance, finances and strategic priorities to understand the city, the challenges it faces and the ambitions shaping its future.

Their final report was issued in February 2025 and published on the council's website following Cabinet consideration of the associated action plan.



Peers made a number of positive observations about Chelmsford City Council, including :

- ✓ Effective political and managerial leadership with a clear sense of direction and accountability
- ✓ Strong external partnerships and an influential role in shaping the regional conversation on local government reorganisation (LGR)
- ✓ Visible commitment to placemaking, culture and environmental responsibility
- ✓ A workforce that is professional, adaptable and motivated by public service
- ✓ Constructive relationships between members and officers, and a culture of openness to learning and change
- ✓ Sound financial management and an ongoing focus on value for money
- ✓ Active engagement with residents and communities on local priorities

The peer team also touched on the demanding environment that all councils are operating in, and this has intensified in 2025. LGR across Essex is requiring sustained attention and collaboration between authorities, and Chelmsford has played a significant part in developing and submitting the Five Unitary Authorities (5UA) proposal to the Government. While this work has absorbed some capacity, Chelmsford has continued to deliver services effectively and to maintain focus on its priorities for the community. We are continuing to work on vital projects, scoping and refining them for adoption by a new administration.

Recommendations made to the council by the peer challenge team were a useful tool in achieving this. A year on, as the team returns to review our progress, we share how Chelmsford has moved forward, what has changed over the past 12 months and how we've acted on the recommendations.

# At a glance...

The past 12 months have been a year of change and progress for Chelmsford.

While much of our focus has been on preparing for local government reorganisation (LGR), we've kept delivering for our communities — from major new projects to local cultural highlights. These are just a few highlights.



## February

Chelmsford kept its Purple Flag status for the 12th year in a row, achieving national recognition of our safe, welcoming and well-run city centre at night.



## June

Skills Fest brought together employers, schools and residents to explore training and career opportunities in our city.



## August

Muddy Stilettos named Chelmsford the best place to live in Essex, another boost to the city's reputation for quality of life.



## October

Beaulieu Station opened its doors, a huge milestone for local transport and the city's future growth. The station was the result of **over 30 years** of work by Chelmsford City Council and its partners.



## May 2025

The Museum of Chelmsford secured the country's largest ever Iron Age gold-coin hoard - an incredible find of 933 coins, now part of our growing collection.



## July

Bow Bridge officially opened, improving access and connections along the riverside. This is a major milestone in the transformation of Chelmer Waterside, a former brownfield site.



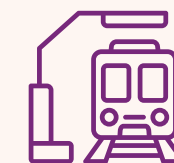
## September

Chelmsford Market won Small Market Team of the Year at the national market awards, recognising the team's creativity and community spirit. September also saw the submission of the five-unitary business case for LGR in Essex, which Chelmsford contributed to.

## In numbers



**933** Iron Age coins preserved



**1** new train station opened, the first on the Great Eastern Main Line in **100** years



**12** Years of Purple Flag status



# Culture

Chelmsford's cultural life has continued to grow through investment in the district's heritage, venues and creative partnerships.

The City Council continues to support **Culture Chelmsford**, the cultural development trust which is working to shape a bold, creative future for Chelmsford. This year, the trust secured **£250,000 in place partnership funding** to work with young people on four exciting projects, from citywide street art and a programme of creative exploration into gaming to mentoring opportunities and co-creating a diverse collections policy for the city's museum.

It has been a particularly big year for the Museum of Chelmsford. In May, it secured the **largest recorded Iron Age gold coin hoard in Britain**, with 933 coins discovered in Great Baddow. The acquisition drew national attention and secured the museum's position as a centre for heritage learning.

The museum also completed a fresh, appealing **rebrand**, developed in collaboration with community groups and stakeholders. The agency, This Is Fever, won **Agency of the Year** for this project at the British Agency Awards. The museum also received £236,000 from the **UK Museum Renewal Fund** to improve galleries, expand outreach and develop its collection. Most recently, an exhibition celebrated the work of local children's author **Kes Gray**, drawing new audiences to local literature and storytelling.

Meanwhile, Chelmsford Theatre reported strong performance, tracking at 60 per cent of its annual sales target before Q2 had even begun. The theatre's year included a successful **Aladdin** pantomime season, a **'Be the Voice of Panto'** competition for local children, and weeklong productions such as **Little Women**.

We are also continuing to develop the city's **Cultural Quarter** in partnership with Blue Horizon, supporting Chelmsford's ambition to remain a leading cultural destination within Essex.





# Housing, places and community

In 2025, the council has focused on improving homes, infrastructure and local facilities, ensuring Chelmsford remains a connected and inclusive place to live.

Planning work has advanced through the review of the **Local Plan**, which now includes 11 new potential sites following the cancellation of the A12 widening project and changes to the National Planning Policy Framework. This ensures the plan remains achievable and aligned with national guidance.

Two major infrastructure projects have further improved how people move around the city. The new **Bow Bridge**, opened in July and named by public vote, has reconnected key parts of Chelmsford, improving walking and cycling routes and unlocking the major transformation of Chelmer Waterside from a former gasworks site to a bright new mixed-use development. Three months later, the new **Beaulieu Station** opened after over **30 years' work** by the council and its partners, offering step-free access, cycle storage, 700 parking spaces and faster regional connections.

A **Community Governance Review** is currently underway to assess arrangements in central Chelmsford, the district's only unparished area and home to 51,000 people. We hope this will give residents a greater voice in how their neighbourhoods are represented, if they choose.

Housing delivery has progressed in key areas, with a new **homelessness and rough sleeping strategy** published in September. We are working with our charity partner, **CHESS**, for them to become a registered provider and open new supported units funded by the council. Its **Turning Point** development of modular units has been shortlisted for the Inside Housing Development Award and was highly commended in the Essex Housing Awards.

The council also purchased a former office building in the city centre, which will be used to



further expand accommodation options for residents in need.

In February, the council joined most other districts in Essex in introducing **charges for green waste collections**. The fees for this non-statutory service will enable it to continue, supporting the wider work of the Council at a time of financial pressures.

Throughout the year, the city's profile continued to rise. The popular national Muddy Stilettos blog named Chelmsford the **best place to live in Essex**, citing its strong transport links, cultural scene and quality of life. In June, over 1,500 senior school students attended the council-run **Skills Fest** at Anglia Ruskin University, which connects young people in a hands-on, fun way with employers and training providers. In September, Chelmsford Market won **Small Market Team of the Year** at the NABMA Market Awards, recognising its success in supporting traders and keeping the market vibrant.

The city centre renewed its **Purple Flag status** for the 12th consecutive year, recognising our safe, well-managed and welcoming evening economy. Assessors particularly noted that people feel "overwhelmingly positive" about their safety when alone at night in Chelmsford.

Last year, the council **began award-winning work** with the charity Make Space for Girls and consultants Social Place to make parks more inclusive for girls and gender-diverse young people. This has continued into 2025: in May, a student-designed social area called **Our Place** opened in Central Park.

We are proud that many Chelmsford businesses have readily signed up to the Women's Safety Charter, and that our recent campaign on active bystandership has been well-received. Real change comes from the community, and in Chelmsford many people and groups are working together to help women be and feel safer.

The departure of a key commercial player from the Meadows Shopping Centre initially caused concern, but has since created an opportunity for the council and the developer to work together on a **new vision for the site**. The partnership aims to revitalise the shopping centre and enhance the wider city offer.

Work continues at **Dovedales** leisure centre, where **refurbishment is underway** ahead of reopening in January 2026. The project will deliver modern, energy-efficient facilities for local residents.



## Our team

All this progress has been delivered by a **workforce adapting confidently to change**.

Our **office accommodation project** is moving ahead, creating modern, collaborative spaces for staff and partners. **The Coval** – formerly an underutilised council office, now a co-working space – opened in June. Part of it is now in use by Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts, which delivers a performing arts course in partnership with Chelmsford Theatre. Interest in other parts of the site continues to grow.

We have also launched a new spoken-word **video about Chelmsford**, centred around a poem by our competition winner **Rebecca Carter**. Representatives of the peer challenge team attended the competition to select the poet.

We are continuing **future planning** work on new Assistant Director roles, and have also created a **Core Change Management Group** in response to LGR. This group focuses on sustaining service delivery, supporting staff through the transition period, strengthening member engagement and fostering pride and ambition across the organisation as we prepare for local government reorganisation.

Through our HR team and managers, we are providing tailored support to staff during

this period of change, such as coaching, mentoring, wellbeing and guidance with recruitment and selection. This includes supporting groups who are underrepresented in senior roles. The group is also supporting Members, building positive and meaningful connections and discussing future aspirations for Chelmsford.

A comprehensive, inclusive plan has been developed for both internal and external communication about LGR. Outputs have included blogs and roadshows by the Chief Executive to keep staff updated and informed, alongside external social and street media campaigns and presentations to key stakeholder groups (see page 9).



The ourFuture logo, representing our values propelling us into the future, is used internally to communicate LGR news with staff.

Digital needs are an important consideration as LGR approaches. We are currently reviewing our requirements now and for the future, and liaising with partner organisations on potential joined-up solutions.

“Our Place is in a popular area, close to Central Park café and a well-used footpath, so users won't feel isolated. But it's also sheltered by tall grasses and decorative panels, so they don't feel observed.”







## Recommendations

Over the last 12 months, the landscape of local government has shifted significantly, particularly in Essex. Some of our priorities and goals have adapted to the prospects of local government reorganisation and devolution. Where relevant, this is reflected and explained in the actions below.

Each of the following nine Peer Challenge recommendations has been flagged according to progress:

-  Green: Action is completed or progressing on track.
-  Amber: Action is underway or may be slightly delayed or diverted.

There are no red flags: the council is acting on all of the recommendations.



## 1. Scrutiny Effectiveness

### Recommendation

The peer team recommended that Chelmsford strengthen the role, focus and consistency of its scrutiny function, ensuring that members have access to training and that processes are robust, inclusive and effective.

### Action

The council will complete a full review of overview and scrutiny arrangements to equip scrutiny/opposition members in fully engaging in scrutiny activities, including:

- Training and development of Chair and Vice Chair
- Training for all committee members
- Consideration of more active pre scrutiny activity
- Review of call in arrangements

This will result in better understanding of the role of overview & scrutiny, more appropriate challenge of decisions and effective understanding and pre-scrutiny of specific proposals.

### Progress

- » Training delivered for all members of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee through the Centre for Governance & Scrutiny.
- » The Council clarified that the Policy Board will be used for pre-scrutiny, providing a clear route for early input and engagement.

» Continued emphasis on involving opposition members constructively in the scrutiny process.

» Task-and-finish group established to review the performance of Chelmsford Theatre since its refurbishment.

» Climate and ecological 'inform and debate' session introduced at Overview & Scrutiny Committee in response to public questions.

» Research undertaken into other councils' call-in procedures. The Constitutional Working Group is considering whether to broaden or reduce requirements (five councillors, or less, instead of five members of Overview & Scrutiny Committee).

Scrutiny now operates with greater confidence and visibility. Member attendance at training was high, and the introduction of Policy Board pre-scrutiny has streamlined early engagement with Cabinet. The theatre task-and-finish group provided evidence that is now shaping programming and financial monitoring. The committee agenda has widened to include engaging debate on climate, a topic of strong public interest, showing responsiveness to residents. Chelmsford is maintaining momentum on continuous improvement.





## 2. Policy development

### Recommendation

Broaden and formalise how policy is developed, ensuring that members from all parties are involved early and that emerging strategies are transparent, evidence-based and well communicated.

### Action

To review and strengthen overview and scrutiny. This includes work to increase wider/opposition member engagement in policy development e.g. continue Chief Executive briefings and subject specific member briefings. This will result in all Members, including opposition Members, having a greater voice in policy development.

### Progress

Expanded use of member briefings and working groups on key issues such as LGR, the Chelmer Waterside development, property purchases, the community governance review and the Local Plan.

- » Local Plan sessions designed to allow open discussion and joint problem-solving.
- » Cabinet Member briefings with opposition representatives on major reports such as property and budget.
- » Cabinet reports shared with opposition groups prior to publication for transparency.

Policy development now benefits from earlier and broader engagement. Cross-party briefings have improved shared understanding and reduced duplication of debate in formal meetings. The process has strengthened trust and accountability, with members reporting improved clarity around strategic direction. Future iterations of the Local Plan and budget-setting process will continue this collaborative model.



## 3. Strengthening governance

### Recommendation

To strengthen our approach to governance relating to the provision of information, member involvement and decision making and reporting. Ensure that governance systems remain clear, timely and transparent, with decision making procedures, training and digital tools updated to meet new demands. Alongside the recommendations, Chelmsford City Council decided to review its approach to policy development.

### Action

The council has introduced Member briefings to enhance early engagement with opposition members in relation to specific large project decisions as they arise (e.g. Chelmer Waterside, LGR). New member intranet site being developed to bring information together in one place. Training for Officers and Members to increase understanding in relation to executive and non-executive decisions.

### Progress

- » Decision making training delivered for senior officers and members.
- » Development of a new internal Members' Hub on the intranet, to include a live enquiries tracker and self-service resources, almost complete.
- » Improved processes for Executive Decision Notices, now rolling rather than monthly, with less falling within 28 days. This enables more considered decisions. A form has been provided to help staff capture information essential to decision making.

- » Stronger engagement achieved with parishes and communities on major decisions such as the Local Plan and LGR.
- » Community Governance Review underway for unparished central Chelmsford area.

Though more needs to be done to reach more Members, training has increased confidence among senior staff and portfolio holders,. This boost is demonstrated in the case of a Member who used the training in responding to a Council Tax issue, and in the increased levels of process understanding displayed in discussions of the Chelmer Waterside project.

The rolling decision notice system has already reduced administrative delay and improved forward visibility. The Members' Hub is underway, with launch expected next quarter. Work continues to embed parish and community engagement into all significant policy areas.



## 4. Opposition engagement

### Recommendation

Maintain constructive, transparent relationships between Cabinet and opposition members, ensuring regular communication and mutual understanding of key decisions.

### Action

To explore how engagement with opposition groups could be improved and investigate best practice in other councils. Briefing and engagement of opposition representatives by senior staff is to be formalised.

### Progress

- >> Cabinet Member briefings established for opposition representatives.
- >> Deputy Leader of the opposition contributed actively to the ongoing Community Governance Review, collaborating with officers and Cabinet on consultation design.

- >> Additional briefings and support offered by CEO. Opposition indicated satisfaction with current arrangements.
- >> More questions and direct dialogue now taking place during, before and after Cabinet meetings.

Opposition engagement is now consistently positive and solution-focused. Joint working on the CGR has helped to build consensus and collaboration. The pre-Cabinet briefing structure has improved understanding and reduced surprises at decision points. This area is fully embedded and continuing strongly.

## 5. Performance management and assurance

### Recommendation

Strengthen performance oversight and assurance, ensuring that management information is timely, well-used and linked to service improvement.

### Action

Ensure there is an organisation-wide approach to corporate assurance and performance management, including reporting to members. Organisation-wide oversight and reporting of performance data will enable the council to join up learning and recognise trends and target areas for improvement. It will also help inform future decision-making for Chelmsford City Council and the shadow unitary council, including decisions related to LGR.

### Progress

- >> The management team continues to receive regular performance reports from all services, enabling proactive support.

- >> When the DWP highlighted inconsistent performance in Revenues and Benefits, management and staff were able to work together to resolve issues. We responded with additional agency capacity, a new training-grade structure and revised recruitment processes.
- >> The DWP subsequently confirmed that Chelmsford's performance will meet 'exemplary' standard once these changes are complete.
- >> Recognising increased pressures from LGR, the communications team's workload was reviewed. A new, more agile working method was implemented to enable the team to prioritise the communications most important to residents, and additional resource was provided.

Performance monitoring is stronger and better connected to decision making. The turnaround in Revenues & Benefits has been noted externally as good practice, while the communications review demonstrates the trust between staff and management team.







## 6. Member training

### Recommendation

Expand and systematise member learning and development, ensuring councillors have access to consistent, high-quality training and ongoing support.

### Action

Deliver a programme of external member training and development to support continuous improvement in decision making, governance, and accountability.

- Staff-led induction and service-specific sessions delivered for committee members, champions, portfolio holders and others with interest in particular areas of the council's work.
- Member Development Champions group established, inviting councillors to identify learning needs within their groups. Sessions are organised as necessary.
- This generated the decision-making training which has now been delivered (see above).

- Neurodiversity awareness sessions held for councillors, supporting understanding for both individuals and communities.
- Continuing data protection and cybersecurity training.
- Member Training Hub in development as part of intranet work (see above).

### Progress

Training coverage has improved and is now better targeted. Feedback from attendees is positive, although, as mentioned above, more will be done to reach non-Cabinet Members with decision making training. Work on the digital training hub is almost complete, and it will soon allow councillors to track their own learning and access materials at any time.

## 7. Workforce planning

### Recommendation

Ensure that the workforce strategy supports succession planning, development and retention, aligning with the council's values and preparing for future organisational change.

### Action

Develop, formalise and implement a workforce plan that ensures structure, skills and capacity are fit for the future to meet challenges and priorities. To revise the workforce plan to meet future staffing needs as a result of reorganisation and to compile an LGR risk register to monitor this emerging risk.

### Progress

- Revised workforce plan in development to meet future staffing needs arising from reorganisation.
- Succession planning still central to Our Plan, with changes due to LGR.
- Assistant director roles created to develop future leaders.

- Some officers enrolled in leadership apprenticeships.
- Seeking further opportunity for staff to prepare for potential new roles in unitary authorities.
- Managers encouraged to hold open, honest conversations with individuals about future goals and development opportunities.
- The above objectives are embedded in the work of the Core Change Management Group.
- The now-live LGR risk register will assist in monitoring this emerging risk.
- Office accommodation project underway, resulting in emergence of The Coval co-working area and modernised, collaborative workspaces for staff.





## 8. Resident engagement

### Recommendation

Continue to strengthen how the council engages residents, ensuring that consultation and participation are accessible, transparent and meaningful.

### Action

Within the context of LGR, our objectives must now be to increase resident and business engagement and consultation on local priorities, use of resources, and the implications of LGR and devolution. Additionally, Chelmsford City Council is keen to target community groups, partners and hard-to-reach or disengaged groups.

Increase resident engagement and consultation about local priorities and use of resources. Develop a focused campaign to consult, inform and engage with these groups, in partnership with other Essex authorities and alone.

### Progress

- Pre-Submission Local Plan consultation held in Q1. National changes have triggered re-review and a further consultation is being held from 20 November 2025 to 8 January 2026.
- Supported pan-Essex consultation on the five-unitary proposal in comparison to the status quo. Chelmsford received joint largest response of all areas, alongside Southend.

- Community Governance Review consultation in progress from October 2025 to January 2026.
- Continued engagement on the Women's Safety Charter has seen staff engaging with local schools on healthy relationships.
- Communications work continues to raise the council's profile locally, with national coverage of our rooftop beehive project and Green Flag parks.
- Government consultation on LGR in Essex went live in November. Considering this and existing consultations noted above, we are holding off on additional formal engagement which could overwhelm residents.
- LGR presents an additional constraint: the 2026 Budget is the last Chelmsford City Council will set without the input of the shadow unitary authority. It would not be transparent or timely to consult now on service management or resource/ budget allocation.



## 9. Future challenges

### Recommendation

Continue to plan for and communicate effectively about major changes, identifying and managing risks across all services.

### Action

Ensure that members and officers are prepared for the challenges ahead and are clear about what is achievable and politically acceptable. Since the Peer Challenge in December 2024, the landscape has changed significantly and future challenges now centre on LGR and devolution.

### Progress

- Comprehensive LGR risk register, overseen by the management team, drafted and reviewed regularly.
- Core Change Management team established with workstreams addressing internal and external pressures that are likely to arise over the three years until the new unitary authority is established.
- A key strand of our work in this period is identifying key strategic transformational projects which are important to Chelmsford, but at risk of delay, dilution or deprioritisation because of LGR. We are proactively assessing these and working to ensure that they are 'oven-ready' for a new administration to carry forward. This programme is set to launch in late January 2026.
- Separate briefing sessions held for members, staff, parishes, voluntary

and business sectors to address different concerns. The Chief Executive has held 'roadshows' at the Council's satellite sites to ensure that staff who cannot attend briefings are included.

- Collaboration with other Essex councils on the five-unitary business case. Chelmsford led the finance workstream and co-produced a low-cost informational campaign, sharing materials and resources with other councils.
- Key staff represented on Essex LGR development programme.
- LGR core change programme embedded across communications, HR and digital
- Local Plan re-consultation planned due to national policy shifts and A12 widening cancellation.
- Cultural Quarter partnership with Blue Horizon progressing to strengthen Essex-wide cultural offer.

Chelmsford City Council is recognised regionally for its collaborative work in shaping and communicating LGR proposals. Internal readiness work is maintaining service continuity and staff confidence. Non-LGR projects such as the Local Plan and cultural growth have continued in parallel, showing resilience and focus amid uncertainty.