

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Chelmsford City Council

Thursday 15 January 2026

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 3 – 6 December 2024 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge 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 RAG rated CPC Action Plan. (RAG rating relates to an assessment where the council self-assesses progress against the recommendations; Red – no action, Amber – work/action in progress and Green – action completed).
- 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 Chelmsford City 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 Chelmsford City Council took place (onsite) on 16 January 2026.

The Progress Review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge, under the following theme headings:

- **Governance & Assurance**, incorporating recommendations 1, 3, 4, 5 & 7
- **Policy Development**, incorporating recommendations 2 & 9
- **Preparing for Future Challenges**, incorporating recommendations 6 & 8

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

- Cllr Rowena Hay, Leader of Cheltenham Council
- Cllr Kelham Cooke, Lincolnshire County Council
- Liz Elliot, Deputy Chief Executive, Harborough District Council
- James Mehmed, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Out of the CPC's nine recommendations, the council's action plan reports that six actions are completed, and 3 actions have started and are work-in-progress.

Summary Observations

The cabinet and senior leadership team (SLT) were pleased to welcome the LGA peer team back to facilitate a CPC progress review. Since the CPC the council have prepared a plan with agreed actions, with reporting mechanisms and oversight from the SLT and members.

Contextually the council has embraced sector led improvement through ensuring the CPC outcomes and recommendations have been appropriately considered to ensure improvement in key areas identified including *governance, performance* and *preparing for the future*.

Shortly after the CPC was conducted, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution wrote to all councils in two-tier areas and small neighbouring unitary authorities to formally invite proposals for local government reorganisation (LGR). Chelmsford City Council as a Greater Essex local authority is included in the devolution priority programme where proposals were submitted in September 2025 with a view to undertaking elections for new authorities in May 2027 ahead of go live and vesting in April 2028.

Chelmsford City Council has collaborated across the Greater Essex authorities and played a significant role in developing and submitting to government a proposal detailing a [five unitary model](#).

The council has been agile in how it has taken forward the CPC actions in the context of LGR and uncertainty. Despite this challenging context a strong ambition remains with staff and members working well together to ensure communities receive high quality services, whilst ensuring the organisation is focused on delivering the [Our Chelmsford, Our Plan](#). The council is forward looking and working hard to deliver key programmes and where appropriate scoping and refining projects, so they are ready for a new unitary authority under a yet to be elected shadow administration.

The council shared with peers many examples of how Chelmsford has progressed projects since the CPC for example the delivery of Beaulieu train station, a project involving the council's input over three decades; the delivery of Bow Bridge will provide access to Chelmer Waterside where the local plan has 770 homes designated.

During the progress review, there were many examples shared with the team that evidence strong leadership by the chief executive and leader. Leaders are providing a clear vision underpinned by values and an organisational culture that has supported the council to pivot, be agile and face into the challenges including preparing for the future.

The organisational culture and values were identified by peers as a key building block to have been successful in taking forward preparation for LGR and ongoing council transformation. The cabinet have been robust and resilient in supporting the leader to focus more outwardly with partners on LGR.

Communication was consistently cited as being strong and impactful providing two-way staff engagement with a high degree of trust and confidence with senior leadership. A recent pulse survey provides evidence that communication is effective.

Peers reflected the council's enviable financial settlement, which provides an additional £3.3M revenue, increasing in years two and three by an additional £200K. The increase in funding will provide the opportunity to invest into project delivery and looking forward to LGR readiness.

The council is balancing the demands of service delivery over the remaining period of council sovereignty whilst taking action with regards to preparedness for the future; examples include investing in change management practices and proactively

developing opportunities that will deliver benefit to LGR transition such as proposals to repurpose office accommodation. Plans are in progress to create a collaborative workspace for colleagues, which could also be used across other partner councils to come together and collaborate. The proposed changes to office accommodation are seen positively by peers and demonstrates the council's leadership and ambition to prepare for future collaborative working in the next phase of delivering LGR in Greater Essex.

Peers reflected that governance and decision making has improved; for example, the maturity of the corporate risk register and audit actions being used proactively. The council has reflected on the improvements made to governance, which will be further evidenced in the report thematic areas.

3.1. Governance & Assurance

Corporate Peer Challenge recommendations covered by this theme:

Recommendation 1 - Commission the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to review and strengthen overview and scrutiny and wider governance.

Recommendation 3 - Strengthen your approach to governance relating to the provision of information, member involvement and decision-making and reporting.

Recommendation 4 - Formalise briefing and engagement of opposition members by officers.

Recommendation 5 - Ensure there is an organisation-wide approach to corporate assurance and performance management, including reporting to members.

Recommendation 7 - Deliver a programme of external member training and development to support continuous improvement in decision-making, governance, and accountability.

The council has conducted a comprehensive review of its overview and scrutiny arrangements to ensure members, particularly scrutiny and opposition members are fully equipped to participate effectively. The review included targeted training for chairs, vice chairs, and all committee members, as well as consideration of increased pre-scrutiny activity and a reassessment of the call-in process. The aim is to strengthen understanding of the scrutiny function, improve the quality of challenge,

and support more effective examination of proposals before decisions are made.

All overview & scrutiny committee members were offered training from the Centre for Governance & Scrutiny (CfGS), and the council has formalised the use of the policy board as the main route for pre-scrutiny, although through discussion with peers, there appears to still be inconsistency of understanding amongst members and officers, suggesting further work may be needed to ensure a clear understanding is fully embedded in working practices.

Peers recommend the council should map out the process for the policy board and scrutiny (journey mapping) to increase clarity and support members and officers to improve engagement including a consistent understanding on how items get included on the forward workplan. The policy board does appear to be effective and working well for the council. Efforts to engage opposition members in a constructive and collaborative way have been strengthened, for example a task and finish group has been set up to review the performance of Chelmsford theatre following its refurbishment. Work is also underway to review call-in arrangements, with research into practices at other councils.

The council has strengthened early engagement with members, including opposition members, through targeted briefings on major projects and training to improve understanding of executive and non-executive decision-making. Progress has been made, including the delivery of decision-making training for senior officers and members, and the near completion of a new members' hub on the intranet, which will provide a live enquiries tracker and self-service resources.

The council shared with the peer team there is still a risk with taking urgent decisions, where there is insufficient time to undertake normal decision-making protocols. Urgent decisions will be included in a review of decision-making by internal audit, ensuring the outcome clearly defines agreed decision-making routes. The council have committed to review the audit findings and examine how improvement can be achieved including transparency and publishing all urgent decisions.

Decision making processes have been improved through the introduction of rolling executive decision notices (forward plan), reducing administrative delay and increasing forward visibility. A revised template now supports officers in capturing

essential information to underpin sound decisions. Engagement with parishes and communities has also been strengthened on major issues such as the local plan and LGR, alongside the commencement of a community governance review for central Chelmsford. Peers recommend ramping up the community governance process, ensuring, if possible, the second consultation takes place before the LGR structural change orders are made and before new governance restricts potential devolvement.

While further work is required to reach more members, training is already increasing confidence among senior staff and portfolio holders.

The peer team reflected the council has improved its approach to engaging opposition groups by formalising briefing and engagement opportunities with senior staff. Cabinet member briefings for opposition representatives are now established, and additional support provided by the chief executive. Peers were informed by opposition members they would like the opportunity to increase their scrutiny of policy documents taken to policy board by receiving papers that detail options for decision-making (options appraisal) opposed to endorsing a specific recommendation.

Peers heard how this enhanced engagement has resulted in more constructive dialogue before, during and after cabinet meetings, improving understanding and reducing unexpected issues at decision points; peers were given an example where the all-member briefings supported decision-making concerning investment into affordable housing. Opposition involvement in the community governance review has been particularly effective, with the deputy leader of the opposition working closely with officers and cabinet to shape consultation design.

The council is embedding a coordinated, organisation wide approach to corporate assurance and performance management to strengthen oversight, identify trends and support informed decision-making, including preparation for LGR. Regular performance reporting to the management team is now well established, enabling earlier intervention and better targeted support.

This approach has already delivered tangible improvements as evidenced by the example shared with peers regarding concerns raised by DWP about performance in revenues and benefits, management and staff jointly implemented a package of

improvement actions.

The council is aware of the increasing pressures linked to LGR, the communications team underwent a workload review, leading to a more agile operating model focused on resident-priority communications and supported by additional capacity.

The council reflect that overall, performance monitoring is now stronger, more responsive, and better aligned with decision-making. The recent inclusion of an LGR specific risk register is a good example of improving transparency and management of risk.

The council has continued to strengthen its approach to member development through a comprehensive programme of external training and tailored learning opportunities. Staff led induction and service specific sessions have supported committee members, portfolio holders, champions and others involved in key areas of council business. A member development champions group has been established to identify learning needs across political groups, enabling responsive delivery of sessions, including the recently introduced decision-making training, which has helped clarify roles and responsibilities and improved understanding of process.

Peers were informed that work is nearing completion on a dedicated member training hub, which will allow members to access materials and have more control over their learning and development.

Training coverage is now more targeted and effective, with positive feedback from participants. Peers reflected that recent attendance at scrutiny training could be improved, given 6 out of 13 members attended. The overall programme and approach to member development demonstrates progress in strengthening governance, accountability and decision-making across the council.

3.2. Policy Development

Corporate Peer Challenge recommendations covered by this theme:

Recommendation 2 - Review the council's approach to policy development.

Recommendation 9 - Increase resident engagement and consultation about local priorities and use of resources.

Cross-party engagement has been improved through all-member briefings on strategic projects such as Waterside, the Local Plan and major planning applications such as for the garden community. Cabinet reports are always shared with opposition groups ahead of publication. These measures have enabled earlier and broader involvement in policy development and a catalyst for open discussion.

Peers reflected that the use of the policy board whilst distinctive to Chelmsford City Council works well for the council; when formal decision-making takes place, members are aware of the key background and issues having discussed options for taking forward formally. The policy board was seen by peers as a collaborative space and a process where policy can be developed cross-party.

Peers feel that further clarification around how the policy board, scrutiny committee and the cabinet work together would further improve accountability for where decisions are being taken, ensuring appropriate challenge and oversight takes place. Mapping out the process would be helpful and ensure there is clarity around, for example, how workplans are developed and how the opposition can put forward items for inclusion. Peers felt if processes were clearer these could be used effectively in the context of LGR and future ways of working.

Within the context of LGR, the council has prioritised strengthening engagement with residents, businesses and harder to reach groups on local priorities and the implications of future governance changes. Significant consultation activity has taken place, including pre-submission local plan engagement, participation in the Greater Essex unitary proposal consultation and the ongoing community governance review. The council evidenced their approach to wider community engagement through initiatives such as the women's safety charter and communications work that has raised the council's profile locally and nationally ([roof top beehive project](#) and [green flag parks](#)).

The council shared that, given the volume of concurrent statutory consultations and the government's LGR consultation, additional engagement has been paused to avoid overwhelming residents. LGR also places limitations on budget related consultation, as the 2026 budget will be the final one set without input from the joint committee.

Peers recommended to continue to increase the local voice now, further developing two-way communications in readiness for LGR and community governance outcomes. Focus on increasing Chelmsford City voice in an increased geography, ensure your communications are amplified.

3.3. Preparing for Future Challenges

Corporate Peer Challenge recommendations covered by this theme:

Recommendation 6 - Ensure that members and officers are prepared for the challenges ahead and are clear about what is achievable and politically acceptable.

Recommendation 8 - Develop, formalise and implement a workforce plan that ensures structure, skills and capacity are fit for the future to meet challenges and priorities.

Shortly after the CPC was conducted, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution wrote to all councils in two-tier areas and small neighbouring unitary authorities to formally invite proposals for local government reorganisation (LGR).

Chelmsford City Council has collaborated across the Greater Essex authorities and played a significant role in developing and submitting to government a proposal detailing a five unitary model.

The council has been preparing members and officers for the significant challenges arising from LGR and devolution, recognising that the strategic landscape has shifted substantially since the 2024 corporate peer challenge. Peers were informed that a detailed LGR risk register is now in place and regularly reviewed by the management team, supported by a core change management team with established workstreams (HR, learning & development, digital solutions, communication and continuing ambition).

Peers met with members of the core change management team and were able to discuss examples of their work, including digital upgrades to systems, exploring application of artificial intelligence (AI) and learning from other councils' use of AI.

The council is ensuring the workforce is supported through all stages of LGR by

equipping managers with the skills and resources to manage the changes and transformation, examples include personal resilience, action learning sets, apprenticeships at management level. The council is making good use of networks and targeting learning from other experienced LGR councils, seeking to identify best practice and exploring what those councils would have done differently.

The council has been identifying major transformational projects that are important to Chelmsford but could face delay or reprioritisation during LGR. These projects are being prepared to a standard for seamless progression under the new unitary authority, with the programme due to launch in late January 2026. Peers observed a proactive, can-do attitude from staff who are motivated to deliver for the people of Chelmsford, ensuring there is a focus on transformational projects, providing sustained delivery through this period of uncertainty.

Extensive engagement has taken place to ensure readiness across the organisation and among partners. Tailored briefing sessions have been held for members, staff, parishes, voluntary groups and businesses, supplemented by chief executive roadshows at remote sites to ensure broad staff inclusion. Peers engaged directly with a staff focus group who shared their positive insights regarding the impact of internal communication.

The council shared with the peer team early sight of a staff pulse survey which seeks to understand the views of the workforce with the context of LGR. Although the survey was still live, interim results demonstrated that 96 per cent of staff either somewhat agree or strongly agree being well informed about LGR. Other results indicate 93 per cent somewhat agree or strongly agree the council will act fairly and openly to secure the best outcome from LGR; 93 per cent agree or strongly agree to knowing where to access reliable information about LGR when needed. Most staff completing the survey (88 per cent) agree or strongly agree that LGR is not distracting them from performing their day-to-day role and with a lower result, 57 per cent who either agree or strongly agree to feeling positive about their future career prospects.

Chelmsford has collaborated closely with other Greater Essex councils on the five unitary business case, with the chief executive leading the finance workstream and

the leader playing a significant role. Key staff are contributing to the wider Greater Essex LGR development programme, with core change activity embedded across communications, HR and digital services. Despite the complexity of LGR, the council has maintained focus on wider priorities such as the local plan and driving forward the cultural offer. Chelmsford is recognised regionally for its constructive role in shaping and communicating LGR proposals, with internal readiness work supporting service continuity and staff confidence throughout the transition.

The corporate peer challenge originally raised the frequent reference to a succession planning risk. Peers recommended the council should develop, formalise and implement a workforce plan that ensures structure, skills and capacity are fit for the future to meet challenges and priorities. The council shared with peers that a revised workforce plan is being developed to ensure the organisation has the structure, skills and capacity required to meet future challenges, particularly those arising from local government reorganisation (LGR).

Succession planning remains a core priority. Following the retirement of a director role, the council took the decision to create two new assistant director roles to support leadership development, whilst creating additional capacity for directors. The council is actively creating opportunities to grow management and leadership capacity, for example several officers are now undertaking leadership and management apprenticeships. The staff focus group confirmed that the council is actively supporting staff with development opportunities and citing that the family culture referred to in the corporate peer challenge remains at the core of how staff and members behave and operate.

Managers are actively being encouraged to hold open discussions with staff about career aspirations and development needs, helping individuals prepare for potential roles within future unitary authorities.

Supporting the workforce to be LGR ready is the core focus of the core change management group, which is also supported by a specific LGR risk register to monitor emerging staffing risks. Alongside workforce planning, the council is progressing its office accommodation project, with the objective of creating a modern, collaborative workspace designed to support new ways of working. Peers discussed

how the new workspace has the potential to serve as a catalyst for creating new collaborative working arrangements that can be initiated as soon as government confirm the outcomes of the LGR business case submissions.

The council has plans in place to progress the preferred unitary configuration option. Additionally, peers recommended - whilst welcoming the council's openness and transparency that they will positively progress any confirmed unitary configuration - that it would be prudent to develop some outline plans on how the council will respond to members and staff if the outcome is not a five unitary model.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Chelmsford City 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 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.

Rachel Litherland (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and their e-mail address is rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk

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