

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Hertsmere Borough Council

4th and 5th February 2026

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

Hertsmere Borough Council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in October 2024 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

A Progress Review is an integral part of the CPC process and is designed to provide space for the council's senior leadership to:

- Receive feedback from peers on the progress made by the council against the CPC recommendations and the council's related 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

The LGA would like to thank Hertsmere Borough Council for their commitment to sector led improvement. The progress review was the next step in a developing relationship that the council has with LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

The progress review with Hertsmere took place on Wednesday 4th and Thursday 5th February 2026. It focused on each of the recommendations from the CPC, which were as follows:

Recommendation 1

Develop a clear and compelling narrative of Hertsmere's 'offer' and vision as a place

Recommendation 2

Through wider involvement across the political and managerial leadership, develop a clearer strategic direction for the council – centred on a defined manageable set of priorities

Recommendation 3

Consider the range of elected member forums and bodies that exist and the extent to which they are fulfilling their objectives and securing sufficient benefit – all in a

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context of overview and scrutiny currently lacking clarity of purpose and depth of understanding around the potential it can offer

Recommendation 4

Create an elected member development programme tailored to need and learning style and providing networking and insights beyond Hertsmere

Recommendation 5

Adopt a casework management system for elected member enquiries

Recommendation 6

Consider fundamentally what the future is for the council's wholly-owned subsidiaries

Recommendation 7

Commission an expert review of the governance arrangements around the wholly-owned subsidiaries

Recommendation 8

Deliver on the commitment to review and report the council's Financial Strategy

Recommendation 9

Satisfy yourself as a council that you are doing all you can to ease the recruitment and retention challenges

Recommendation 10

Act upon staff wanting to feel that the organisation takes their safety and welfare seriously

The following formed the peer team for the Progress Review:

- Stuart Bobby, Chief Executive, Gravesham Borough Council
- Councillor Eamonn O'Brien, Leader, Bury Council (Labour)
- Councillor Brian Milnes, Deputy Leader, South Cambridgeshire District Council (Liberal Democrat)
- Jackie Smith, Corporate Director and Chief Operating Officer, South Staffordshire Council
- Helen Gretton, Head of Transformation, Strategy and Performance, Charnwood Borough Council
- Chris Bowron, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

The peer team were pleased to see the way in which the council has embraced CPC and the Progress Review, the comprehensive nature of the action plan and the way it has been taken forward.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

3.1. Prioritisation, vision and corporate leadership

Recommendation 2 from the corporate peer challenge was to develop a clearer strategic direction for the council, through wider involvement across the political and managerial leadership, centred on a defined manageable set of priorities.

Recommendation 1 related to developing a clear and compelling narrative of Hertsmere's 'offer' and vision as a place. In response, significant time and effort has been dedicated to enhancing joint working across the Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) since the CPC.

External facilitation has been central to this, delivering a programme of support to the senior political and managerial leadership which started in April 2025. The key aims and areas of focus have been developing a narrative and vision for Hertsmere; establishing a single shared list of priorities for delivery by the council; and exploring mutual expectations and desired values and behaviours integral to joint working

across Cabinet and SLT. Four facilitated sessions were held between April and June 2025, with a follow up session then taking place in September.

A 'Vision and Corporate Plan' document has emerged through this joint activity and this is set to be considered at Cabinet and Full Council in February. The prioritisation activity identified a set of key deliverables for the borough, with examples including increasing the number of social and affordable homes; town centre regeneration in Borehamwood and Potters Bar; the redevelopment of Bushey Golf and Country Club; and taking forward the Elstree Immersive Experience.

A Programme Management Office (also referred to within the organisation as a GRIP office) is currently being drawn together, comprising both existing and additional capacity and resource. This has been created "to support the delivery of the Corporate Plan objectives" but what this means, in terms of its focus and remit, needs to be more clearly and jointly understood. As an example, does it mean the function is there to manage projects directly, or to provide additional capacity for projects or to monitor and report on the progress of projects? At present, expectations and understanding would appear to differ across the council, amongst both officers and elected members.

The council's ambitions are supported by a revised Financial Strategy that outlines the medium-term financial position. This links to recommendation 8 from the corporate peer challenge, to deliver on the commitment to review and report the council's Financial Strategy. The financial position of the council is balanced until 2028/29, albeit announcement of the final local government financial settlement was awaited at the time of the Progress Review.

Cabinet and SLT have been meeting as a Management Board since September 2025. This forum takes place monthly and has the combined purpose of enabling the informal discussion and exploration of emerging key strategic issues and considering the agenda and reports for the forthcoming Cabinet meeting. The joint development work that took place across Cabinet and SLT helps to inform how Management Board functions, in terms of values and behaviours. There is recognition that the approach is still evolving. The Chief Officer Board has been expanded and now involves the Monitoring Officer and Section 151 Officer as well as the Chief Executive

and Deputy Chief Executive.

3.2. The organisation and its people

Recommendation 9 from the corporate peer challenge was that the council satisfy itself that it is doing all that it can to ease the recruitment and retention challenges. Recommendation 10 was focused upon the council acting upon staff wanting to feel that the organisation takes their safety and welfare seriously.

A new People Strategy and related action plan were widely consulted upon in the organisation and then formally adopted at Personnel Committee in September 2025. The strategy sets out the council's approach to supporting, developing and empowering its workforce. The SLT structure was reviewed and the related changes took effect from April 2025. This sought to build strategic capacity and involved the creation of a new post of Director of Place and Transformation.

With recruitment to this new post currently underway, it is crucial that the council is absolutely clear on the expectations and remit of the role. As an example, is it designed to pick up some of the responsibilities of the Chief Executive in order to free up capacity at that level to support local government reorganisation (LGR)? Is it a strategic role or more of a 'hands on' one to drive the development of the Local Plan, which represents an agreed corporate priority? The appointment must be absolutely right in terms of somebody with the appropriate background and attributes being brought in to deliver on what must be a clearly and collectively agreed set of expectations.

A revised hybrid working policy was implemented in June 2025 and has been very much welcomed by staff at all levels. Anecdotally it is seen to have aided recruitment and retention to an extent. However, it was clear to us that the approach has not been wholeheartedly embraced by the senior-most managerial leadership. This is presenting a barrier to practical implementation of the policy and some potential new appointees, upon gleaning that, have decided not to join the organisation. Others from within the existing workforce have chosen to leave the council because of their need or desire for greater flexibility. This means capacity is being lost to the organisation.

The council has launched a multi-faceted recruitment campaign to attract new staff. This includes a social media campaign, updates to the website and careers microsite and promotional videos featuring staff from the civic offices and the depot.

A review of the pay and grading structure has taken place in recent months, although this element of the action plan responding to the CPC recommendations took a period of time to gain momentum. A draft pay progression policy has been developed. What has emerged from the review is to be considered by Cabinet in a few weeks' time. Managers are keen to ensure they receive training and support in the application of the approach to pay progression. The context for this is that progression up to the mid-point of a grade will happen automatically over time but further progression will be determined by the relevant manager – a sensitive and tricky responsibility that managers are keen to be helped to navigate.

The first cohort of twelve 'future leaders' have embarked upon the council's newly established Leadership Development Programme. This programme is seen as having potential. There are various aspects to it that the council will wish to bear in mind as the approach to the programme for next year evolves. Both the programme itself and the application process to be selected for it are seen to be demanding in terms of the time commitment involved. This has meant some people decided not to put themselves forward to participate or, having embarked upon it, are struggling to balance the demands of the programme with professional and personal commitments. There is also a desire to see perspectives from beyond Hertsmere being brought into the programme.

Works are anticipated to commence shortly to reconfigure the civic offices reception area to improve staff safety. This is an element of the action plan responding to the CPC recommendations that has started to progress more recently, with the initial procurement exercise generating significant cost considerations and requiring the identification by the council of more affordable alternative approaches. Training has also been rolled out for staff (and those who manage them) who deal with complex and 'challenging' customers.

The council undertook its second annual staff satisfaction and engagement survey last year. The findings included the following, based on a 38 per cent response rate

(which the council wants to help increase to 50 per cent when the survey takes place this calendar year):

- 71 per cent of respondents would recommend Hertsmere Borough Council as a good place to work
- 84 per cent felt able to be themselves at work – which, whilst down from 95 per cent, is still a strong score
- 71 per cent indicated they were able to achieve a good work/life balance
- 66 per cent are able to access development opportunities
- The proportion of respondents receiving recognition from line managers rose from 59 per cent to 76 per cent
- 57 per cent felt senior leaders role model the organisational values
- The proportion of staff feeling levels of pay were fair rose from 45 per cent to 56 per cent
- 41 per cent felt able to challenge how things get done in the organisation
- 40 per cent believe managers address poor performance

3.3. Governance

Recommendation 3 from the corporate peer challenge encouraged the council to consider the range of elected member forums and bodies that exist and the extent to which they are fulfilling their objectives and securing sufficient benefit. By way of response, there has been some refinement of the range of councillor forums. This includes the dissolution of the Grounds Maintenance Panel and the Performance Panel. The remit of the latter has been assumed into the purview of a new Strategic Board, with scope to absorb the remits of other panels and forums into this too. The future of individual Cabinet Panels has been left to the respective Portfolio Holder, in conjunction with appropriate Chief Officers and Heads of Service, to determine.

Despite these revisions, it is clear from the Progress Review that significant officer time is still being absorbed in servicing and attending elected member meetings and

supporting the democratic process. It is felt that this can be amended for the better. Central to this would be addressing what appears to be a perceived expectation on the part of the senior-most managerial leadership that senior officers are physically present at the widest possible range of elected member forums, which largely take place in the evening, even when there is little likelihood that they may be called upon to contribute. This issue risks being exacerbated with discussions currently underway, as we understand it, to move the 'guillotine' for the cut-off time for meetings to later – at 11pm.

Independent Members have been appointed to the Audit Committee and an Independent Person to the Standards Committee. This has been welcomed as a way of bringing additional perspectives and experience into the council and, by definition, increased independence and objectivity.

Another way that wider perspectives are being brought into the organisation is through the incorporation of benchmarking information to performance reports, including to Cabinet. This is enabling officers and elected members to see how the council is performing in comparison to similar authorities using the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) 'nearest neighbours' model, which groups councils serving similar demographics and areas. Thus how the council is faring on measures such as the number of families in temporary accommodation; the percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting; the percentages of council tax and national non-domestic rates collected; and the number of days lost to short term sickness absence per employee are now being viewed in a comparative context – which strengthens performance management and provides opportunities for the exchange of learning.

Recommendation 5 from the corporate peer challenge related to the adoption of a casework management system for elected member enquiries. In response, councillors have been provided with access to a portal to log issues raised with them by residents. This is working well for those who are utilising it, recognising that other avenues remain open to councillors including contacting officers directly via e-mail, phone or face to face.

Councillors have also been provided with access to the council's online 'Learning Zone' – the corporate training platform. This links to recommendation 4 from the corporate peer challenge which related to the creation of an elected member development programme tailored to need and learning style and providing networking and insights beyond Hertsmere. This has provided training courses on matters such as safeguarding and cyber security. There is scope to develop the approach further, in terms of subjects – such as awareness around violence against women and girls, media and communications and resident engagement; providing opportunities for councillors in Hertsmere to learn from wider local government; and adopting different approaches to delivery in order to suit different needs and learning styles.

3.4 Council-owned companies

Recommendation 6 from the corporate peer challenge indicated that the council should consider fundamentally what the future is for its' wholly-owned subsidiaries. Recommendation 7 encouraged the council to commission an expert review of the governance arrangements around the wholly-owned subsidiaries.

In response, the council commissioned an independent assurance exercise relating to the governance of Hertsmere Developments Limited (HDL) and this took place in 2025. The council's Shareholder Investment Committee have requested the HDL Board develop an updated business plan for presentation to a meeting later in February. Without a sound business plan there is a fundamental question about the value and viability of retaining HDL as an active company and a decision will need to be taken on its future.

The council-owned company for Elstree Film Studios is seen to have been made more financially secure than was the case at the time of the corporate peer challenge. The council entered into a Partnership Agreement in June 2025 with an operational partner and remediation work has taken place to bring all of the closed stages and the car park back into use.

3.5 Local government reorganisation

Local government reorganisation (LGR) for Hertfordshire came onto the agenda shortly after the corporate peer challenge, through the publication of the English

Devolution White Paper in December 2024. The council worked constructively with partners across the county through 2025, culminating in the submission of a joint proposal to Government in November. Staff representatives from the Local Joint Committee joined the council's Devolution Board and were invited to participate in the council's Cabinet meeting that month to ensure the views of staff were fed into the development of the submission and the decision on which model for reorganisation to support.

Activity related to LGR through 2025 placed significant demands upon the time and energy of senior officers and elected members and those demands will be repeated going forward.

A Government decision on arrangements for local government in Hertfordshire is expected in the summer of this year, followed by shadow elections to any new council/s in May 2027 and 'vesting day' in April 2028. Communications to staff relating to LGR are ongoing and a further round of staff briefings is currently being planned.

3.6 Areas for consideration

Certain key issues came to the fore during the course of the Progress Review. We seek to outline these themes here and the council will need to carefully consider them as it moves forward. Some of these themes have emerged subsequent to the corporate peer challenge in October 2024, whilst others are a continuation or a variation on a theme that the peer team identified fourteen months ago.

In a context of LGR, there are strong political ambitions relating to the legacy of Hertsmere Borough Council. This is a continuation of what the corporate peer challenge outlined as an Administration providing energy and a strong sense of what is important politically and which the peer team encouraged to be channelled through the development of a clearer strategic direction for the council centred on a defined manageable set of priorities. This was responded to by the joint prioritisation activity between Cabinet and SLT undertaken during the summer. However, the Administration's ambitions are not standing still and LGR has created a defined timescale in which to deliver.

This generates considerations around the capacity of the organisation to deliver the

ambitions in the timescales involved and within the level of resource available. Given the constrained resources, including officer capacity, Community Infrastructure Levy funding and capital receipts, the council will need to be able to demonstrate extensive rigour and governance around the prioritisation of projects in the coming months. That is well ahead of the Section 24 Notice (which places additional controls over expenditure on the part of councils subject to LGR) which will necessitate similar discipline.

Relationships between elected members across all political parties and officers generally, at the various different levels of the organisation, are seen to be becoming increasingly strained. This can be directly attributed to the above issue of ambition exceeding capacity. This needs to be resolved through a re-balancing. Achieving that will help to create a situation in which elected member expectations of officers are clarified and ensured to be reasonable. At the same time, it will reduce the risk of blurring responsibilities between elected members and officers, helping to focus councillors on the strategic and enabling officers to concentrate on implementation and delivery of the more operational. Within all of this, but also as a fundamental to ensuring positive relationships, we would encourage, across the elected membership, a greater articulation and demonstration of the appreciation of, and respect for, staff and their contribution.

Dedicating the necessary time and capacity to LGR will be important in ensuring the organisation and its people are placed in the strongest possible position for the future. Hertsmere is in a position to continue and build upon the positive contribution it has made to LGR in Hertfordshire since the White Paper. As we touched on earlier, activity related to LGR through 2025 placed significant demands upon the time and energy of senior officers and elected members and those demands will be repeated going forward. Ensuring the council has sufficient capacity to play a proactive and influential role around LGR will be important not just in relation to supporting a smooth transition in local government structures but also maximising opportunities for the future for current staff and councillors in Hertsmere. The council has dedicated £1m through the 2026/27 budget to support LGR processes.

The political make-up of the council has become more fragmented since the corporate peer challenge and the political balance more fragile. There is a sense that

political relationships have been deteriorating through this period. 'Politics is politics' but some of what is occurring is placing the council in a negative spotlight and risks reputational damage.

The most high-profile example of this is what is being seen in relation to the Planning Committee. A council-commissioned independent review of the committee and the arrangements and atmosphere around it is due to report imminently. We do not have any intention of seeking to second-guess or duplicate this review activity. Suffice it to say, what is taking place with the committee is generating major financial, reputational and operational risk for the council.

The council will wish to reflect on what emerges from the review and implement effective measures to respond to the findings. There is an imperative of avoiding the council being entered into 'special measures' by Government as a result of what is being experienced around Planning. The loss of control which that re-categorisation would entail risks negatively impacting the future of the people and the communities the council serves.

Finally, we want to outline our view as a peer team that the council would benefit from more opportunities being created to enable both staff and elected members to talk about issues of significance and importance in relation to the functioning and culture of the organisation. On both occasions that we have been guests of the council, people that we have met have indicated how much they have welcomed and benefited from the opportunity to talk about a range of matters which they see as important but feel constrained in raising internally.

We have sought to articulate, through the CPC report and this report, the issues that have been outlined and explored with us. Moving to a position in which the culture in the council enables such issues to surface and be explored by the organisation itself openly, constructively and honestly, and without any sense of anxiety or concern, would benefit both organisational effectiveness and the well-being of its people.

This principle and approach can be broadened to include opportunities for greater organisational self-reflection, learning and taking stock. There are few unique challenges existing in local government and other councils are likely to have 'been there before' on any given issue that the council may face now or in the period

ahead. Similarly, Hertsmere has learning that it can offer to others. Facilitating the exchange of this, both off its own back and through organisations such as the LGA, will aid the drive for continuous improvement.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Hertsmere Borough Council for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review.

We appreciate that the 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.

The peer team and LGA would encourage people from the council to consider becoming a peer and participating in peer challenge and sector-led improvement.

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