

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

North Herts Council

15th December 2025

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during November 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.
- 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 North Herts 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 North Herts Council took place (onsite) on 15th December 2025.

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

Strategic alignment and delivery

Recommendation 1 – Develop the golden thread: Engage all staff and partners in developing an annual delivery plan with clear priorities, outcomes and measurable KPIs – golden thread:

- Align the financial strategy with organisational priorities, ensuring that there is a real balance between income and expenditure and that there is no longer a reliance on the use of reserves to produce a balanced budget.

- Align the digital transformation and capital projects with organisational priorities.
- Align service plans and staff objectives with the council plan.

Recommendation 2 – Prioritise: Collectively the political and officer leadership needs to be clear about what it wants to do and how the “one team” is going to do it. There may be things that have to take longer, be paused or stopped to free up resources to deliver the priorities.

Recommendation 3 – Place narrative: Promote the place narrative for North Herts that encapsulates its character and attributes. This narrative will serve to define and promote North Herts, giving a voice to its rural roots, and fostering a distinct identity for the area.

Recommendation 4 – Partnerships: Maximise collaborative opportunities to get the best outcomes for North Herts. There are willing partners ready to support delivery of shared ambitions.

Driving organisational growth

Recommendation 5 – Leadership: Build energetic and visible officer leadership, with more strategic impact. Create opportunities for more in-person communications and support senior officers with the skills and time to look “up and out” to develop strategic partnerships and strategy. Develop new ideas to get people excited about working for North Herts Council.

Recommendation 6 – Organisational Development: Create an organisational development plan that horizon scans for future challenges and sets out clear processes for learning and development, appraisals, succession planning, recruitment and retention.

Recommendation 7 – Ways of working: Reset expectations of behaviour regarding internal council relationships, ways of working and responsibility for presenting committee reports. This includes the behaviour and roles and responsibilities of councillors to councillors, councillors to officers, officers to councillors and officers to officers.

Performance-led modernisation

Recommendation 8 – Performance management: Improve the rigour and transparency of performance management. Be clearer in explanations regarding corrective and preventive actions, set challenging targets and use the data to drive improvement.

Recommendation 9 – Modernisation: Capitalise on digitalisation skills and capacity to deliver a modernisation programme across the council.

Recommendation 10 – Project management: Strengthen project and programme management. Be clear on the skills and resources required and ensure the delivery framework which includes lessons learnt and benefits realisation is applied consistently across all projects.

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

- Cllr James Dawson, Labour Leader of Erewash Borough Council (replaced Cllr Hugo Pound who was unable to rejoin the team)
- Cllr Sarah Bütikofer, LGA Liberal Democrat Regional Peer - North Norfolk District Council
- David Blake, Managing Director - Worcester City Council
- Kirsty Human - Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Out of the CPC's ten recommendations, the council's RAG rated action plan reports that 90 per cent are either completed or being progressed and 10 per cent have not yet been progressed.

Peers returned to North Herts Council (NHC) following an intense year of work which not only saw the council deliver some big projects and achievements but also co-produce and submit a proposal for local government reorganisation (LGR) in Hertfordshire to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) on 28th November 2025.

Following the LGR proposal submission, on 4th December 2025 a motion of no confidence was tabled against the leader over disagreements centred around which LGR option to submit. The motion passed, and on our visit, peers found NHC to be in political stalemate, with the deputy leader acting as leader until an extraordinary meeting, which is scheduled for 13th January 2026 to elect a new leader.

Despite the political challenges, peers discovered the council in a very optimistic position, having just drawn breath from the LGR proposal submission and in a state of reflection. There was no underestimating the collaborative work that has been delivered over the past year. Peers took time to congratulate all those who had contributed to this significant effort including the chief executive, leader and senior officers.

3.1. Strategic alignment and delivery

There has clearly been progress in aligning service plans with the corporate plan, budget and transformation objectives. Peers heard how the budget has aligned resources to key priority areas including those projected due to LGR, for example training and development and additional staffing. A draft budget has been prepared, and cross-party workshops have been held to develop this. The scenario planning suggests that depending on the outcome of the financial settlement, general fund reserves may be needed to plug a financial gap this year, but the budget will still be balanced, with the worst of the impact coming in 2027/28.

The council has delivered a substantial amount of work over the past year, this includes significant changes to the shared waste collection service, commencement of the £16.4m leisure centre decarbonisation and modernisation programme, second community governance review, acquisition of a building in Letchworth to house precious artefacts from North Herts Museum and increased and enhanced the approach to public consultation and engagement on issues such as the Women and Girls Safety Charter, Tenants Charter and Community Forums. All this has been achieved against the backdrop of LGR which has drawn heavily on the resources of the chief executive, leader and senior management team.

There is a recognition amongst officers that this pace of delivery cannot be maintained without sacrifice. Peers felt there was a need to revisit the prioritisation

exercise completed earlier in the year to again rationalise the number of projects and at the very least rank them in order of political priority. We recognise that some councillors want to leave a legacy, however there is a limit to what can be achieved alongside the planning and implementation of LGR without adverse impact to staff. Political expectations need to be reevaluated against the resources available. If a compromise can't be found, then serious consideration needs to be given to finding and allocating additional budget and resources.

The recommendation around place narrative has not been progressed due to LGR. Peers understood the reasoning for this and were pleased to hear that despite this, North Herts, its towns and villages continue to be promoted through the new Economic Development Plan, Local Plan and Town Centre Strategies. It was acknowledged that continuing to elevate the importance of North Herts and its "places" is vital to ensuring continued investment and growth as new boundaries are drawn, political agendas change and funding from central government is directed to future mayoral combined authorities. The residents in this part of Hertfordshire must not lose out.

The chief executive and leader along with some directors and senior managers have been heavily involved in developing the LGR proposals and workstreams. Officers are providing key skills and knowledge to the programme in areas including information technology (IT), artificial intelligence (AI) and digital transformation. This has further strengthened partnership working across the county and positioned the council well for the future.

Opportunities for collaboration are also being explored with councils that may be within the same unitary. For example, discussions are ongoing with Stevenage Borough Council to draw on their ability to build council housing with the need in North Herts for more affordable housing. A shared venture of this nature has the potential to bring benefits to both councils and pave the way for further successful LGR outcomes.

3.2. Driving organisational growth

A senior leadership team restructure was agreed and implemented earlier in the year with the permanent appointment of the seventh service director, who had been on a

fixed term contract. Following the retirement of two service directors a robust external recruitment process resulted in the appointment of two internal candidates to these roles. Peers commented on the positive example of this outcome, demonstrating to staff who want to progress and how NHC is actively growing its own talent.

The senior leadership team is now fully resourced and able to work together to deliver the council priorities alongside the LGR workstreams. Peers reflected on the positive change this has created. There is an improved distribution of work, increased capacity for reflection and strategic thinking and evidence of directors now looking up and taking an external perspective, out of the organisation. The reassignment of executive portfolios to match the directorates and more evenly distribute responsibilities has supported senior management capacity. Regular meetings, away days and a new learning and development programme can only serve to strengthen this new approach.

The council is producing a new workforce plan considering LGR timescales. Workstreams are looking at relaunching the organisational values, recruitment and retention, including what is needed now up to 2028, what is needed to put staff in the best position for what happens next along with a staff wellbeing theme to ensure staff are well supported through the next few years.

Recruitment and retention is currently in a good position but the council is not taking this for granted. There is recognition that uncertainty over future arrangements will for some cause anxiety and for others be seen as an exciting opportunity. Meeting the needs of all views is a challenge but NHC is already exploring opportunities for increased learning and development, future apprenticeships and maximising the potential of current/future graduates.

Every meeting discussed the increased and improved communications and engagement with staff. A new series of staff conferences were held in September led by the chief executive and leader, and staff are helping to shape future versions. The chief executive is providing regular updates on LGR, even if there is nothing much to say. The senior leadership team (SLT) are also taking turns in providing regular communications to all staff, along with virtual and in person staff briefings. This increase has been noted by staff who welcome it, but for some, there is still more to

do. Peers were really pleased to see the progress on this recommendation and encourage the officer and political leadership to continue. Consider how SLT members could be even more visible at other council sites such as the depot and look for opportunities to drop into team meetings to introduce yourself.

Peers heard of progress being made on political accountability, with portfolio holders now presenting reports to committee supported by officers to answer technical questions. This is a recent change with work to do to ensure consistent implementation of the process.

There were mixed views on whether councillor and officer relationships have improved. Some officers reported still feeling “caught out” by councillors and others reported receiving advance notice of questions to be tabled, which meant they could prepare ahead of meetings. Some staff also reported feeling upset by the recent council meeting involving a vote of no confidence in the leader. They felt the behaviour displayed was not in line with NHC’s values and opened the council up to reputational risk.

Peers were keen to emphasise their role was not to comment on the meeting or how it was conducted but they did stress the need for stability. Staff are understandably worried about the political leadership and the impact this has on their work, priorities and LGR process.

The council meetings in January 2026 provide the opportunity to steady the ship and elect a leader who can steer NHC through the next period of work which will include setting and approving a balanced budget, continuing to progress the legacy projects and navigating the next phase of LGR including public consultation on the proposals ahead of the minded to decision from MHCLG.

3.3. Performance-led modernisation

Gradual progress is being made around performance with a clearer council delivery plan providing more explanation as to the direction of travel. The use of benchmarking data from LGInform is being used to support the development of more stretching targets and to allow councillors to compare the performance of NHC with others. And Overview and Scrutiny Committee are providing review and oversight of

the data to drive improvement.

There is however more work to do, to fully embed a strong performance driven culture. Consistency in how performance indicators are selected, set and challenged needs to be prioritised. Along with ensuring they are aligned to the corporate plan, delivery plan, service plan and budget – the golden thread. Further benchmarking will also ensure the council is driven to be best in class. Officers felt there was more political direction needed to support progress in this area.

Churchgate remains the largest and potentially riskiest project on the council's agenda. Peers heard that resources were allocated to secure the appointment of a skilled project manager to oversee the project alongside the technical consultants. Councillors have recently discussed their plans for the site which include residential (private & affordable), market (indoor & outdoor space), car parking, community and leisure space, retail (inclusive of independent) and the possibility of a food store. Project Board are currently investigating the viability of these items and choosing the best option for developing the site. Councillors will receive an options appraisal report in early 2026 for decision on how to proceed. There is forward momentum on the project and NHC are committed to delivering the project, even if that means delivering an oven ready proposal to the new unitary, the residents of North Herts will still see the benefits.

Digital transformation continues to be a key component of the corporate plan, and it is helping the council to modernise. In view of LGR the council has been self-aware enough to stop some projects where LGR makes them less viable. However, where appropriate IT and AI are transforming services with positive results. Peers heard how the use of AI and bots within customer services is revolutionary, supporting effective and efficient delivery. Up to 50 percent of all calls relating to revenues and benefits are now being answered by AI, allowing staff in this area to work on other priorities.

In addition, the knowledge, skills and expertise within the teams at NHC are positively contributing to LGR across Hertfordshire with NH leading the Technology workstream. This is a key area of work which can make a huge impact on the transformation, savings and success of the new authority.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank North Herts 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 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.

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](#).