

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Bolton Council

3 June 2025

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge

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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) between 9 – 12 July 2024 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The progress review is an integral part of the CPC process. Taking place approximately 10 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 Bolton 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 Bolton Council took place (onsite) on 3 June 2025.

The progress review focussed on each of the recommendations from the CPC, under the following themes:

- strategic planning
- demand management/community engagement/communications
- financial management
- governance/risk
- transformation and workforce.

During the scoping meeting, it was agreed to include a particular focus on theme one (the development of the council's strategic planning framework) and theme two (demand management and locality working) as key areas that are strongly related to

all the CPCs wider recommendations.

For this progress review, the following LGA peers were involved:

- Delyth Curtis, Chief Executive, Cheshire West and Chester Council
- Councillor Jane Scullion, Leader of Calderdale Council
- Councillor Abi Brown OBE, City of Stoke-on-Trent and Chairman of the Local Government Association's Improvement and Innovation Board
- Cindy Lowthian, LGA Peer Challenge Manager
- Rachel Robinson, LGA Adviser

3. Progress review – summary

The peer team reviewed progress against the 13 recommendations from the original CPC. The council's RAG rated action plan (updated in May 2025) includes a breakdown of the specific actions taken in response to each of these. Out of these actions, 38 per cent are rated as 'blue' (complete), 36 per cent are rated as 'green' (in progress/within timescale) and 26 per cent are rated as 'amber' (in progress/subject to flexibility in timescale or not yet started but still within target timescale). None of the actions were rated as 'red' (no progress).

The peer team were pleased to see that the council has made positive progress in addressing the CPC recommendations. It is important that the council maintains this positive momentum and trajectory now evident and created by the CPC and continues to drive forward the implementation of recommendations. Specifically, to maintain impetus and pace behind the delivery of those actions rated as amber. This is particularly crucial given the financial challenges facing the council, including its continued dependence on reserves – a reliance that the council's external auditor has highlighted as a 'significant weakness' regarding the organisation's financial sustainability for the year ending March 2024 (published in February 2025).

Peers found a real sense of a 'call to action' following the CPC, with clear messaging from the chief executive, Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and political leadership about what needs to be done. This is reflected throughout this report, with clear examples including the implementation of a new strategic planning framework for the

council and place, pro-active work on 'place branding', a refreshed performance framework, published performance dashboard and a new longer term, more detailed Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

Those staff the team met with told peers that the council continues to remain a great place to work. External partners continue to hold the council in high regard, welcoming its convening role in bringing them together to shape the borough's new place-based vision, strategy and branding.

As referenced above, and like many other upper tier councils, Bolton Council continues to face significant financial challenges associated with the rising level of demand and costs within adults' and children's social care being seen locally. At the time of the original CPC, the council had shown a dependency on reserves to balance its budgets. This included a drawdown of £10 million for 2023/24 and further £10m for 2024/25. This use of reserves was in addition to required savings of over £13.8m for the same period.

During this progress review, peers saw how the council is continuing to rely on reserves to balance its budget. The MTFS projects a £30m budget gap between 2025/26 and 2028/29. The council is using £17.4m of reserves across 2025/26 and 2026/27 combined, which compounds the need to achieve savings into the latter two years 2027/28 and 2028/29. As identified above, this reliance on reserves has been flagged by the council's external auditors.

Whilst the latest LG Inform comparative data shows Bolton's level of reserves as a percentage of net revenue expenditure is above the average of other metropolitan councils (2023/2024), the total estimated un-ringfenced reserves for 2024/2025 is below the average.

The original CPC report highlighted that this reliance on reserves to balance budgets is unsustainable and had been pleased to see the council's clear focus on demand management and service transformation, acknowledging these as key steps in proactively addressing the challenges faced. During this re-visit, peers saw progress in this work (highlighted in section 3.8 and 3.10 below). Looking ahead, maintaining momentum, focus and pace on demand management and transformation is crucial.

The CPC had also highlighted the importance of increasing the frequency and

visibility of financial, performance and corporate risk management reporting to cabinet, Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and councillors. In particular, the importance of publishing quarterly financial performance reports for cabinet. The peer team saw positive progress through the drive to align finance, performance and risk via a new quarterly published dashboard on the council's website. Building on this, the council is committed to publishing quarterly finance and performance reports through CLT, cabinet and scrutiny imminently; the peer team encourages the council to maintain pace on this and implement this within the next month.

4. Progress Review – feedback

As outlined above, the progress review focussed on each of the recommendations from the CPC as follows:

Strategic planning

3.1 Develop the council's hierarchy of strategic plans and strategies, starting with the refreshed place-based vision for 2040. This should then align to the new corporate plan.

The council has made good progress in relation to this recommendation with a clear hierarchy of key strategies in place which align to the focus on growth and prevention set out within the Greater Manchester Strategy. These include the place strategy (vision 2040), the council plan (2024-2028) and the borough's first four year, more detailed, MTFS (2025/26-2028/29).

The place strategy 'Bolton 2040' has been agreed by the vision board (a strategic partnership). Focusing on growth and prevention, the plan sets out six strategic missions for action. Strategic partners reported a stronger sense of pace and momentum over the past ten months to develop and agree the plan. Peers heard how there were opportunities for partners to influence and be involved, and partners fed back that they were treated as equal partners.

Peers heard from partners how the vision 2040 plan was helping to de-clutter a busy landscape of plans and partnerships, helping to build greater clarity through the shared vision and missions. Partners are keen for this work to continue, saying the council should “*keep its course, don't lose the way now*”, ensure the new plan “*isn't a*

strategy on a shelf, keep the momentum going” and “don’t fear failure as this will stop progress”.

They fed back that engagement with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) has become stronger. The GMCA is now represented on the borough’s vision board. There were examples, shared with peers, of collaborative work taking place alongside GMCA and the council’s strategic partners.

Building on the positive progress so far, partners highlighted an opportunity to strengthen the engagement of ward councillors, from all political groups, on the vision 2040 plan. Peers agree that this broader communication and engagement has the potential to foster greater cross-party understanding of the 2040 vision and associated missions.

Since the CPC, the council has simultaneously progressed work on the new council plan which was agreed in April 2025. It is positive to see how this is framed to support delivery of the borough’s place-based vision. The performance framework has been revised to align with the new plan. This was shared with peers, and it clearly shows a golden thread running from the GMCA strategy, vision 2040 place strategy, council plan, directorate and service plans.

It is positive to see how an integrated performance dashboard, aligned to the council plan, has now been put in place which covers key performance information, risk and finance data. This dashboard will be published quarterly on the council’s website (the first published dashboard for quarter three is now on the council’s website). It is positive that this is now available for councillors, partners and the public to see.

As referenced earlier in this report (section three), the council is also committed to publishing quarterly finance and performance reports for cabinet and scrutiny imminently; the peer team encourages the council to maintain momentum and pace on this and implement this within the next month.

Demand management, community engagement and communications

3.10. Continue to develop the council’s proposals in respect of demand management, harnessing the opportunities arising from the newly established demand management boards in social care (adults and children.)

As highlighted above, like many other councils, Bolton Council is experiencing on-going financial challenges associated with rising demand and costs in adults and children's social care. This includes a forecast overspend of £14.7m for 2024/25 at quarter two, largely due to £13m of pressure in children's services.

Peers met with senior officers and middle managers, and it is clear from these conversations how, since the original CPC, the council has continued to maintain a relentless focus on tackling rising demand through a range of targeted initiatives. Both children's and adults' social care have a strong vision focused on demand reduction and peers were told that this work is now, following the original CPC, more corporately owned and driven.

In children's services, this includes work to refine commissioning processes, refresh the sufficiency strategy and engage providers to reduce costs. Since the peer challenge, the council has restructured family support and launched an additional family hub, with two more planned for 2025. In adult social care, efforts are underway to improve carer assessments, reduce lost bed days, and develop a 'transfer of care' hub model. Overall, peers heard how the approach to market sufficiency in both adult and children's social care is now much more developed. The council is also working with strategic partners, through the vision partnership, to advance a new prevention and inequalities framework.

Peers heard that, building on this existing work, there is an opportunity to further strengthen the council's corporate approach to developing business cases and invest-to-save initiatives. The emerging transformation strategy (see 3.8) provides a timely opportunity to embed a stronger emphasis on using clear data, metrics and outcomes to shape future investment proposals that address long-term financial challenges - particularly in relation to demand management, new models of care, and new ways of working.

The original CPC highlighted opportunities for the council, particularly through their chief executive, to strengthen the place-based working and leadership within the Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership arrangements. During this progress review, some stakeholders re-affirmed this point, highlighting the recent national NHS reforms and the impact on integrated partnership arrangement. As a key partner

within the Integrated Care Partnership (GMICP), it is important that the council - through the leadership of its chief executive, ensures the council's voice is represented.

3.11. Building on the strong community and locality based working initiatives in place, consider opportunities to strengthen direct resident engagement and consultation. This should include feedback to residents and stakeholders following consultations.

Peers were encouraged to learn that a cross-directorate working group has been established. The working group has agreed a community collaboration framework to support direct resident engagement and consultation. This outlines several engagement principles including the need to ensure feedback after consultations. A 'way of engaging wheel' supplements the framework, providing staff with a tool to support them in their work with residents.

There was insufficient time, during this progress review, for peers to test out the extent to which the framework and wheel are being used across services. However, the council's position statement acknowledges it is still early days and this work is ongoing. Peers were pleased to see, within the position statement, the council's commitment to sustaining momentum on this work to support culture change.

The council has continued work through its 'community alliance' model. These involve ward councillors and residents working together on local priorities. During the original CPC, peers learned that this was a pilot approach in seven areas with the aim of rolling out the model across the borough. As highlighted in the original CPC report, the peer team encourage the council to agree a clear timeline and approach to review these to inform their roll out.

3.12 Continue to communicate and champion the work you do well to improve your profile both regionally and nationally

During the original CPC, peers noted the significant efforts underway to build a place-based narrative and branding for Bolton, known as 'the Bolton Story'. In this progress review, peers were impressed with the progress made. Peers found that external

partners have a clear passion and understanding of the brand and jointly own it.

A 'Brand Bolton Board' - aligned to the vision partnership, has been put in place to promote Bolton's unique brand. The branding, alongside a 'We are Bolton' ambassador programme, were formally launched earlier this year. The latter is particularly impressive – involving ambassadors from a range of sectors, who actively promote the borough as a place to live, work and invest. Ambassadors can access brand assets and networks including breakfast meetings and marketing meetings.

In addition to this, the council have agreed a marketing and communications strategy (December 2020/4). This sets out several priority objectives for the council to ensure staff and councillors understand the Bolton story and can communicate it in a way that builds trust and confidence with residents.

Overall, the council and partners have demonstrated innovative and impressive progress in relation to this recommendation and peers encourage the council and partners to continue this.

As referenced earlier in this report (3.1), there is an opportunity to strengthen the engagement of ward councillors from all political groups in shaping the vision 2040 plan. Could this also be a timely moment to consider reinvigorating the previously well-regarded 'Bolton first, politics second' approach – an ethos that once gained cross-party support but appears to be referenced less frequently today? This is not about diminishing constructive political debate or challenge but about gaining shared understanding of the key issues facing the place.

Financial Management

3.2 Increase the frequency and visibility of financial, performance and corporate risk management reporting to Cabinet, Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and councillors

3.3 Publish a four-year Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) aligned to the new Corporate Plan

During the CPC, peers had been concerned that regular, quarterly financial performance reports were not being published as part of meeting papers for cabinet. Peers also learned that the council's financial strategy covered a period of just two years when best practice indicates a longer-term medium term financial plan should

be in place e.g. covering four years.

During the progress review, peers learned that external auditors, in their latest value for money opinion (published in February 2025 for year ending March 2024) also commented that the council's MTFS was not sufficiently detailed. As outlined in section three, they gave an overall significant weakness judgement for 'financial sustainability'.

Peers were pleased to see the council have undertaken work to address these recommendations. This includes the publication of a more detailed and longer term MTFS for the four-year period 2025/26-2028-29 (produced in November 2024).

Peers also saw evidence of a drive to align finance, performance and risk reporting via a new quarterly published dashboard. The first quarter three report has been published on the council's website. Those who met with peers during this progress review welcomed this transparency.

Building on this, as outlined earlier in this report, the council is committed to using the new dashboard as a tool to inform published, quarterly finance and performance reports through CLT, cabinet and scrutiny imminently. The peer team encourages the council to maintain momentum on this and implement this within the next month.

Governance and risk

3.4 Enhance the role and profile of the 'golden triangle' in line with the latest LGA, Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants (CIPFA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) guidelines.

Peers were pleased to learn that this recommendation was implemented promptly following the peer challenge with the three statutory officers meeting regularly. In addition, a corporate governance group, involving the chief executive, section 151 officer, monitoring officer, director of corporate resources and the assistant director for audit and risk meets regularly. The latter post holder is shared with, and hosted by, Manchester City Council, which is supporting the provision of an external perspective beyond the council itself. Peers also heard that the chief executive has invited the council's external auditor to meetings, where relevant, for an added level

of assurance. An action plan, which tracks progress key actions, is in place. Building on this, peers would encourage the council to consider formalised agendas for these meetings to ensure meetings remain focussed and effective.

3.5 Continue to progress the work, already started, to strengthen the council's framework of governance, risk management and control.

3.6 Ensure the role of the Standards Committee, beyond dealing with councillor complaints, is better understood and enhanced to promote high standards of conduct.

3.9 Establish a new councillor development plan and programme of training

The council has continued work to strengthen governance, risk management and control. This includes a new process for reviewing the council's Annual Governance Statement (AGS). This process (overseen by the corporate governance group), involves a self-assessment questionnaire, informed by CIPFA and SOLACE guidance, covering key aspects of governance and assurance. Other examples include the incorporation of risk metrics into the new published quarterly performance dashboard and a recent review of business continuity plans. Staff who met with peers reflected positively on this work.

At the time of the original CPC, the council's standards committee had not met since 2012. Peers recommended work with councillors to ensure its role, beyond dealing with councillor complaints, is better understood. In particular, to include a review the code of conduct in line with the LGA's model code (or similar). Peers were pleased to see that a meeting of the committee was held in September 2024 to review the code of conduct against the LGA model code. The recommendation (agreed by full council) was to retain the exiting code as it aligned broadly to the aims contained within the LGA Model Code. Building on this (as outlined below) the council should continue to reflect the code within the member development programme.

3.7 Develop a Corporate Risk Register that is owned by both the Corporate Leadership Team and Cabinet.

At the time of the original CPC, the council had recently adopted a revised risk management strategy, identifying the need to strengthen its corporate approach. Peers also recognised this need, noting that while directorate level risk frameworks and registers were in place, the council needed to enhance its corporate oversight by establishing an updated corporate risk register – one that is jointly owned by the cabinet and CLT. The council's latest external auditor's value for money opinion (referenced above) identifies this as a significant weakness in the council's arrangements in respect of governance.

The council has since made positive progress by undertaking a formal review of the corporate risk register which was published as part of the papers to the audit committee (December 2024). Peers strongly recommend that the corporate risk register is regularly reviewed and owned at the most senior levels of the council including the CLT and cabinet.

3.9 Establish a new councillor development plan and programme of training

The council has indicated that it is currently assessing training opportunities and plans to present a report to a future CLT meeting to explore ways forward. The goal is to implement a new programme ahead of the council's next elections in May 2026. Peers strongly encourage the council to accelerate the pace here, in developing and rolling out a member development plan. Consideration should be given to how best to involve councillors in this work e.g. through a working group or similar. A plan which aligns with the new place strategy, corporate priorities, and the 'Bolton Story' presents a valuable opportunity. Peers would encourage the council to continue to use the LGA's wide range of leadership, training and development opportunities to support councillors in their roles. These are detailed on the [LGA's website](#).

Transformation and workforce

3.8 Develop a council wide programme of transformation with a clear vision and aims

Progress has been made, following the CPC, with targeted programmes of transformation. In particular, the continued roll out of the council's first-ever digital transformation programme. As outlined earlier in this report, the council has

continued to progress demand management work across both adult's and children's social care. Building on this, the council recognise the opportunity to build a wider programme of transformation aligned to council priorities with a clearer vision and aims.

A new transformation board has been established and a transformation action group is in the process of being set up. A vision for future transformation has been agreed *"to be the driving force behind innovative and sustainable change, by deploying the Future Council Model...."*. This future model has a focus on demand reduction and on ensuring capacity and ways of working to support transformation. There is a recognition of the need to ensure the programme is aligned to agreed priorities and has a clear focus on data and measures.

It is positive how a new transformation strategy, which pulls this work together and sets out the vision and priorities for transformation, is currently under development (to be agreed by September 2025). Maintaining pace and momentum in developing the transformation strategy is essential, as it serves as a key mechanism for tackling the financial challenges facing the council, as outlined earlier in this report.

Peers also encourage the council to continue to ensure that organisational capacity and capability is in place to deliver transformation. The council's most significant financial challenges must be addressed through the transformation programme (including the work to manage demand). It is positive how some additional investment has been used to develop a corporate programmes function with work taking place to build a Programme Management Office (PMO) and Programme Management Unit (PMU). The PMO will bring together change managers, strategy and policy leads and other enablers (Human Resources, Finance, Legal, Technology).

The demand boards (referenced above) within children's social care and adult social care have matured since the original CPC, with a focus on reform and transformation. Building on this, and as outlined in 3.10, it will be important to ensure clear linkages are in place across this work and the corporate transformation programme. The council should continue to ensure whole council prioritisation of demand management.

3. 13. Develop a corporate workforce strategy

Peers were pleased to note how the work to develop a corporate workforce strategy is under-way. The Human Resources (HR) team have reviewed the current people plan and engaged directorates to inform the new strategy. They have also considered strategies across other Greater Manchester councils to learn from different approaches. Findings, together with key HR data, were considered by CLT. A workforce audit is also underway to inform the new strategy and once this is completed, a working group will be established to oversee the development of the strategy and wider engagement.

This new workforce strategy will be critical in ensuring the council has the right people, skills and culture in place to meet both current and future challenges and deliver the organisational transformation highlighted above.

5. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Bolton Council for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review. It is clear to us that the council have embraced the CPC and associated recommendations with clear progress made.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on several of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this.

Dan Archer (LGA Senior Regional Adviser) is the regional lead for the North West and, is the main contact between your council and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Dan is available to discuss any further support the council requires, his email address is Daniel.archer@local.gov.uk.