

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

25 June 2025

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 15–17 January 2024 and published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the CPC process. Taking place 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 Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (the 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 Tunbridge Wells Borough Council took place (onsite) on 25 June 2025, with the following members of the original CPC team involved:

- Lead officer peer: Giles Hughes, Chief Executive, West Oxfordshire District Council
- Lead member peer: Cllr Sally Morgan, Teignbridge District Council
- Member peer: Cllr Sue Baxter, Bromsgrove District Council
- Member peer: Cllr Richard Henry, Leader, Stevenage Borough Council
- Officer peer: Kirstin Donaldson, Service Manager Acquisitions and Development, South Cambridgeshire District Council
- Nick Searle, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

The Progress Review considered the ten recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge under the following theme headings:

- Members and senior officers
- Key priorities and finance
- Organisational


3. Progress Review – Feedback

Peers returned to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council after a period of significant change for local government following the publication of the English Devolution White Paper in December 2024. More locally in Tunbridge Wells, in May 2024 there were all out elections with the number of councillors reducing from 48 to 39. This saw several new councillors elected, as well as the council changing to majority political control, and new governance arrangements were also introduced.

On their return to the council, peers welcomed the honesty and willingness to engage from everyone spoken to throughout the progress review. Although it was acknowledged that local government reorganisation (LGR) would bring significant change to the council and the wider Kent sub-region, the council is working effectively to manage the challenges and opportunities of LGR. For example, the Leader and CEX are both proactive players with leading roles in LGR discussions across the whole of the Kent. LGR is broadly seen as an opportunity for the council to promote the economic growth, development and cultural prospects of the Borough. Regular updates and engagement with staff on LGR has been welcomed, and staff remain committed and positive about working for TWBC.

Out of the CPC's ten recommendations, the council's RAG rated action plan reported that 100 per cent of actions are completed or in progress and on track. On their return to the council, the peer team felt that the council has made good progress against many of their CPC recommendations.

Amidst this background of significant change, the council has accomplished many things since the peer team were on site. This includes the council launching an



ambitious Strategic Plan in February 2025; greater emphasis has been placed on social value with The Amelia; strong progress has been made on the Local Plan; Cabinet members have undertaken various training; and external auditors have recognised the council's robust financial management. Outside the council there has been the establishment of a regular farmers' market; the redevelopment of the former cinema site; and several retailers are moving into Royal Victoria Place.

More detailed feedback on each thematic area is set out below.

3.1. Senior officers and members

- Recommendation 1: Strengthen working relationship and shared understanding between senior officers and members (joint away day, off-site, on long-term strategic challenges with external facilitation).
- Recommendation 2: Streamline meetings for senior team and Cabinet to make the most effective use of time.
- Recommendation 8: Training for members post May all out elections, clarify role of Cabinet Advisory vs working groups vs OS with forthcoming governance changes.
- Recommendation 10: Encourage Cabinet Members to lead on the presentation of items at Cabinet to increase visible ownership of key decisions.

Following the peer challenge in January 2024, the council has undertaken significant efforts to strengthen the relationship between the political and officer top team. Initiatives have ranged from away days, to training sessions to individual coaching sessions with both the Leader and Chief Executive, with some of these sessions taking place off-site. Several of the away days have been held jointly between the senior management team and the Cabinet. Specifically, the Council has worked with the LGA and Avanti who have provided both separate and joint sessions for the Cabinet and the Management Team. Through the LGA, a Liberal Democrat peer provided external facilitation for the senior management team on political awareness training, which was warmly welcomed. Peers were glad to have seen these changes

and encourage senior officers and members to continue to invest in these relationships to help embed the positive working achieved so far.

Peers heard that the introduction of a new weekly 'Leadership Team' meeting format has helped better utilise member and officer time together. These meetings have also been a valuable way to identify and develop solutions to long-term strategic challenges and priorities. In addition to this, the Cabinet meets for a 'tactical' meeting on Wednesday afternoons. Further improvements have been made to enhance ways of working too, including uploading key documents onto a Teams site and materials shared ahead of meetings. The recent extension of an 'on tour' format has seen Cabinet meet local parish and town councils to understand local issues/concerns. Peers welcomed these changes and the positive impact they have made and encouraged the initiatives to be kept under constant review.

Peers observed that Cabinet members are developing effective working relationships with key officers covering their portfolios, including Heads of Service. This is supported by a positive culture of hybrid working that allows members and officers to fulfil their roles and responsibilities when working on-site and remotely. As a result, Cabinet members are now regularly leading on the presentation of their items at Cabinet. Whilst peers appreciate that this remains an emerging learning process, they encourage this approach to be more consistent across the whole of Cabinet.

The council has also changed its governance structure, and this has included formalising the arrangement by which non-cabinet members now chair Council Advisory Boards. This has helped clarify ways of working.

Taken together, all these initiatives have helped foster greater understanding between senior officers and members, supporting the development and delivery of the council's Strategic Plan priorities. Peers welcomed this closer and stronger way of working between senior officers and members.

Since the peer challenge, the council has clearly strengthened its training offer for all members, particularly through the new councillors' induction. Training is now provided during the day as well as evenings, acknowledging that many members work full-time. The creation of an online Member Portal has enhanced the sharing of information and all-member briefings are provided every Friday, with key topics

covered such as LGR, as well as regular contributions from external guest speakers. The feedback has been positive, and councillors are now better informed, although attendance at these sessions can sometimes vary. Officers are exploring ways to upload recordings which will mitigate attendance challenges.

Despite the significant progress made in this area, the council remains committed to continually improve the support available for newly elected councillors and regularly gathers feedback. To further develop the training offer, Cabinet members could maximise the external training opportunities available by the LGA.

3.2. Key priorities and finance

- Recommendation 4: Consider re-baselining the budget taking into account repeated underspends and areas for growth. Align resources to key services, priorities, and long-term strategy.
- Recommendation 5: Climate change is a key priority, but to meet stretching targets it needs to be at the core of what you do. Embed it through the organisation and ensure there are sufficient resources, staff, and capacity.

Following the CPC, the Council consulted and approved a new Strategic Plan to 2032. It has four priorities:

1. Climate Action
2. Sustainable Development
3. Vibrant Economy
4. Community Wellbeing

Peers felt that the Strategic Plan, adopted in February 2025, is concise, ambitious and its priorities are clearly presented.

Climate Action is now a dedicated priority within the Strategic Plan, demonstrating its importance to the administration. Progress has been made on the Borough Climate Change Strategy, which was published and consulted on, and updates on progress are reported against commitments through the Council's Climate Emergency Advisory Panel. Peers heard that the council is particularly proud of how it has

leveraged its 'community leadership' role within the Borough by promoting action from local residents and businesses through the Sustainability, Economic Development and Communications teams and through the 'Amplifi' initiative. Despite this notable progress, peers reported that the timescales for delivery of the council's climate change ambitions remain stretching, especially against the challenging timeframes associated with delivering LGR. These timescales should therefore be kept under constant review.

On finance, the council's prudent financial management is commendable, and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy has been updated. The council has also made budgetary information presented to Cabinet and advisory boards more accessible, with in-year financial information infographics now included in the suite of quarterly financial management reports. These changes were welcomed by peers.

All councils are operating in a challenging financial environment, and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council must continue to take a considered approach as it seeks to deliver the four overall priorities outlined in the Strategic Plan, as well as several major projects and sizeable contracts, notwithstanding managing LGR requirements too. Peers understand that the council will be producing an overall timeframe and prioritisation picture plan to show the capacity requirements for the Strategic Plan for consideration against existing business as usual commitments and the forecast medium-term budget deficit. Given budgetary and staffing pressures, peers felt that the council must determine its priorities and encourages more member involvement in the prioritisation of resources against the Strategic Plan.

3.3. Organisational

- Recommendation 3: Update and communicate HR policies (e.g., hybrid working, disciplinary/grievances/EDI, Health, and policy for frontline staff etc). Training and support for managers on issues like reasonable adjustments, mental health, and well-being. Consider introducing the mental health first aider scheme.
- Recommendation 6: Consider ways to strengthen EDI, updating policies, using EQIA more effectively. Change approaches to consultation and decision-making to ensure EDI is considered at an early stage.

- Recommendation 7: Strengthen risk management, with updated processes and systems, and taking a more strategic long-term view
- Recommendation 9: Consider ways to improve the governance of shared services arrangements to increase transparency and member oversight. Consider creating a shared long-term strategy.

The peer team heard positive feedback about the council's considerable efforts to update, streamline and communicate many of its policies relating to Human Resources (HR). The most significant of these is the council's new People Strategy, which was implemented in March 2024. The peer team were informed that this involved undertaking a comprehensive review of all HR policies, including the review of pay and benefits. This has been completed and is currently being implemented. That review adjusted the employment market to which the council benchmarks itself and has rectified areas where the council deviates from the market.

From the peers' engagement with staff, it is evident that staff enjoy working at the council, with increased morale, and staff commenting that they feel appreciated. A key contributing factor is the improvements made to employee wellbeing across the organisation. Following the CPC the council convened a group of staff to review wellbeing issues. The council decided not to pursue a mental health first aider scheme; instead, it developed a draft 'statement of intent' combining existing and future planned support with initiatives developed to address physical, financial, mental and social aspects of wellbeing. The peer team was pleased to see that a range of other training opportunities and talks on mental health issues have been provided.

The re-structuring of the HR Team, including the appointment of an Interim Head of HR and a new Learning and Development Manager, has led to improvements in specific support and training for all managers. For example, managers are now better supported in making greater use of data and analytics. There are now dedicated groups for senior managers, managers' managers and people managers. The council has recruited two M365 trainers to enhance staff skills as well as support the council's transformation aspirations. There has also been mental health training for all managers, and this has been further strengthened by the council changing its

Occupational Health Provider, which has focused on mental health issues. Overall, the peer team were impressed by the plentiful learning and development opportunities for staff at *all* levels, and these changes were reflected positively in the recent staff survey.

Equalities, diversity and inclusion continues to be important for the council. Following the CPC, the council updated its Equalities Strategy, and the recruitment of an Insights Officer has substantially improved the council's engagement with harder to reach groups in the community. These are positive steps, and the peer team encourages the council to keep EDI policies under review and at the centre of decision-making, especially with regard to Strategic Plan projects to which it is highly relevant, for example strategic leisure contracts.

The peer team had previously highlighted the need to strengthen risk management. Whilst financial risk management is well-covered, financial risks are not the only risks that impact the council. Analysing risk in relation to Strategic Plan objectives will be a positive step in assisting any prioritisation exercises.

Since the CPC, the council has reviewed its Strategic Risks with support from Zurich Municipal. This review involved members of Cabinet, the Council's Senior Management Team, Internal Audit and the Council's Audit and Governance Committee. The council is also exploring various software packages to identify an improved approach to recording and managing strategic risks. All key decisions include an assessment of risk, and it has been included within major decisions such as the acquisition and redevelopment of Royal Victoria Place.

The council has also started a governance review of Mid Kent Services (a partnership agreement between Maidstone Borough Council, Swale Borough Council and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council), but this has been delayed both by the departure of the Mid Kent Services Director and the additional pressure that LGR has placed on staff capacity. The council is, however, reviewing and standardising the collaboration agreements for Mid Kent Services and has appointed a lead chief executive/director to oversee each service and liaise with each Mid Kent Services head of service.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Tunbridge Wells Borough 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 a number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this.

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