

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Wyre Forest District Council

**10 December 2024**

Feedback

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## Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 5 – 7March 2024 and promptly published the [full report with an action plan](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjn8qzl_bOKAxULW0EAHRO6IcwQFnoECBUQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwyre.moderngov.co.uk%2Fdocuments%2Fs24146%2FFinal%2BCPC%2BReport%2BWyre%2BCouncil.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2EwfxZbAKOyazA0OfF1S7H&opi=89978449) on 3 June 2024.

The Progress Review (PR) is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. Taking place approximately six to 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 Wyre Forest 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.

## Summary of the approach

The PR at Wyre Forest took place onsite on 10 December 2024. The PR focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge, under the following theme headings:

**Theme 1 – Local Priorities and Outcomes**

**Recommendations:**

1. Establish a consistent approach to assuring delivery and reporting on the progress of major projects to adequately manage risk and ensure good governance.
2. Embed a corporate approach to service business planning to ensure resources are allocated to priority tasks linked to the corporate plan.

**Theme 2 – Financial planning and management   
Recommendations:**

1. Review previous business case decisions that may be out of date to reaffirm costs, benefits, affordability, viability, and validity of previous decisions in the light of a high inflation environment.
2. Promote commercialisation within the Council to ensure that everyone understands the part they play.
3. Provide training on understanding financial reports for non-finance staff and Members.

**Theme 3 – Governance and organisational development**

**Recommendations:**

(3) Review the scrutiny process in line with best practice.

(6) Members to review the delivery of member training to consider how it can be delivered to suit their needs and availability.

**Theme 4 – Capacity for improvement - workforce focus**

**Recommendations:**

(8) Bring forward the development of workforce and succession plans to provide resilience to the delivery of the Corporate Plan.

(9) Develop a strategic corporate approach to Equality Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) encompassing both HR and service/community considerations.

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

* Andrew Pritchard, Chief Executive, Runnymede Borough Council
* Cllr Nick Worth, Leader, South Holland District Council
* Francesca Stott, LGA peer challenge manager (Not a member of the original CPC team).

## Progress Review - Feedback

Out of the CPC’s nine recommendations, the council’s RAG rated Action plan reports that 100 per cent of actions are either completed/progressed and 0 per cent have not yet been progressed. This equates to one action being fully ‘complete’, eight actions ‘on target ’and no actions ‘off target’. The council shared with peers how the corporate peer challenge process has allowed Wyre Forest District Council (WFDC) to reflect on and further consider the recommendations and feedback received in April. The peer team was pleased to observe the positive approach WFDC has taken in starting to address the recommendations from the CPC, including the actions implemented and the evidence demonstrating the progress made.

The council developed and published an action plan in June 2024 in response to the recommendations of the CPC and has been delivering against this. There was acknowledgement that progress is stronger in areas such as the corporate EDI strategy, reviewing business case decisions and establishing a consistent corporate reporting approach. However, there remains an inconsistent understanding among members and officers of WFDC’s significant financial challenge, with a lack of urgency in addressing it. The pace of delivery does not reflect the pressure of the MTFS, and WFDC will need to ensure there is sufficient member and officer buy in to the actions to ensure they have traction and long-term impact. Peers recommend that WFDC accelerates their current approach to the implementation, monitoring, and reporting on the delivery of their Action Plan which will materially benefit the MTFS. Peers were informed by officers and members of the improved relationship between CLT and Cabinet since the CPC. As a result, peers recommend leveraging this progress and encourage both Cabinet and CLT to take a leadership role in driving accelerated delivery in response to MTFS pressures, ensuring organisation-wide buy in. It is also important that the council continues to assess the impact of its efforts while maintaining business as usual operations.

Since the peer team’s CPC visit, there have been some changes to Wyre Forest’s political administration and senior officer structure. Changes to the Cabinet included Cllr Ian Hardiman’s retirement from Cabinet, with Cllr Ben Brookes announced as new Deputy Leader of the Councillor, and Cllr Chris Rogers appointed as Cabinet Member for Housing, Health and Wellbeing. Councillor John Byng was elected as Chairman of the Council for 2024/25, with Councillor Paul Harrison as Vice-Chairman. From 1 July 2024, the new Senior Leadership Team structure was implemented, with Ostap Paparega appointed to the new Deputy Chief Executive post, also responsible for Regeneration and Commercial. The peer team were pleased to hear that the council has created senior officer capacity with the skills and experience to drive forward WFDC’s commercial agenda.

Following the corporate peer challenge, the [Devolution White Paper](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth) announced the Government’s desire for all of England to benefit from devolution. The White Paper also announced that the Government will facilitate a programme of local government reorganisation for all two tier areas. It is recognised that the council will be impacted and, while closing its financial gap and addressing other key priorities, it will also need to divert officer capacity to support reorganisation planning.

**Theme 1 – Local Priorities and Outcomes**

**Recommendations:**

1. Establish a consistent approach to assuring delivery and reporting on the progress of major projects to adequately manage risk and ensure good governance.
2. Embed a corporate approach to service business planning to ensure resources are allocated to priority tasks linked to the corporate plan.

The council RAG rated these actions as mostly green and the peer team can see, from the mini position statement and from conversations with senior officers, that good progress has been made. Embedding the new corporate approach is still in the early stages and will require a few cycles to fully implement, which WFDC recognises. Implementing the recommendations is essential to support the council’s aim of increasing commercial income to address its financial challenge.

In response to recommendation 1, the council identified a group of officers to undertake a project management qualification to build capacity within teams, rather than establish a programme management office. WFDC had not, at the time of the PR, procured an external provider to deliver the project management qualification to relevant staff. But the council has identified officers whose roles would most benefit from this training and there is still a growing performance management culture. As the commercial culture embeds, strengthening in house project management skills will help achieve a business minded approach across the organisation, and enhance workforce capacity to deliver savings and support key commercial projects that are essential in the MTFS to bridge the budget gap. WFDC has rolled out in depth workshops and e-learn modules on key topics including the roles and responsibilities of Project Sponsor / SRO, Programme Manager and Project Manager; risk management; issue management; change management; stakeholder management; financial management; strategic procurement and supplier management, and information management. The peer team would encourage WFDC to review and provide a refresher of this training on an annual basis.

The council’s Transformation and Commercial Board is still in early stages of implementation, having subsumed the previous iteration of the Commercial Board. As the board becomes more active and develops its work programme, peers suggest that WFDC should model best practice to the wider organisation. In the spirit of continuous improvement, peers encourage WFDC to conduct a formal review of the board’s processes on an annual basis, considering future changing priorities and potential resource constraints. It is positive that updates for all major capital projects now feature in all budget and performance monitoring reports, including Q3 report for the 2024-25 financial year. Peers heard from members that the Board receives consistent, clear and detailed reports on major risk projects, so the members on the Board have a detailed understanding of the risks. WFDC clarified that the Board exists for monitoring purposes, and provides oversight and assurance on the council’s Commercialisation agenda with a summary report to Cabinet. Along with CLT, Cabinet considers taking actions based on the advice.

In response to recommendation 4, WFDC has redrafted all service plans to have a uniform introduction/structure and to be aligned with the vision, priorities, and values outlined in the council’s Corporate Plan. Service plans have also been compiled (one plan remains outstanding) for 2024/25 using a corporate approach, including performance indicators for each head of service. This should enable WFDC to take a more streamlined approach to performance management (albeit this is linked to the outstanding recommendation detailed above). The peers heard that WFDC has merged individual project boards, whilst retaining the same officers on the board, to provide better consistency and embed the new approach, as recommended in the CPC report. The new corporate performance and policy officer is now in post and there has been a good start with a strengthened performance management culture, but more progress can be made to fully embed across WFDC.

The peers concluded that with these changes a “golden thread” is emerging from the corporate plan, down to service delivery, and woven into individual objectives – all closely aligned to the MTFS. In summary, the peers observed clear progress on these two recommendations and encourage WFDC to maintain this approach, prioritising the project management training to fully realise its benefits as soon as possible and deliver value.

**Theme 2: Financial planning and management**

**Recommendations:**

(2) Review previous business case decisions that may be out of date to reaffirm costs, benefits, affordability, viability, and validity of previous decisions in the light of a high inflation environment.

(5) Promote commercialisation within the Council to ensure that everyone understands the part they play.

(7) Provide training on understanding financial reports for non-finance staff and Members.

The original Corporate Peer Challenge, undertaken in March 2024, highlighted the council’s significant financial challenges including a budget gap of £2.1m over three years to 2027/28. The CPC report highlighted the importance of ensuring a whole organisation understanding of the financial challenges faced and the need to deliver savings.

During the PR, it was clear that the council continues to face significant financial pressures. The 2024/2025 financial position is showing significant pressures mitigated only through Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) savings and additional investment income due to the base rate falling at a slower rate than anticipated. The council’s latest Quarter 2 budget report shows how a forecast £155k net overspend has been offset by an underspend of £546k as result of these mitigations, leading to a projected overall net underspend against the original budget for 2024/2025 of £391k.  However, this same report highlights how the impact of emerging cost pressures could fully erode this gain by the end of the financial year.

The Quarter 2 monitoring report and [updated MTFS (December 2024)](https://forms.wyreforestdc.gov.uk/council/docs/doc60024_20241218_cabinet_agenda.pdf) also provides information relating to estimates of the council’s financial position beyond 2024/2025 and over the next three years to 2027-28. Peers recognise that WFDC is drawing significantly on reserves to balance the budget and recognise that this is not sustainable over the cycle of the Council's MTFS.  The Council’s reserves were £3.9m at the start of 2024-2025, but this is forecast to reduce to £1.4m by the start of 2027-2028. Work still needs to be done to ensure the council’s MTFS can be balanced in the final year of the plan with a further £2m draw down on reserves currently modelled. The Council should use this time now to crystallise savings and deliver on their savings plans for future budgets. Peers heard that the council is looking to increase commercial income to address the budget gap. However, during the PR, peers did not see evidence of tangible or urgent progress towards this, and it was clear that the commercial agenda remains in an early phase. It is imperative that the council accelerate this, whilst also making good progress with the savings from the Transformation and Financial Sustainability programme, as use of reserves is unsustainable. Currently, the council’s commercial plan to address the budget gap is not mature enough to materially address the gap in the time frame needed.

The council RAG rated recommendation 2 as green, as the council has fully completed the action. Peers heard that this work was prioritised, with all business cases approved prior to December 2021 having been re-examined. Those business cases which have not implemented were identified and then reviewed by the Commercial Programme Board, and the Board identified those which would not be progressed. This will provide WFDC with clarity on their commercial priorities. Base budgets have been amended to remove expenditure and income allocations from the 2024/25 budget for business cases no longer being progressed. Debt-financing costs were re-affirmed in the current higher interest rate environment, for those that were financed by borrowing.

The council RAG rated recommendation 5 as amber and red. The council is still identifying a commercial training course for members and officers. WFDC plans to share successful business cases that have either significantly improved Council revenue or reduced operating costs will be publicised following approval by the Council’s Transformation and Commercial Board. However, this has not been progressed yet. The council has added a new deputy chief executive post, responsible for regeneration and commercial. Peers heard from senior officers how this has raised internal awareness of the council’s commercial agenda. However, as flagged in the CPC report, peers heard that the postholder needs to have sufficient capacity to devote to the commercial aspects of the role.

It was unclear to peers if the whole council has embraced the commercialisation agenda. Peers heard from senior officers that WFDC could ‘do more to support and implement the culture around commercialisation’ and ensure all officers and members understood their role in supporting delivery. Peers heard that a new commercial strategy had recently been agreed, but at the time of the PR, this had not been communicated to officers and members. In general, the wider staff group are less informed about the council’s commercial agenda. There was recognition that internal comms should be published soon. Due to the emphasis on the council’s commercial agenda in the MTFS, the council should drive forward the commercial culture. The peer team heard that ‘our biggest issue is pace’, despite having the capacity to deliver within the organisation. Peers reflected that the council has much further to go to complete recommendation 5 within a timescale that it will materially benefit from.

The peer team also heard that the council is implementing four multi-disciplinary delivery units to bring forward projects that the council is relying on to be delivered, so it can secure financial sustainability. This is currently at an early stage, with the first meeting due to take place in January 2026. The groups are designed to promote a consistent approach across the council, ensure that delivery and reporting effectively manage risk, uphold good governance, and facilitate cross-departmental sharing of best practices. Peers heard that there is enthusiasm and drive for the council’s commercial agenda from the depot, and the peer team suggest the council should explore socialising this across the council.

The council RAG rated recommendation 7 as green and red. Although the commercialisation agenda remains the council’s primary focus to deliver against the MTFS, peers heard that target savings have been assigned to themed areas with senior responsible officers (rather than departments) and progress against targets are reported into the Transformation and Programmes Board. The council is still working towards implementing robust performance management of savings targets, but the finance team regularly meets with budget holders one-on-one. The council decided to deliver finance training in house. Members had recently received the first training session on finance, but staff had not received formal training since the CPC in March. The team heard that the council will offer a CIPFA diploma in financial management to the appropriate managers and all new starters in early 2025. The peer team recommends that the council prioritise training for budget holders, as it will equip staff with the skills needed to manage income generation and drive the efficiencies and savings required to deliver the MTFS.

**Theme 3 – Governance and organisational development**

**Recommendations:**

(3) Review the scrutiny process in line with best practice.  
(6) Members to review the delivery of member training to consider how it can be delivered to suit their needs and availability.

The council RAG rated recommendation 3 as mostly green, with one sub-action identified by the council as being red; and RAG rated recommendation 6 as a split of green and amber. The peer team met with the Solicitor to the Council and three members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (O&S). However, the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee were unavailable to meet the peer team for the PR. The peers heard that members had recently engaged with an initial training session and review of the O&S Committee’s functions, delivered in-house, which was well received.

The mini position statement noted that WFDC considered a scrutiny review by external organisations but was deterred by the cost. Instead, the council have decided to work with Members to develop bespoke scrutiny review arrangements for each of them, based on one-to-one interviews. Although WFDC delivers training in house, peers were pleased to learn that the council is also using training materials from the Local Government Association, Local Government Information Unit, and the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny. It was also encouraging to hear that O&S would now receive separate updates on all capital projects on future agendas. In WFDC’s scene setting meeting, peers learned that, following CIPFA best practice, WFDC is strengthening the relationship between the Audit and O&S Committees through training.

Members reflected that effective scrutiny still needs revitalising, as it currently functions more as a ‘rubber stamp’ exercise. For example, while performance data is presented to the scrutiny committee, members felt it is buried within the budget monitoring report, causing key information to be overlooked. As a result, O&S Committee members feel unable to effectively carry out their role. They expressed a desire for clear, detailed information on major capital projects to enable meaningful scrutiny and in depth questioning. Peers heard that O&S Committee members do not actively contribute to the Committee’s agenda and are unaware of who sets it. As per best practice, the peer team recommends that O&S Chair & Vice-Chair take responsibility for designing the agenda to ensure the committee is member led, so it can hold the Executive to account.

The PR position statement highlighted that the council conducted a public consultation on the council’s scrutiny function and these results will be published. Although resident engagement is positive, WFDC should maintain a clear focus on reviewing the effectiveness of the Committee’s function. In the CPC, members and officers reflected that scrutiny could be used more effectively to help inform policy development and decision making, but during the PR peers did not hear that much progress had been made. Overall, peers recommend that WFDC still has progress to make with the O&S review, and the council should ensure that the review is aligned with best practice.

Members had recently received finance training from the Head of Resources, and had received externally provided training on commercial property, to enable members to understand the business case behind property issues. The Head of Resources has also provided training on governance and questioning for the Audit Committee and the O&S Committee. Members reflected to peers that the training was needed to feel confident in holding the administration to account. There was a perception amongst members that training is ‘moving in the right direction’, but more could be done. Peers recommend that the council implement member training more comprehensively and that the council continue to review the effectiveness of scrutiny training to complete recommendation 6.

**Theme 4: Capacity for improvement – workforce focus**

(8) Bring forward the development of workforce and succession plans to provide resilience to the delivery of the Corporate Plan.

(9) Develop a strategic corporate approach to Equality Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) encompassing both HR and service/community considerations.

The council have RAG rated recommendation 8 as green and amber. WFDC has made a good start on addressing its workforce resilience and succession plans. In July 2024 the council identified the posts which, if vacated, would expose the organisation to considerable risk. To address this, WFDC is progressing a sub-action to develop the skills of CLT members to deal with the range of corporate issues handled by the Chief Executive. Senior officers and politicians spoke positively of the progress made but believe WFDC could go further to fully ensure there is adequate resilience built into the council. Peers noted in the position statement that by November 2024, the Chief Executive had delivered five of the eight ‘bite-sized topics’ with CLT members to develop their skills on corporate issues. Peers encourage WFDC to complete this action and repeat it annually to build workforce capacity. The new deputy chief executive post was designed to help build in resilience, but the breadth of responsibilities associated with the role may offset any perceived increase in capacity – as highlighted in the original CPC report.

The council RAG rated recommendation 9 as amber and green. As part of its three-year HR and OD strategy, now in its second year, WFDC published a new corporate EDI policy (August 2024) and conducted a review of the corporate EDI policy (September 2024). The new HR and OD manager is driving a strengthened approach to WFDC’s EDI policy, which peers learned is well received internally. As detailed in the [review report](https://forms.wyreforestdc.gov.uk/council/docs/doc59967_20241127_audit_committee_agenda.pdf), the council's ongoing EDI improvement journey includes actions such as incorporating inclusion-related questions into the staff survey; having HR present workforce trends in the Workforce Profile Report to CLT; introducing new mandatory EDI focused e-learning modules for managers and all new starters; establishing an EDI staff group; and completing, ratifying, and publishing the new corporate EDI policy on the website. Peers heard from officers that other actions included providing front line delivery staff with council email accounts, granting them access to the staff intranet, e-learning platform and the council’s staff newsletter.

While progress is promising, peers heard that further work is needed to embed the new corporate EDI strategy into day-to-day operations. Peers also learned that WFDC plans to take additional steps to promote inclusion, such as raising awareness of support entitlements for staff, adopting anonymous recruitment practices, and integrating mental health reporting into wellbeing action plans. Overall, peers commend WFDC for the proactive approach to addressing recommendations 8 and 9.

## Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Wyre Forest District 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 ongoing 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.

Helen Murray (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and her e-mail address is [helen.murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:helen.murray@local.gov.uk).