

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Worcester City Council

11th March 2026

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge

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Introduction

Worcester City Council (WCC) undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during April 2025 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the CPC 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 WCC 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 Progress Review at Worcester City Council took place (virtually) on 11th March 2026 and focussed on each of the recommendations from the CPC.

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

Jackie King - Chief Executive, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council

Cllr James Dawson - Leader of Erewash Borough Council (Labour Member peer)

Cllr Martin Fodor – Chair of the Environment & Sustainability Committee, Bristol City Council (Green Member peer)

Suzanne Jones - Former Corporate Director (Finance and Resources) & Section 151 Officer, Huntingdonshire District Council

James Millington - Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

Progress Review - Feedback

Out of the CPC's 10 main recommendations and four key sub-recommendations, the council's RAG rated action plan reports that 35 per cent of actions are completed, 62 per cent are in process or ongoing and 3 per cent have not yet been progressed.

The peer team found that Worcester City Council (WCC) has shown strong engagement with the recommendations of the original CPC, and heard consistent evidence that the council has maintained momentum on its action plan despite the significant and competing demands presented by Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). The council benefits from continuity in leadership and from the strong legacy of its out-going managing director, which has helped position the council on a stable footing for the future. Across the board, steady progress is evident, and the council approaches this work with openness, maturity and a clear desire to strengthen its effectiveness.

The peer team noted a wide number of areas where specific tangible improvement has taken place: budget-setting processes have been strengthened, with Members and officers working more closely together with improved financial clarity and benefiting from a more favourable settlement; corporate risk management has also advanced, with a more robust framework now in place; and the council continues to invest in and value its staff, who remain one of its greatest assets. Apprenticeships, workforce support mechanisms and the emerging new workforce strategy all demonstrate a commitment to developing capability and resilience, which is particularly important for a small authority where vacancies or periods of absence can have disproportionate impacts.

Staff feedback highlighted an appreciation for the council's open and honest communication style, particularly regarding LGR, even when answers are not yet definitive.

The progress review found evidence of strengthening relationships and maturing partnership-focused ways of working, including in culture and economic development as the council prepares for life beyond its current structure. Member-officer relationships also continue to evolve positively, with recognition that further improvement remains possible.

Looking ahead, WCC now faces an important period as it moves toward the LGR decision. Clarity around short and medium term priorities, continued communication with staff and partners, and maintaining Worcester's identity within the wider transition will all be crucial.

Overall, WCC is making solid progress and is well placed to build on this trajectory as it prepares for the future.

The peer team's reflections on progress made in relation to each recommendation is set out below:

Create more focused capacity for strategic planning at a senior level for future challenges and opportunities

The peer team heard that WCC has made good progress in strengthening its senior-level strategic capacity. The recent internal recruitment to the managing director post, along with the subsequent rebalancing of responsibilities across corporate directors, has intentionally freed up senior capacity for LGR and longer-term strategic challenges. Alongside this, plans to finalise the recruitment of a new corporate director for operations, homes and communities by March 2026 through internal secondment will further stabilise strategic oversight while helping to minimise capacity gaps. This recalibration of roles represents a deliberate shift towards ensuring that senior leaders have sufficient headroom to plan proactively for the council's emerging opportunities and risks. Whilst the use of interim posts is not an ideal situation, particularly at a senior level, it is recognised that this is a conscious strategy that the council has developed to provide flexibility in the context of LGR.

The corporate leadership team (CLT) working practices have also been refined to enhance strategic focus. CLT agendas have been streamlined to release additional time for the managing director to concentrate on forward-looking priorities, and delegations have been reinforced to avoid duplication of oversight and ensure operational management is more effectively driven at corporate management team (CMT) and wider management team (WMT) levels. This strengthened distribution of responsibilities is enabling senior leaders to step back from day-to-day activity and direct attention toward organisational transformation, scenario planning, and preparatory work for LGR.

Start now to develop the strategies and planning for the budget in 2026/27 to close the gap, involving the Corporate Management Team and the Wider Leadership Team

For 2026/27 budget setting WCC took early and proactive steps to strengthen its approach to medium-term financial planning, demonstrating a clear recognition of the scale of the budget challenge ahead. CMT was fully engaged in the early identification of financial pressures and opportunities, contributing to the development of proposals to address the projected budget gap. The structured involvement of CMT - supported by regular briefings from the section 151 officer - has ensured a shared understanding of the financial context and the collective ownership required to close the gap. A clear budget-setting timetable was agreed with Members, providing clarity and transparency over key decision points.

Engagement has been broadened beyond senior management, with the WMT, employee advisory group, and staff conferences which have actively involved officers in shaping the financial narrative and reinforcing organisational readiness for difficult decisions. The corporate director of finance ensured that colleagues at all levels understand both the risks and opportunities within the 2026/27 budget, for example through staff briefings in autumn 2025 that set out the financial pressures and the potential implications for the workforce. This candid and inclusive approach has contributed to a more informed organisational culture, strengthening transparency and building confidence across the workforce. Subsequent updates have been shared to reflect the improved financial outlook following the draft financial settlement, with assurances provided that redundancies would not form part of the 2026/27 budget proposals. Staff the peer team spoke to really appreciate the “honest and open” proactive communications approach taken by the council to keep them informed.

The peer team heard good feedback on the structured nature of this latest budget setting process. The council’s approach also reflects strengthened cross-organisational collaboration, with CMT and the WLT contributing to the development and assessment of budget options. The involvement of staff groups and broader leadership forums appears to have increased the council’s financial awareness and has also created a structure through which emerging ideas and mitigations can be surfaced earlier. This represents a significant development in the council’s financial planning maturity and positions it well for the future. The work undertaken to date shows clear evidence that the council is embedding a more strategic, whole-council approach to developing the budget and supporting Members to make informed decisions.

Strategic economic development and growth would benefit from a broader focus.

The council does a lot on this already, but there are opportunities to develop with partners for the future. The council could be more proactive in strategic conversations on economic growth with key stakeholders including the County Council

The peer team heard how WCC has begun to broaden its strategic focus on economic development and growth through structural changes and strengthened partnership engagement. Bringing together economic development and planning under a single head of service marks an important step towards creating a more coherent strategic approach. This consolidation is intended to ensure that key growth-related functions operate with greater alignment, enabling the council to respond more effectively to emerging opportunities within the local economy. In addition, regular meetings have been established with the local enterprise partnership (LEP), signalling a commitment to engage more actively with partners and strengthen the council’s position.

Work is now underway to formalise this broader focus through the development of a new economic development strategy/plan, which is scheduled to be presented to the place and economic development committee by autumn 2026. This strategic document is expected to articulate Worcester’s economic strengths and opportunities and provide a clearer framework to guide future investment, including through collaboration with partners. WCC recognises that forthcoming LGR adds a further imperative for greater alignment with partners and the need to ensure that economic development priorities are shared, understood, and jointly shaped.

Refresh the Member/officer protocol around expectations, accessibility, response times and clarity on the points of contact

The Member/officer protocol was reviewed with Group Leaders in November 2025. Through this process, the council confirmed that the existing protocol remained fit for purpose, and

no amendments were required. However, the peer did still hear some concerns from Members around not having a single point of contact in some cases or receiving responses for some casework issues in a timely manner. The peer team encourage the council to keep its approach under review and continue to build upon the positive work which has been done.

There are good relationships with Members and officers and there are opportunities to develop more collaborative relationships with wider partners

The council has continued to build on its already strong Member–officer relationships by turning its attention to strengthening collaboration with a wider set of strategic partners. Work was undertaken to map and review the council’s most significant external stakeholder relationships, ensuring that both officers and Members have a shared understanding of where partnerships are most critical and where new opportunities may lie. This work provides an important foundation for more coordinated and intentional engagement with partners.

WCC has taken practical steps to mitigate disruption to partner relationships during the transition period associated with changes in senior leadership. Although the retirement of the managing director could have posed risks to continuity, these were effectively managed through an internal secondment to the role. This decision has ensured stability at a senior level and preserved the trust and confidence of key partners. At the same time, the council has begun to strengthen collaboration through existing networks, including ongoing work with strategic partners and district-level collaborations. These demonstrate the council’s commitment to maintaining and expanding its partner relationships even during organisational change.

Looking ahead, the council acknowledges that deeper and more structured collaboration will be vital, particularly in the context of LGR. The ongoing stakeholder review is supporting a more deliberate and proactive partnership approach, ensuring that relationships with key organisations are aligned with future strategic priorities. The peer team also recommend that in particular the council continues to engage with Platform Housing as its largest registered social landlord, as this relationship at both a member and officer level required some additional focus.

The approach WCC has taken positions it well in strengthening its collective leadership role in the city and wider area, broadening its influence and ensuring that partners are engaged effectively in shaping Worcester’s long-term direction post LGR.

General workforce capacity is a concern, with savings needed, but new demand coming down the line in the context of LGR may impact on the agility and flexibility needed to react to change or new projects. Every opportunity should be taken to create capacity at all levels

WCC has taken significant steps to strengthen workforce capacity at all levels, recognising the dual challenge of delivering savings while preparing for substantial new demand arising from LGR. Workforce capacity and resilience have been formally identified within the corporate risk framework, with dedicated risks established for staff resources and staff resilience. These are monitored quarterly through the council’s risk management processes, ensuring ongoing oversight of pressures and mitigation requirements.

The peer team were impressed with how the council has prioritised investment in staff development as a key mechanism for creating additional capacity and resilience. Through

active use of both the training budget and the apprenticeship levy - including securing a substantial £300k levy donation- the council has enabled 35 staff to undertake professional apprenticeships in leadership, management, data analysis and project management. The peer team did receive some feedback on the limitations of the apprenticeship scheme meaning that some staff who are part-time were disappointed to not be able to take advantage of this, but this is outside of the control of WCC. This is complemented by wider programmes such as the annual leadership staff development programme and the tri sector challenge, which are strengthening leadership capability across the organisation. These investments not only enhance individual skills but also build organisational flexibility by equipping staff to take on broader responsibilities and adapt to emerging demands, including those associated with LGR.

The peer team hear how WCC is further increasing capacity by promoting internal recruitment and progression as a deliberate workforce strategy. CLT has agreed that vacancies should be considered for internal appointments wherever possible, giving existing staff opportunities to step into new roles and building organisational continuity. This is supported by a traineeship pathway for posts where individuals may not yet meet all essential criteria, ensuring development is embedded into resourcing decisions. These actions, combined with collaborative working arrangements such as shared service delivery with partners, demonstrate a proactive and multifaceted approach to building capacity. Refresh the workforce strategy as this is an opportunity to ensure the council is planning for current and future needs. This should include: identification of gaps (skills; gender; ethnicity etc); ensuring it is representative of the community served; and building resilience within the workforce

WCC has been finalising its draft workforce strategy with a focus on staff retention, development, and preparedness for future demands. This strategic refresh is ensuring that the council's workforce planning is both forward-looking and responsive to the changing environment.

In developing the refreshed strategy, the council has undertaken internal assessments of skills and resilience, embedding these considerations into its financial sustainability planning and LGR preparation work. Line managers are playing a key role through consistent use of mandatory mid-year and annual performance reviews, ensuring that capability, skills gaps, and development needs are regularly identified and addressed. This systematic assessment demonstrates the council's commitment to understanding its workforce profile and shaping interventions that ensure it remains equipped, representative, and able to adapt to emerging pressures.

Alongside this, access to a wide range of learning and development opportunities - including continual professional development, professional qualifications, and leadership development programmes - supports a more agile and capable workforce. These actions, combined with the development of a refreshed workforce strategy, demonstrate the council focus on supporting its workforce to be skilled, adaptable, and ready to meet both current and future organisational needs. The peer team encourage WCC to maintain focus on now finalising and implementing the workforce strategy.

Create a community engagement plan using Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) principles with partners and use the insight to inform the strategy and action plan

The peer team heard how the council has taken clear and positive steps towards developing a community engagement plan informed by asset-based community development (ABCD) principles. In January 2026 the communities committee approved the

undertaking of a public and stakeholder consultation to support the development of a stronger and connected communities strategy for Worcester. The initiation of this consultation marks an important move toward embedding ABCD principles by ensuring that community strengths and assets are at the heart of future engagement activity.

To support this work, WCC has strengthened its internal capacity by establishing a new community development and partnerships manager role, with the postholder starting in January 2026. This dedicated resource is now leading the development of the strategy and coordinating engagement with partners across the voluntary, public, and community sectors. The enhanced capacity provides a strong foundation for building more consistent, coordinated, and insight-driven engagement practices.

Following the consultation, a new community engagement strategy is being developed and is scheduled for discussion at the communities committee in June 2026. This approach ensures that the emerging strategy is genuinely co-produced, reflecting the lived experience and priorities of Worcester's communities. It also demonstrates an intention to move beyond traditional engagement models, embedding a more strengths-based ethos that aligns closely with ABCD principles. By structuring the work in this way, the peer team heard how WCC is positioning itself to work more collaboratively with partners and residents, ensuring that community insight not only informs future strategy but actively shapes the design and delivery of services.

Members and officers need to prioritise the formation of a programme of activity with potential unitary partners around the implications and impact of LGR on capacity, resilience and costs for the council. It is never too early to start this and there is an enormous amount of work required in the lead up to the formation of new councils

The peer team heard how since the CPC the council has taken deliberate steps to engage with potential unitary partners and to understand the implications of LGR for organisational capacity, resilience and cost. Initial preparatory work has begun through the drafting of a countywide governance structure, scheduled for agreement by chief executives in March 2026. The peer team heard about the establishment of a programme management office and the multiple workstreams which sit underneath this. Internal leads have also been nominated and a regular LGR preparation team meeting is now in place. The council has also set aside LGR implementation fund of £400k but recognises that this will likely need to be increased. This reflects a maturing awareness of the organisation-wide impact that transition to a unitary structure will have.

The council is also contributing to wider regional conversations, with leaders continuing dialogue and professional officer groups meeting regularly to explore shared issues and opportunities. These engagements will be revisited following the June 2026 Ministerial decision on the preferred unitary model and transition arrangements. By participating actively in these structured conversations, WCC is positioning itself to understand the implications for capacity, workforce planning, resilience and financial modelling.

Internally, the council has complemented this external engagement by strengthening staff awareness and readiness for LGR. Regular staff briefings ensure the workforce remains informed, and these will intensify following the Government's decision on the new arrangements. This approach reflects a recognition that staff engagement and clarity about the transition process are essential for maintaining organisational resilience and morale during a period of uncertainty. Positively, staff the peer team met with felt that the council

was keeping them well informed on the position and really valued the communications approach which council has adopted.

Ahead of any exploratory work on Artificial Intelligence (AI), the council should return to first principles to be clear on the issues and opportunities facing the organisation before considering how digital, including AI, could be part of that solution. Clarity on where the senior sponsorship of this work sits is also key

The peer team heard that WCC has taken a measured approach to exploring the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI), beginning with a clear assessment of organisational needs rather than adopting technology for its own sake. Its digital transformation programme, running up to LGR, now provides the overarching framework for this work, ensuring that AI considerations sit within a broader digital improvement agenda focused on information governance, Microsoft 365 optimisation, customer experience, digital skills and organisational change. WCC has also produced an AI Staff Guidance document, alongside its Digital Strategy, giving clarity on where AI may add value and setting boundaries for safe and appropriate use.

Senior sponsorship and leadership for digital and AI-related activity is provided through the corporate director of finance and the wider digital transformation governance arrangements, ensuring that decisions about AI adoption remain aligned with the council's capacity, financial constraints and long-term strategic direction. While the council recognises that large-scale investment in AI is unlikely within its remaining lifespan, it has made practical progress by embedding currently available tools: Microsoft Teams is now fully adopted, staff have access to Copilot, and the revenues and benefits service is using chatbots and automation to improve customer responsiveness. This cautious but forward-looking approach ensures that the council realises immediate benefits where appropriate, while maintaining disciplined governance and aligning AI exploration with organisational priorities.

The peer team also made the following some sub-recommendations to the council as part of the CPC. Progress against these was also discussed as part of the progress review:

S1. The council would benefit from reviewing and strengthening its approach to risk. Corporate risks are reported to CLT and the Policy & Resources Committee on a biannual basis and CLT's last committee report was in November 2024 (pre-LGR announcements). This is essential to provide early indications of capacity, resilience or skills challenges for forward planning purposes for more regular oversight and appropriation escalation and mitigation actions if needed

WCC has strengthened its approach to risk management, undertaking a comprehensive review and refresh of its corporate framework. The risk management strategy has been fully overhauled and was approved by the audit and governance committee in September 2025. Alongside this, CLT has reviewed and updated the corporate risk register to ensure all risks are current, relevant, and supported by appropriate mitigation activity. Risk reporting has now moved to a quarterly cycle, replacing the previous biannual reporting and providing a more frequent and reliable flow of information to Members and senior officers. This enhanced reporting frequency reflects a strengthened organisational commitment to early identification of capacity, resilience and skills-related risks - an essential requirement given the scale of change associated with LGR.

This more robust risk management approach ensures that senior leaders are better positioned to anticipate challenges and escalate issues appropriately, supporting stronger forward planning and organisational resilience. Building on this the council is now reviewing the approach to service-level risk management.

S2. Although the peer team found there was a good articulation of The City Plan, WCC may want to further consider how to maintain attention and focus on all of the Plan priorities. For example, priorities are clearly outlined in plans but during the CPC the peer team predominantly heard about the arts, culture and heritage focus. These other areas are being worked on but this was not always immediately obvious from those the peer team spoke to. WCC will want to consider how equal weight can be given across these priorities and how all of the work being delivered is communicated

The peer team heard that the council has taken clear steps to maintain balanced attention across all priorities within the City Plan, recognising the peer team's observation that external perceptions were disproportionately shaped by the visibility of arts, culture and heritage activity. The corporate business plan has been used to focus on current priorities while explicitly acknowledging that not all elements of the City Plan can be prioritised simultaneously. This pragmatic approach ensures that work continues across the breadth of City Plan themes even where some programmes - such as major cultural investments linked to the Scala, The Arches and heritage components of the town investment plan - have a more prominent public profile. By setting out the full range of activity underway, including economic development initiatives, sustainability work and biodiversity action, the council has demonstrated that its wider priorities remain active and appropriately resourced. Aligned to this WCC may want to further review and potentially shelving priorities that will not be completed prior to LGR, recognising that the council may not be able to deliver everything and this may free up some capacity and possibly finance.

Alongside this, the council has strengthened how it communicates progress across all areas of the City Plan to ensure a more balanced understanding of its work. This includes highlighting the significant progress made in areas beyond culture, such as active travel, skills support, and environmental sustainability, which had been less visible during the initial CPC. Through clearer communication and a more intentional framing of its broad delivery portfolio, the council is ensuring that Members, partners and stakeholders have a more accurate and rounded understanding of the full scope of City Plan delivery.

S3. The Arts and Culture Strategy which was adopted in 2022 would benefit from a refresh with a consultative approach for greater collective ownership. It was recognised that the current Strategy includes activity which was not originally agreed and owned by the delivery organisations. Also a more consultative approach in developing this with partners would ensure the collective strengths of partners were maximised

WCC has taken constructive steps toward refreshing its arts and culture strategy, recognising the peer team's recommendation that a more consultative and collectively owned approach is needed. Work to update the strategy is underway and is being led by the cultural compact, ensuring that partners are placed at the centre of the process from the outset. By rooting the refresh in a shared cultural needs assessment, which is supported by West Midlands Culture Central, WCC is ensuring that future cultural priorities are more evidence-based, jointly shaped and reflective of Worcester's evolving cultural landscape.

The intention to develop a new cultural strategy in 2026 provides the opportunity to embed co-production more meaningfully, drawing on the strengths, experience and ambitions of cultural organisations across the city. This approach positions the council to maximise the collective capability of its partners, strengthen alignment across the cultural ecosystem and ensure that the refreshed strategy is widely owned, strategically coherent and grounded in partnership-led delivery.

S4. WCC could consider the benefits of a Place Board with strategic level key partners including the Integrated Care Board (ICB), education providers, voluntary sector, County Council, University and the Police etc coming together to talk about Worcester as a place. Place Boards have been developed in lots of other districts and there may be advantages to creating this locally, particularly in the context of LGR

With the Town Board coming to an end in June 2026, the peer team heard how the managing director has initiated discussions with key partners to shape a new strategic collaboration forum capable of bringing together senior leaders from across sectors - including health, education, the voluntary sector, the County Council and the police. Early conversations indicate a shared appetite among partners for a strengthened forum that can provide a coherent and influential voice for Worcester, particularly as the region prepares for significant changes linked to LGR.

By proactively shaping these arrangements ahead of LGR, the council is positioning itself to maximise the benefits of collective strategic leadership for Worcester.

Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Worcester City 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 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.

Helen Murray (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and their e-mail address is

helen.murray@local.gov.uk.

Further information, support, and resources on LGR/Devolution, can be found on the [LGA's devolution and LGR Hub website](#).