

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Test Valley Borough Council

Wednesday 1st October 2025

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Summary of the approach	3
3. Progress Review – Feedback	5
4. Final thoughts and next steps	13

1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during November 2024, and 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 CPC Action Plan;
- Consider peers' reflections on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team was 'on-site' including any further support needs; and
- Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date.

The LGA would like to thank Test Valley Borough Council for their commitment to sector-led improvement. This Progress Review was the next step in the ongoing, open and close relationship that the council has with LGA sector support.

2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at Test Valley Borough Council took place at the council on Wednesday 1st October 2025. The Progress Review focussed on the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge:

- **Recommendation 1 – Place Leadership.** Continue strengthening your leadership role with partners across the region. Consider how the well respected and well regarded reputation of the leader and chief executive within and beyond the county could facilitate agreed policy positions on key issues impacting residents and businesses.
- **Recommendation 2 – Housing Delivery.** The changes to the national policy planning framework (NPPF) and national housing targets will be a challenge for the Test Valley communities through the Local Plan process. The council needs

to build on the success of its community engagement and bolster those robust and honest conversations at pace.

- **Recommendation 3 – Transformation.** The council is beginning its transformation journey and taking time to reflect; however, an articulation of what transformation means for the council is paramount for clarity, whilst twin tracking some quick wins around digitalisation and IT.
- **Recommendation 4 – Community Councillor Approach.** Continue to build on the success of the community councillor approach through review and shared learning, whilst exploring longevity of funds available to community councillors.
- **Recommendation 5 – Audit.** Strengthen audit through the appointment of an independent member along with increased use of third-party internal audit services, such as the Southern Internal Audit partnership to develop skills, resilience and capability.
- **Recommendation 6 – Performance and Data.** Strengthen the use of performance and data to better inform continuous service improvement, evaluation of impact, benefit and value for residents.
- **Recommendation 7 – Digitalisation.** Expedite your digitalisation strategy to improve service delivery.
- **Recommendation 8 – Communications.** Communications is at the heart of all council activity and success. Consider an LGA Led Communications review to build on this.
- **Recommendation 9 – Workforce.** Continue to build on your current investment in the workforce to grow the leaders of tomorrow, today.

Test Valley accepted all the recommendations made during the LGA CPC and subsequently produced an action plan outlining the steps the council would take to respond to these recommendations.

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

- Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen- Leader,

North Breckland Council

- Caroline Green- Chief Executive, Oxford City Council
- Megan Hermes (peer challenge manager)

The peer team would like to thank all those that they spoke to as part of the Progress Review for their participation and openness.

Progress Review – Feedback

The council's CPC action plan broke down the nine recommendations into five thematic areas for their action plan and delivery. Upon the peer teams return visit only two out of the nine recommendations were rag rated amber, the others green.

Overall, the peer team were impressed by the council's approach to the peer challenge and their response to the recommendations. The peer team commended the council on the strong strategic golden thread that they recognised running throughout the organisation, whereas this was evident during the last visit this time it was considered part of the council's DNA.

It is highly commendable how the council have taken on the challenge of LGR. Where some see this change as a threat, Test Valley have embraced the opportunities it provides for their community focused approach. It has brought pace and focus and been used as a springboard for multiple workstreams and ways of working. Staff reported feeling prepared for change, and the organisation is focused on setting up staff and residents alike for success in the new arrangements.

Systems Leadership

Theme 1: Systems Leadership	RAG Rating
Recommendation 1: Continue strengthening your leadership role with	

partners across the region. Consider how the well respected and well-regarded reputation of the Leader and Chief Executive within and beyond the County could facilitate agreed policy positions on key issues impacting residents and businesses

The council's strategic context has shifted significantly since the peer challenge in November 2025, following the Government's announcements on Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and Devolution the following month. The peer review came at a pivotal point in the council's transformation journey which they noted provided confidence in their direction of travel and reinforced a strong foundation for place-based learning.

Building on their respected reputation for collaboration, the Leader and Chief Executive have played a central role in shaping LGR proposals with 11 other councils. The council's subsequent submission to government consistently framed LGR as an opportunity for transformative reform rather than a technical exercise in redrawing boundaries. It positioned the council as a systems leader, with both the Leader and Chief Executive playing a prominent role in national and regional discussions, including those with SOLACE and MHCLG. Strategic partnerships with upper-tier authorities and academic institutions such as the University of Southampton, have strengthened this position. The council have also contributed sector-wide learning through commissioned research and work with Collaborate and New Local.

Internally, the LGR process has reinforced best practice cross-party working, supported by regular member briefings and a dedicated LGR forum. Staff morale and retention have remained high, with deliberate efforts from the Chief Executive and SLT to engage and develop the workforce during this period. Externally, the council has maintained strong relationships with partners through events and deliberative engagement with residents, achieving the highest response rate to engagement surveys in the area. While opposition members note the increased workload and

challenges of influencing from outside core discussions, there is collective pride in continuing to deliver services while shaping the future.


The councils continued work with Health also demonstrates the continued strengthening of their place-based approach. Since the peer review, a £1M expansion of the health hub has been completed. This has enabled the relocation of Community and Older People's Mental Health Teams, complementing existing primary care and community services.

The council is collectively proud of its ability to face the future head-on. It has developed a strategic vision for LGR that aligns with national priorities while reflecting local identity and aspirations. With two years to shape the transition, the council sees real opportunities to embed preventative approaches, strengthen local economies, and deliver services in ways that matter most to residents. This process has reinforced the council's role as a systems leader and demonstrated its capacity to influence at regional and national levels while continuing to deliver for its communities.

Place based working with communities

Theme 2: Place based working with communities	Rag Rating
Recommendation 2. Continue to build on the success of the Community Councillor approach through review and shared learning, whilst exploring longevity of funds available to community councillors.	
Recommendation 4. The changes to the National Policy Planning Framework (NPPF) and national housing targets will be a challenge for the Test Valley communities through the Local Plan process. The Council needs to build on the success of its community engagement and bolster those robust and honest conversations at pace.	

The council continues to build on the success of its community councillor approach, which has been central to shaping thinking around Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), particularly the role of frontline councillors and neighbourhood governance. At the heart of this approach is a clear commitment to asset-based community



development. To take this work to the next level, the council has engaged Cormac Russell, a leading expert in the field, to work with staff, councillors, and partners through a series of sessions later this year.

The council has also partnered with INLOGOV and the Local Government Chronicle (LGC) to host a regional event promoting the updated 21st Century Councillor framework, bringing together councillors and officers from across the south to share learning and amplify the role of community leadership. The Chief Executive has contributed to national conversations on this agenda through podcasts with LGC and South East Employers.

In 2025, a bespoke programme of activity has continued to support councillors in developing their community leadership role. This included the annual Councillor Marketplace in June, which provides a networking opportunity for councillors and officers to share best practice and explore local community work. Storytelling workshops have also been delivered to help councillors communicate their impact and legacy to residents.

The Member Community Development Group (MCDG), comprising senior councillors including the Leader and Opposition Leader, has expanded to include the Community Councillor Reference Group (CCRG), which brings in more backbench members. This cross-party group meets quarterly, two weeks before MCDG, to ensure alignment. Discussions are open and inclusive, with a strong focus on community priorities.

The council is now at the midpoint of its Corporate Action Plan. Major commitments are funded, and a programme has been designed to ensure resources, such as the Community Delivery Fund, are used effectively. Up to £10 million—primarily from the New Homes Bonus reserve—has been allocated to support projects aligned with the corporate plan and grounded in community priorities identified through ongoing engagement, including neighbourhood planning and deliberative processes. To deliver this, the council will work closely with Andover Vision and Romsey Future, while the Community Delivery Fund will drive progress in areas outside these towns. This approach builds on the community councillor model, enabling councillors to identify, develop, and deliver key projects in partnership with communities.

The council has also strengthened its work with the Armed Forces community, spearheading transformation through an active Civilian-Military Forum. A new Armed Forces Covenant has been signed, and engagement has increased significantly, with regular meetings (3–4 per year) and strong collaboration between councillors, military representatives, local organisations, and charities.

Community cohesion remains strong, with little evidence of significant tensions. Events like the World Street Party have helped create a positive atmosphere, countering divisions seen elsewhere, a local antidote to national narratives of division.

Against the backdrop of changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the council undertook a 10-week public consultation on the Revised Regulation 18 draft Local Plan from 27 June to 5 September 2025. This focused on meeting the Government's requirement for a 78% increase in Test Valley's housing numbers, which has also resulted in the borough no longer having a sufficient five-year housing supply, increasing the risk of speculative applications.

To ensure informed engagement, 15 public exhibitions were held across the borough, supported by officers from planning policy and community development teams. Parish councils in areas with proposed allocations were also engaged, alongside a proactive communications campaign that reached over 11,000 people with an open rate of more than 60%.

To strengthen member involvement, a new group was established to give councillors greater input into Local Plan drafting and strategic planning matters, including MHCLG consultations.

The council has also launched an updated Community Planning Toolkit, providing guidance on neighbourhood plans, village design statements, and community resilience plans. This was introduced at the Test Valley Association of Town and Parish Councils in June 2025. Work is also underway to explore funding options for Community Land Trusts and rural exception sites, following the end of previous government funding.

Two Overview and Scrutiny panels commenced in December 2024 to examine Affordable Housing, focusing on supply and demand and service user experience. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, these panels identified strengths, areas for improvement, and key recommendations, including improving accessibility of the housing register and enhancing property advertisements. These insights will inform the next housing strategy and ensure service user experience is embedded in future design and delivery.


Organisational Development and workforce

Theme 3: Organisational Development and Workforce	RAG Rating
Recommendation 7. Continue to build on your current investment in the workforce to grow the leaders of tomorrow, today.	

Following the peer review, the council recognised the importance of building on its strong foundations by further investing in staff development, particularly in preparation for LGR. This commitment has focused on embedding the council's values and behaviours, strengthening leadership capability, and creating a culture of continuous learning and adaptability.

A significant part of this work has been the introduction of action learning sets for all managers through the Senior Leaders Forum, ensuring that leadership development is practical and embedded in day-to-day work. These sets provide a structured approach to problem-solving and peer support, and managers are encouraged to use them to reflect on and apply learning from other initiatives. The sets have become a core part of working life at Test Valley, with staff reporting that they feel more connected across services and better equipped to manage change. Far from being an additional burden, these sessions have been described as timesaving, trust-building, and instrumental in breaking down silos. Managers and teams now have stronger networks and a deeper understanding of the council's work as a whole, which has been particularly valuable in the context of LGR.

This year, 360 feedback was completed for all senior managers ahead of their Personal Development Discussions (PDDs), with a focus on how individuals live the



council's values and behaviours. Insights from this process have been used to shape personal development actions and strengthen leadership practice across the organisation.

To reinforce this learning culture, a monthly “Involved Managers” memo is issued, offering HR updates, practical guidance, and prompts to help managers apply learning in real scenarios. Two Chartered Management Institute (CMI) courses have been delivered in partnership with a local college, with two cohorts completing the programme. These courses were designed around the council's values and focused on managing effectively within that context. Building on this, large groups are about to start in-house CMI Level 3, Level 5, and ILM Level 7 courses in leadership and management. In addition, the council has worked with the Leadership Centre to deliver a bespoke programme on adaptive leadership, equipping leaders with the skills and behaviours needed to lead transformational change.

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) network has also been further strengthened. Dedicated intranet pages have been launched, providing information on the network, the Gender Pay Gap, Equality Impact Assessments, and equalities objectives, alongside resources for learning and upcoming events. A budget of £3,000 has been allocated to support the network's development and expand its training and engagement activities. The EDI Assurance Group continues to oversee progress against the council's equality objectives and support the network's ambitions.

Staff feedback reflects the positive impact of these initiatives. The latest staff survey achieved a 73% response rate—the second highest to date—and showed the highest-rated area was confidence that managers act in line with council values, with 86.9% agreement, up 6.1% from last year. Wellbeing and inclusion scores also improved. Importantly, staff reported feeling informed and confident that their feedback would be acted upon.

The council has also introduced a range of practical initiatives to strengthen organisational resilience and adaptability. These include workshops on future ways of working, which explored how to centre residents in service design and impact mapping to ensure decisions improve outcomes for communities. A new Early

Careers Network has also been launched to support those starting their careers in local government.

These initiatives have created a strong culture of learning and adaptability across the organisation. Staff reported feeling informed, connected, and empowered to lead change, with improved cross-service collaboration and trust. This work has positioned the council to face the challenges of LGR with confidence, ensuring that leadership at all levels is equipped to deliver transformation while maintaining a strong focus on residents and values.

Transformation and Digital

Theme 4: Transformation and Digital	RAG Rating
Recommendation 5. The council is beginning its transformation journey and taking time to reflect; however, an articulation of what transformation means for the Council is paramount for clarity, whilst twin tracking some quick wins around digitalisation and IT.	
Recommendation 6. Expediate your digitalisation strategy to improve service delivery	

The council has adopted a clear transformation ambition: *“Creating better futures by transforming services at a human scale – starting with people’s lives.”* This ambition is underpinned by three priorities: redesigning services to be people-centred and outcome-focused, equipping staff with the digital and adaptive skills needed for new ways of working, and creating the conditions for accelerated transformation with partners through place-based delivery.

In February, Council approved a £1M Transformation Fund to resource this work, including an £80K investment in a bespoke leadership programme for the council's 50 most senior managers, delivered by the Leadership Centre. This programme focuses on adaptive leadership and applied learning through six transformation projects covering digital innovation, housing and homelessness prevention, resident-first ways of working, youth engagement, and embedding asset-based community development.

Digital transformation has been a core enabler of this change. A new digital strategy and action plan were approved in early 2025, supported by a dedicated Digital Programme Board and three new specialist roles. Progress includes completing a digital skills audit, upgrading the My Council Services platform, and delivering training on tools such as Power BI, Microsoft Copilot, and Power Automate. Drop-in sessions on AI have been well attended, and an AI policy is in development.

To support evidence-based transformation, the council commissioned Collaborate CIC to review how place-based approaches can drive systemic change, with findings published in *The Bigger You Go, The Less You Know* report.

These combined efforts, investing in leadership, embedding values, strengthening digital capability, and fostering a culture of learning are positioning the council to deliver meaningful change now while laying strong foundations for the new authority. Staff feel informed, connected, and empowered, and the organisation is increasingly confident in its ability to lead transformation work that improves lives and strengthens communities.

Communications and performance

Theme 5: Communications and performance	RAG Rating
Recommendation 3. Communications is at the heart of all Council activity and success. Consider an LGA Led Communications review to build on this.	
Recommendation 8. Strengthen audit through the appointment of an independent member along with increased use of third-party internal audit services, such as the Southern Internal Audit partnership to develop skills, resilience and capability	
Recommendation 9. Strengthen the use of performance and data to better inform continuous service improvement, evaluation of impact, benefit and value for residents.	

The council has made significant progress in strengthening its communications, performance, and governance arrangements over the past year. The week prior to the progress review a one-day communications health check took place led by the

LGA's communication improvement team. The council chose to undertake this in response to the peer team's recommendation and recognised it as an opportunity to reflect on how we work together to communicate our successes, engage with our communities, and prepare for the future particularly in light of LGR.

Internal communications remain a strong point, with authentic messaging from the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive helping to address uncertainty around LGR. Physical publications have been redesigned to reflect resident feedback, creating modern, user-friendly signposting documents. The council is now ranked as one of the top-performing communications teams in Hampshire and has developed a timetable aligned to the LGR timeline to ensure readiness for future consultations.


The council has embedded its Performance Management Framework, which has now been in place for a full year. All Heads of Service hold monthly performance reviews with managers, feeding into four-monthly corporate oversight sessions.

An internal audit confirmed strong awareness and application of the framework, with the next phase focusing on strengthening data analysis and evidence-based decision-making. Digital performance dashboards are being developed in Power BI, with prototypes already in use across Environmental Services, Property and Asset Management, and Finance & Revenues. These dashboards, alongside deliberative workshops with residents, will inform improvements to digital services and enhance user experience.

Governance has also been strengthened with the appointment of an independent member to the Audit Committee, bringing fresh perspectives, while a review is underway to explore future internal audit delivery models, including potential partnership with SIAP from 2026/27. These developments, supported by inclusive processes, enhanced use of data, and a strong focus on resident engagement position the council to maintain transparency, improve service outcomes, and prepare for the opportunities and challenges of LGR.

Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Test Valley Borough Council for undertaking a CPC



Progress Review. We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings 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.

Will Brooks, Principal Adviser for the South East, is the main point of contact between the authority and the LGA and his e-mail address is william.brooks@local.gov.uk