

Progress Review: Lancaster City Council

Feedback: 23 January 2025

1. Introduction



The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 16th to 18th April 2024 and promptly published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge 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 peer's 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 Lancaster City 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 Lancaster City Council took place (onsite) on the 23rd January 2025.

The Progress Review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge, under the following theme headings (a full breakdown of the recommendations can be seen at Appendix A):

- Theme 1 - Healthy and Happy Communities
- Theme 2 - Inclusive & Prosperous Economy & Sustainable District
- Theme 3 - Kind, Caring & Responsible Council

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

- Michelle Sacks - chief executive , Huntingdonshire District Council
- Cllr Martin Fodor - Bristol City Council
- Alan Waters - Previously leader at Norwich City Council
- Rachel Robinson, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

3. Progress Review - Feedback



The Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) report was published by Lancaster City Council via their website on 19th July 2024 with the accompanying action plan following in September 2024.

Since the CPC was undertaken, Lancaster City Council has experienced a change of control, with the coalition arrangement (Labour, Green and Liberal Democrats) that was in place at the time of the original CPC, being replaced in November 2024 with a new administration (Green, Liberal Democrats and Morecambe Bay Independents) and leader.

In advance of the Progress Review, the council shared a short position statement and RAG rated Action Plan (Red, Amber, Green) to update peers on the progress made to date. The council provided a self-assessment against each of the 13 recommendations within the plan, with 85 per cent identified as 'green' (on track and progressing well) and 15 per cent as 'amber' (progress made, but slightly behind planned trajectory). None were rated as 'red' (not being progressed).

It was clear to the peer team that the council has taken on board the feedback from the Corporate Peer Challenge, noting that progress has been made across the suite of recommendations. Whilst, quite naturally, some themes have developed further than others, the peer team believe that overall, the council has made more progress than it has given itself credit for and should take further steps to celebrate and communicate these successes.

Peers believe that at this stage, having in place an overarching narrative that clearly describes the ambitions for the district and the story of progress to date against these ambitions, would be worth further consideration. This can play a useful role in supporting a shared understanding amongst partners, residents and wider stakeholders of the vision for Lancaster, as the council goes through the processes identified in the recently published English Devolution White Paper.

In light of the recent changes to the political leadership of the council, the peer team believe that there is a need for the cabinet and corporate management team to invest quality time in further building relationships, trust and confidence as this new team now develops. This includes having more space for strategic thinking and horizon scanning. Central to this, as recognised by the council, is a need to 'prioritise the priorities' within the existing council Plan and ensure resources are aligned accordingly.

This report will now consider each of the recommendations from the CPC in more detail (as outlined in Appendix A) and grouped under the following thematic headings.

Theme 1 – Healthy and Happy Communities

During the CPC, the peer team identified that the council is held in high regard by a wide range of key stakeholders, with its convening power being utilised to renew the Lancaster District Strategic Partnership (LDSP). It was therefore recommended that the council uses its strong reputation as a collaborative and proactive place leader to further develop partnerships and bring to fruition the aspiration to deliver shared outcomes. It was further noted that this should include additional energy and capacity being invested to work with partners where the relationship had not been as productive previously.

Peers were pleased to see the considerable progress that has been made in response to this recommendation, evidenced through the further development and implementation of strategic place-based partnerships. The Lancaster district strategic Partnership (LDSP) was formally established in August 2024 with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding by a breadth of partners including the two universities, local college, NHS partners, third sector organisations, the Chamber of Commerce and Arts Council. Partners meet on a quarterly basis, with a Climate and Nature Strategy identified as the first area of strategic development. The partnership also provides an engagement forum for wider strategic matters, such as devolution.

The council has continued to strengthen the existing memorandum of understanding with Lancaster University, with a focus on utilising data, academia and research capacity and linking this to policy design. The development of a joined-up Economic Strategy is the first area of focus. In addition, strengthening partnership work with the health sector has been identified as an area for improvement, with forums such as the health and wellbeing partnership now in development.

Partnership working with town councils has picked up pace. For example, a Morecambe Summit between Lancaster City Council and Morecambe Town Council took place in October 2024 to explore the opportunities for aligning priorities, leading to the drafting of a memorandum of understanding and a similar arrangement will be offered to Carnforth Town Council.

At an operational level, peers were impressed to hear the work that has been undertaken with the community and voluntary sector through the Food Justice Network. Based on an asset-based community development model, the approach includes food clubs that support 13,000 households a week, freeing up food bank capacity to those who are most in need. The next steps building on this include a commitment to identifying and responding to the underlying causes of food poverty.

Theme 2 - Inclusive & Prosperous Economy & Sustainable District

The CPC recognised that Lancaster has a clear vision that increased prosperity must be for the benefit of the whole community, with an ambition to help and enable a low carbon future. The ambition for inclusive prosperity is supported by a number of ambitious capital projects, which have the potential to be transformational (including for example, the Eden Project Morecambe). However, during the CPC the peer team recommended that an economic strategy that all parties can sign up to is created to support the achievement of this vision. This will help to ensure joint focus on the development of quality housing, skills and jobs, tackling climate change, community wealth building and promoting pride in the place.

Since the CPC, initial scoping work has been undertaken with key anchor institutions, including Lancaster and Morecambe College, Lancaster University and the Chamber of

Commerce. As a result of this engagement, it was agreed to link the creation of the economic strategy to the 'Before Eden' research currently being undertaken by Lancaster University on behalf of the eden project Morecambe partnership. This research seeks to provide a baseline of key statistics about life in the district and will therefore provide a rich evidence-base to inform the direction of the economic strategy. This has led to a slight delay in progress against the original timeframes. However, the peer team were informed that a provider has now been commissioned to facilitate the production of the draft strategy, with the intention to commence consultation activity in March 2025.

It was recognised by the council that the economic strategy will be important in the context of devolution and local government reorganisation, setting out and positioning what is important to the locality and communities within the district, including for example the expansion of the green growth agenda. Thus illustrating that the council's responsiveness and adaptability to the changing policy context.

The CPC highlighted that, to ensure that the developing local plan is fully utilised in delivering the council's priorities, including those in the developing Local Area Energy Plan and Economic Strategy, the council should incorporate a 'call for sites' earlier than the Local Plan process would normally cater for. Peers believed that this would provide a pragmatic mechanism to control development and ensure that the emerging Local Plan is fully utilised as an opportunity to shape and deliver the council's priorities.

In response to this recommendation, the feasibility of a separate 'call for sites' process has been evaluated. In response, the council has held an earlier-than-usual 'call for sites' process, which was twin-tracked with increased promotion of the pre-application councillor engagement forum. This forum (comprised of a single Member from each of the political groups represented on the planning regulatory committee) is popular with major developers/housebuilders, as it enables appropriate, emerging residential developments to advance to planning application stage with the comfort of in-principle support from Planning Regulatory Committee Members. Peers heard that this collaborative approach is the most appropriate to ensuring that development proposals reflect and respond to local circumstances and characteristics. It sits well alongside a wider call for sites process and, critically, does not have to wait for the Local Plan to emerge.

Peers saw great pride amongst staff in the work undertaken to date with the Local Plan, particularly the innovative climate emergency review of the local plan that has recently concluded and focused on how new developments can be made better for nature while also making sure that homes and residents are better protected from flooding, have lower water bills, lower fuel bills, and better access to sustainable travel.

Theme 3 – Kind, Caring and Responsible Council

The CPC highlighted a need for the council to continue to invest in the learning and development of the new corporate management team (CMT). In response, a tailored leadership and development programme for chief officers delivered by an external training provider continues to be rolled out, supported by annual conversations (the council's appraisal system). Chief officers have also been encouraged to take part in wider sector-led improvement opportunities, such as peer reviews.

In a similar vein, the CPC recommended that further investment should be made in member development to support councillors (particularly new members) in their council and community leadership roles. Whilst some initial steps have been taken, such as the delivery of overview and scrutiny training by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, it is the view of

the peer team that member development still needs to be strengthened. Activity could incorporate (for example) an offer of formal mentoring arrangements. Likewise, the introduction of performance development reviews which inform the creation of personal training plans for all councillors. It is further suggested that a cross-party member development working group is created to inform and oversee progress and provide dedicated leadership attention in this area. The LGA offers a range of training and development opportunities tailored to councillors at different stages of their journey, which could be used to support elements of the council's member development programme.

Through the CPC it was identified that members at overview and scrutiny could have a greater impact in how they hold the executive to account through effective and constructive scrutiny, including a need to work with members and officers across the council to enhance and embed a culture of effective overview and scrutiny. Progress against this recommendation has been limited to date, albeit with some early, positive examples of policy development work from overview and scrutiny, such as the launch of task and finish groups focusing on the topics such as obesity. Peers were also pleased to hear about the rich engagement undertaken via the dedicated Tenants Scrutiny Panel, which has led to improvement recommendations for the repairs service. A pre-scrutiny protocol to assist both cabinet and scrutiny to work together more effectively is currently being developed.

During the CPC, the peer team recommended that the council should build on the recent improvements to project and programme management and that a whole council strategic approach to the use of data, performance management and financial monitoring should be implemented to inform decision making and management of council business. The peer team were informed that since the CPC, the software tool Power BI has been launched to enable service plans to be more easily and effectively monitored. In addition, the presentation of quarterly performance reports has been reformatted to ensure they are user friendly, strengthening the ability of cabinet and CMT to effectively monitor progress against the delivery of the council's priorities. A full refresh of key performance metrics is planned, along with the implementation of a new project management system.

The CPC illustrated that Lancaster City Council is committed to reducing inequalities and delivering services that are inclusive and accessible to a diverse community. This includes examples of best practice, such as the development of a Fair Work Charter that aims to reduce inequalities in the local labour market by promoting equal and fair employment practices. However, the CPC recommended that the equality policy should now be refreshed with clearly defined objectives included. In response to this recommendation, an external organisation has undertaken a review of the council's current approach to equality, diversity and inclusion. An engagement plan (incorporating internal and external stakeholders) has also been prepared to inform a refresh of the strategy, so that associated connections can be made with relevant partners. Running alongside this, there are a range of internal and externally facing initiatives and projects underway that have grown organically. These include research with Lancashire County Council to develop a more detailed understanding of the drivers behind the community unrest and disturbances seen in many parts of the country during the Summer of 2024; continued expansion of the Fair Work Charter and real living wage; a targeted role out of the community connectors team within priority wards; launch of an internal inclusion policy; and, implementation of wellbeing action plans within every council service. Peers were impressed with the breadth of this work (including the commitment to be data-led) but would recommend that an action plan is produced to capture, showcase and demonstrate the impact of the range of initiatives that are underway.

Lancaster's financial position was a key focus during the CPC. This highlighted that the council's finances are in a relatively reasonable but tightening position and in response a 'Fit for the Future' savings and transformation programme has been developed, which includes

work to review and rationalise assets and the use of a 'flexible capital receipts' policy to enable investment in transformation to deliver savings. Through the CPC it was recommended that the approach could be further enhanced by:

- Strengthening the alignment of budget planning and Fit for the Future process to the Council Plan and service planning.
- Implementing a prioritisation framework to inform the delivery of the Capital Programme, ensuring resources are targeted where they will have the most impact.
- Accelerating the completion of the asset review and delivery of the asset management programme to reduce costs, maximise income and reduce the need for future borrowing.
- Focusing on the creation and implementation of a Digital and ICT strategy.

The peer team were impressed with the overarching approach to the Fit for the Future programme that has been implemented since the CPC, with the governance structure incorporating 13 task and finish groups, including a strong focus on representation from and engagement with Cabinet members. The focus of the strategy is on the medium to long-term and as recommended by the peer team, a concentrated focus has been given to ensuring the close strategic alignment between the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, 25/26 budget proposals and the Council Plan.

Peers were also pleased to hear about the progress with the development of a 10-year capital programme, which formed the starting point for the budget, ensuring that any impact on the revenue budget is understood and capacity/resources are aligned. Associated business cases have been developed on a proportionate basis and tested by both Cabinet and officers.

Similarly, peers were impressed with progress on the development of the asset management programme, particularly the implementation of a cross-party working group to oversee progress and inform the prioritisation of assets, including disposal considerations. This activity has been informed by the completion of a condition survey for all properties held within the general fund and complemented by an estate management improvement plan that will focus on maximising income / reducing costs.

The commitment to green growth through this work is to be commended, particularly for enabling the skilling-up of private sector builders and housing associations in the area to undertake retrofitting of existing buildings / properties.

The council has undertaken significant co-design work with Cabinet members, staff and partners (including Lancaster University and Lancashire County Council) to develop a skeleton strategy for Digital and ICT that identifies the digital priorities for the council and residents (in line with Fit for the Future and council priorities), and also for place-based collaborations. The initial strategic focus will be to ensure the council maximises its existing digital systems, processes and platforms.

Moving forward, it is recognised by Lancaster City Council that there is a need to maintain a resilient Medium Term Financial Strategy in the context of local government reorganisation and the wider potential implications from the English Devolution White Paper.

4. Final thoughts and next steps



The LGA would like to thank Lancaster 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.

Claire Hogan (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and their e-mail address is Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk.