

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Trafford Council

14th November 2025

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



Contents

- 1. Introduction 3
- 2. Summary of the approach..... 3
- 3. Progress Review - Feedback..... 4
- 4. Final thoughts and next steps 16

1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) In January 2025 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 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

2. Summary of the approach

The Progress Review at Trafford Council took place (onsite) on the 14th November 2025.

The Progress Review focussed on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge, under the following theme headings:

- Finance and Transformation
- Healthy and Independent lives for everyone and the best start for our children and young people
- Leadership of Place
- Governance and Leadership

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

- Kath O'Dwyer (former Chief Executive – St Helens Borough Council and LGA Associate)
- Cllr Chris Read (Leader – Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council)

- Pam Duke (former Director of Resources (S151 Officer) – Westmorland and Furness Council and LGA Finance Improvement & Sustainability Associate)
- Dan Archer, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association.

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Out of the CPC's 15 recommendations, the council's RAG rated action plan reports that 87 percent of actions are rated 'green' – meaning they are on track and are either progressing well or have been completed within the timeframe. 13 percent are rated 'amber', meaning there is ongoing work required which requires either further monitoring or minor adjustments. No actions are rated 'red'.

In summary, the feedback given throughout this report shows a council that has acted extensively against the recommendations made as part of the original CPC in January 2025.

Significant progress can be seen in a number of areas, which includes notably how the council has further stepped up to the financial challenge it faces and is now on an improved pathway for dealing with its remaining, underlying deficit. The council is clearly alert to the new, additional financial pressures emerging from the introductions of Fair Funding 2.0 and ongoing demand pressures which will extend this challenge and the difficult decisions this will necessitate. This adds to those decisions members have taken in the last year (such as returning to charging for green waste collection and a Government approved higher than threshold Council Tax increase in 2025/26). A more consistent recognition of the steps required locally to move the Council to financial sustainability within this context is now evident.

Building on the many steps taken, members and officers at Trafford would be the first to acknowledge that a number of the recommendations will remain as relevant moving forward, as the council seeks to deliver the further service improvements required whilst also maximising the opportunities available across place.

Within Adult Social Care, a much improved platform for continued improvement is now in place, following the extensive steps taken by the council in the last year,

which must continue to be supported.

The continued corporate support for children's services is clear to see - it is vitally important that this support and challenge is used to further accelerate all remaining areas of required improvement, ahead of an imminent OFSTED inspection of children's social care services and following the most recent focused OFSTED visit.

Thirdly, real progress has been made with partners in ensuring the capacity and governance required to realise the opportunities presented by the Western Gateway as a transformational development zone which seeks to reshape the western edge of Greater Manchester into a world-class growth corridor. This can help pave the way for a highly exciting period locally over this next stage, and one that could have a significant reshaping effect on the borough.

As the council looks ahead more broadly into this next period, the steps the council has already taken in regard to governance and leadership have established improved foundations and building blocks, which will help to ensure the council can capitalise on the changes and opportunities that are coming within the council and across the borough.

In this context, it is important that the council is able to have clear space for reflection and planning on what new potential this might create for how the council and its partnerships might be able to transform future ways of working building from this.

Live-Well provides an important conceptual umbrella for how the council and partners wrap themselves around, and weave through local communities, which presents a vital backdrop for these wider future transformation discussions (for example at the Transformation Board), which the council should explore further. Ensuring the council is able to have attention on both the design and delivery of the necessary, immediate change work, whilst also having clear forums for future transformation, will help the council to continue to evolve.

To conclude – the original CPC report from January 2025 reflected on '*Trafford Council as highly ambitious for the borough and communities it serves*'. That high level of ambition clearly remains and has been further evidenced in how the council has responded to the recommendations made in the original CPC. The council will benefit from the steps it has already taken against those recommendations and the

continued focus on many of the recommendations made going into this next period for the borough.

3.1. Finance and Transformation

This theme includes reference to the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- Take all steps necessary to eliminate overspend in 2024/25 in light of the highly challenging financial position faced by the council.
- Take the necessary local decisions, at pace, that are required to deal with the ongoing budget deficit, so that the savings and efficiencies required can be fully realised.
- Establish an overarching programme of change which clearly states the success measures, savings and efficiencies that will deliver on your priorities.

At the time of the original CPC, the council was forecasting a year-end overspend position for 2024/25 of approximately £2m. In the context of a limited level of reserves - the above recommendations were given. It is pleasing to see that from this position, the actual year-end overspend reduced to £0.347m. This has continued into 2025/26 where the council was forecasting a year-end overspend position of £0.635m at month 4 and by Q2 is expecting to be at a balanced budget position.

Ongoing financial controls around vacancy management, agency spend and a RAG rating on savings delivery has strengthened financial management and accountability for budgets alongside closer working across directorates. The position is being closely monitored and is expected to continue to improve in-year, with a drive to ultimately try and realise an underspend position.

Shortly following the CPC, the council received confirmation from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), that it would be able to access Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) for 2025/26. Clearly this is only a

temporary measure and it is firmly recognised by all of those the team spoke with, that the additional £9.6m the council has been able to access for 2025/26, becomes a debt the council will then have to repay in future years. Seeking an additional level of Council Tax increase alongside this, involved an important and difficult decision locally and showed political maturity in accepting these decisions are needed to support future financial stability. This will help in addressing part of this underlying structural deficit by bringing levels of Council Tax more closely towards the rates paid in other similar areas.

A more widely understood and collective ownership of the budget challenge across the council can now also be seen with portfolio holders and directors having clear accountability for their budgets. This is reflected in a position whereby the council is not only seeking to deliver on budget, but wherever possible is seeking to drive an increased level of underspend, to help reduce the requirement for EFS.

Looking ahead, the financial challenge continues with work ongoing to identify a balanced budget position for 2026/27. In addition to this, it is expected that this may intensify further for Trafford, with additional pressure coming from the application of the Fair Funding Review 2.0, which is likely to have the effect of increasing the immediate and future year budget gaps that the council will be required to address. The council has intensified its approach to lobbying given this potential negative impact and has engaged with MPs, MHCLG, GMCA (Greater Manchester Combined Authority) and the LGA in this endeavour. The message has been that if funding is not increased for Trafford then difficult decisions affecting services to residents will be required. The council has also adapted its internal narrative within the organisation, recognising that in spite of the lobbying position there is immediate work required within the council to move past this challenging position and get the council onto a financially sustainable footing.

In this context, the work the council has done to introduce a revised approach to change and transformation at the council is especially important. New governance arrangements have been put in place for a Finance, Transformation and Change Board, alongside a three-year transformation programme. A series of sub-boards are in-place to monitor progress and delivery against the 2025/26 budget.

Benchmarking activities have been used to inform strategic planning with comparisons to both CIPFA most similar councils, as well as those other councils who are accessing EFS. It is clear, that the increased engagement that the council has had with other EFS councils has helped to challenge and understand what savings and improvements other councils are having to deliver as part of regaining financial sustainability. The council accepts it has to live within its means and is engaging with the community and residents on those potential difficult decisions. Following this work, the council has reduced its financial gap from an estimated £43m to £7m – assuming the identified savings and efficiencies are delivered in full. However, as stated earlier, this gap will grow further, once the Fair Funding 2.0 outcome is made clearer nationally. The council is continuing conversations with MHCLG in the event the draft finance settlement has such a significant negative impact as modelled at the time of this progress review.

There is a need to continue to focus on, benchmark and challenge areas for further savings, efficiencies as part of a continued council wide budget grip as the council moves forward. This includes a continued focus on the change and transformation agenda. It is recognised that the transformation focus is on improved services to residents but that a critical consequence of improvement has to be around supporting financial sustainability. Having a clear corporate definition for both change and transformation will help to ensure the council is able to have attention on both the design and delivery of the necessary, immediate change and improvement work, whilst also having a clarity of focus on future transformation work and how that will support the council to evolve its operating model and ways of working. The Board is working well with scrutiny and the pre decision support, discussion and debate through scrutiny is strengthening the deliverability and understanding of the impact for residents of the proposed changes.

3.2. Healthy and Independent lives for everyone and the best start for our children and young people

This theme includes reference to the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- Progress at pace the improvements required within Adult Social Care, to fully capitalise on the positive action taken to appoint the new interim Corporate Director of Adult Social Care.
- Strengthen the strategic partnership with GMMH & MFT to better support the mental health needs of children, young people and adults across Trafford.
- Maintain the corporate, political and partnership focus on the children's improvement ambition.

At the time of the original CPC, the council was commencing an improvement journey to strengthen, modernise and improve the consistency of service delivery within adult social care. One of the first steps taken on this journey, shortly before the CPC was to ensure effective senior officer leadership of the service was in place, which the council did by appointing a new interim Corporate Director of Adult Social Care. The council has acted on the recommendation made following this with a range of steps to progress at pace the improvements required within adult social care. The council is honest and open in its self-assessment that this improvement work will of course need to continue, to ensure that the service continues to improve and is CQC ready, with the onsite element of this inspection due in the weeks following this progress review.

This inspection will provide a range of feedback which the council can utilise as appropriate, in continuously developing its improvement programme – the Improving Lives Everyday Programme, which has already been strategically reconfigured in the last year to support the operating model required for an improved service offer to residents.

This is one of a number of steps the council has taken to realise improvements in this service, whilst laying the groundwork for further, future improvement. Examples of which include a proposed restructure of the directorate leadership team, extensive workforce engagement through dedicated 'Let's Talk Adults' sessions, the co-design of a new multi-disciplinary ASC front door and a refreshed practice framework. It is also a positive step that the council has been able to secure the interim DASS for an extended period, until December 2026, to provide the leadership required to see this journey through and secure the wider improvements required.

Closely connected to this, the council has taken some steps to strengthen its strategic partnership with GMMH (Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust) and MFT (Manchester Foundation Trust) to better support the mental health needs of children, young people and adults across Trafford. In particular, the council has reviewed its Section 75 agreement, bringing the social work functions for the provision of social care to people with severe and enduring mental illness back under direct ASC service management. This decision allows the council to now operationalise an improvement programme based on preventative, person-centred care, which is suitably aligned with the Care Act duties. This is one example of a number of ongoing steps that the council will wish to take to further enhance the support available to local children, young people and adults across Trafford within an area that the council will be required to continue to prioritise, and the council recognises that there is more to be done.

Finally, in regards to children's social care, the council continues to act in respect of the recommendation given as part of the original CPC. Reflecting the corporate, political and partnership focus on this improvement priority, the Leader continues to chair the bi-monthly Ambitions for Children Board, which the lead member for Children and Chief Executive also attend. In addition to this, the Director's Management Team have quarterly assurance meetings with the Leader and Chief Executive which are chaired by the lead member. During the progress review, the team were able to hear about the support and improvements seen by a small number of partner representatives.

Shortly before this progress review the council had an OFSTED focused visit, which

highlighted areas of strength and progress, as well as four areas for continued improvement. It is vitally important that the council continues to prioritise the improvement of children's social care, in particular ahead of a pending full OFSTED ILACS inspection to help ensure that the council reaches the level of service performance it clearly aspires to.

3.3. Leadership of Place

This theme includes reference to the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- Clarify the locality working arrangements with partners, to enable greater impact. This includes clarifying the vision and role / contribution of each of the different aspects of locality-based working across the local system.
- Ensure appropriate capacity and governance is in place to maximise the opportunities from the Western Gateway, which is an immense opportunity for the borough and the region.
- Ensure greater visibility to support consistent connectivity of Community Safety with services across Trafford, including local safeguarding arrangements.

The original CPC highlighted Trafford as a highly ambitious, proactive, place-shaping council, seen through the range of significant regeneration programmes that were in train. Most notably this included the Western Gateway as a stand out example of this. Given the scale of this opportunity for the borough, Greater Manchester and wider region, the council were encouraged to ensure that the relevant capacity and governance is in place to maximise on the opportunities this will present.

Since the CPC the council has worked with partners to ensure the relevant capacity and governance is in place. Most notably, this has involved taking the necessary steps to establish a respective Mayoral Development Zone and Mayoral

Development Corporation, working with colleagues at GMCA. The public consultation on the Mayoral Development Corporation (MDC) has been completed and has been submitted to the Secretary of State for approval. Lord Coe has been appointed as chair-designate, with recruitment underway for the Non-Executive Directors and Project Director. An initial business plan has been approved and the council is also completing work to ensure that the capacity and skills are in place and aligned for delivering on this programme. Given its significance, this is clearly an area the council will want to keep under review, as the programme of work develops further.

The council, as part of the Finance, Transformation and Change Board work have reviewed the Strategic Investment Fund, recognising that some of the income streams needed to be reduced due to changing circumstances and for each project within the fund there is increased transparency over the opportunities and also the risks that exist within the developments. The impact of the fund is clearly visible by the properties on the skyline now built and occupied. Stronger governance and regular VFM reviews of the schemes will only strengthen the ultimate pay back on investment albeit from achieved economic growth and development of place as much as from any direct income streams.

Focusing on the locality-based approaches of the council and its partners, the original CPC highlighted an opportunity to strengthen this platform for further locality-based working, by making these arrangements clearer to understand for those both inside and outside the council. Since the team were on site in January, the council has implemented the 2025 – 2028 Locality Plan, which illustrates how the Greater Manchester wide Live-Well concept and programme now acts as the umbrella for how the council and partners work with communities, drawing on the use of assets, services, programmes and initiatives. It is clear that work in this area is progressing at pace, and Executive Members were able to articulate this vision clearly and with enthusiasm. The team heard in some detail about the initial stages of implementation in Sale and Partington. It is also pleasing to hear the further ideas from officers for initiatives like a 'Live-Well' induction, to bring new stakeholders locally into this way of working and what it may mean for them. This is just one example that aligns well with the recommendation made to clarify the locality working arrangements with partners. All of this also serves to further highlight how Live-Well has the potential to

increasingly become part of the council's transformation focus. There may be potential in further exploring how 'Live-Well' can be utilised as a new lens for a whole range of council and partnership problem-solving and future transformation. It is therefore worthy of further consideration to explore how this can be used as a concept and a programme to further inform and inspire the council's next stages of corporate transformation (linked to the reflections on transformation shared earlier in this report).

Finally, following feedback from partners, the council were encouraged to ensure there was greater, more consistent visibility of community safety and the leadership of this across Trafford. A new Community Safety Strategy has been drafted following a multi-agency away day in March with representation from across Trafford. The team were able to speak to lead officers for community safety and hear from partners about how these links were being made, including plans in place locally for the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) and Safeguarding Partnership to continuously reflect on the current level of collaboration and identify any areas where joint working can be further developed. The new CSP strategy will be launched formally early in the new year, which will help also in further communicating the positioning of community safety, mechanisms for engagement and local priorities.

3.4. Governance and Leadership

This theme includes reference to the following recommendations from the original CPC:

- Develop the 'Executive/Forward Plan'.
- Further develop the role of Overview and Scrutiny.
- Support leaders across the council to develop storytelling around the progress, the priorities, change, challenges and difficult decisions.
- Refresh the Corporate Plan monitoring arrangements to provide a focussed set of information, which gives a clear indication of progress against key

milestones and outcomes.

- Create spaces for directors and heads of service to routinely come together as collectives, to further develop cross-organisational working.
- Ensure resilience around single points of responsibility / potential failure across the council.

Given the scale of ambition, as well as the opportunities and challenges present locally, the above recommendations were made to support the council in delivering an informed, connected and confident approach across these priority areas.

The peer team have again been able to observe how the council has acted on all of the above recommendations covered under this theme. A new Executive Forward Plan is now in place, which seeks to increase the visibility of decisions required over a broader scope of areas and a longer timeline. It is too early to comment on the impact this has had, particularly given the postponement of two Executive meetings recently, linked to by-elections locally – an approach which the council has reflected on to help inform future practice.

To help the Executive Forward Plan to truly establish itself as a strategic tool that can better inform horizon scanning and planning, it is important that it is consistently utilised, to include early ‘heads up’ expectations of the full set of decisions to come – even if dates are required to move later on.

One key beneficiary of such a Forward Plan is the council’s overview and scrutiny functions. Steps have been taken to strengthen overview and scrutiny since the CPC which the council can further build-on, particularly in light of the level of support for this direction of travel from the Executive. This can build on the review of scrutiny held in April, from which the council is taking further steps to strengthen budget scrutiny, standardise work programme planning and increasing public engagement. A Scrutiny Toolkit has also been established to support members. The council is now increasing its emphasis on pre-decision scrutiny, which includes the work now being done by a newly established task group who can provide a perspective on budget

updates and proposals.

Alongside this, there may also be a benefit to consider how else the chairs of overview and scrutiny committees might be brought closer into the transformation picture as this emerges further, as a means of supporting the alignment of the work of the Executive with the work of overview and scrutiny. Given the breadth of work happening both across place and at the council specifically, further support for chairs could be explored further, building on the use of the emerging forward plan as a mechanism to retain a sharp focus on the most crucial areas of impact.

More widely, the council has clearly acted to develop the story telling capability of leaders (both political and officer) across the council. The team were able to see examples of this in practice over the course of this progress review – including how the approach to locality-based working was described to a member of the team by an Executive Member, and how both members and officers spoke differently about the financial challenge compared to how this was described during the original CPC. The Executive Members that the team spoke with showed this developing style during the discussions held, utilising stories very much focused on the impact of local residents, which came across both clearly and powerfully.

The performance information available to the Executive has played a role in aiding members in doing this, as has dedicated training for officers on story telling as a leadership discipline. This is clearly a skill set that will continue to develop with further practice over time.

The council has now created a dedicated space for its Corporate Leadership Team and their immediate direct reports to come together routinely to strengthen cross-organisational working. This is an asset to the council in joining up and navigating its continuous improvement journey, as well as in sharing and celebrating its success on the next stages of this journey. As an example, it is striking that the successes and enthusiasm showed for the Live-Well agenda, often had at its roots, connections across the organisation as an essential enabling component. It is therefore important to observe the value of these connections and support them to retain, further develop and flourish, which ‘Let’s Connect’ can have an important enabling role in.

This network can help to provide support across the senior officer cohort to aid resilience, a theme that relates to the final recommendation made - avoiding single points of failure and finding ways to bring more resilience to local delivery arrangements (within the resource context). Doing so to help support a greater sustained impact, not just of the council, but also of its partnerships.

The team heard of examples where this has been acted on already within individual services (for example regeneration and planning). More broadly, the council has more recently started to take steps in this regard, by developing a succession planning strategy as part of a wider organisational development initiative. A new talent and succession plan has been co-designed with senior officers to ensure a robust pipeline of leaders in critical roles across the council. Should the pilot prove successful, and lead to a successful wider roll out, there is likely to be some creative, good practice here, which others in the sector could seek to learn from. The LGA would be keen to showcase the council's experience of this to councils across the sector, who are seeking to try and deal with similar issues, and the team very much encourage the council in this regard, given the learning this could generate for a known issue faced by many councils.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

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.

Dan Archer (LGA Senior Regional Adviser) is the regional lead for the North West and, is the main contact between your council and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Dan is available to discuss any further support the council requires, his email address is Daniel.archer@local.gov.uk.