

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

East Hampshire District Council

15th January 2026

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 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 a year 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 East Hampshire District 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 East Hampshire District Council (EHDC) took place on January 15th 2026. At the request of the Council, the review was undertaken remotely. Before the review the peer team was provided by the Council with an updated list of actions against the recommendations as well as extensive supporting documents. Due to a timetable clash with the Hampshire Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) Chief Executive Officer meetings, the team's Chief Executive peer also met remotely with two neighbouring council chief executives before January 15th.

Corporate Peer Challenges consider the following general themes.

- Local Priorities and Outcomes
- Organisational and Place Leadership

- Governance and Culture
- Financial Planning and Management
- Capacity for Improvement

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

- Yvonne Rees – Lead Chief Executive peer
- Cllr Louise McKinlay - Deputy Leader of Essex County Council and former leader of Brentwood Council. (Conservative)
- Cllr Emily Smith –Vale of White Horse District Council - (former leader- Lib Dem)
- Kamal Mehta – LGA Finance Associate
- Gill Elliott – (Peer Challenge Manager - LGA Associate)

3. Progress Review - Feedback

We appreciate that 2025 has been a really challenging year for EHDC. Shortly after the CPC was completed in January, Hampshire and the Solent area applied to be a priority area for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). This accelerated the LGR timeline on Hampshire's councils to develop proposals for the county. This meant that EHDC has had to divert some of its resources to work on LGR proposals. In May 2025 the Council made the decision to step away from the collective bid to Central Government with 12 other councils in the area and instead work with Hampshire County Council on a separate evidence-based submission. In summer 2025 the priorities in EHDC's Council Strategy were refreshed to reflect LGR and in the autumn a report to Council set out how the budget would be reprioritised. Another challenge for the council over the last year has been completing the recruitment to posts in the new senior management team. EHDC is a small council with relatively lean resources, so LGR has taken up a lot of senior leaders' time, particularly that of the Chief Executive and the Leader.

Despite the additional challenges caused by LGR, the peer team is pleased to report that EHDC has embraced the findings of the CPC and has taken its action plan forward in a pragmatic and proportionate manner. All the recommendations made in

the original CPC have been considered and progress made across all the areas. There have been some really positive achievements, particularly around establishing the forum for the service managers to meet, raising their profile and influence within the organisation, as well broadening Member development and improving Overview and Scrutiny in the organisation. Where the Council has needed to pivot on some of the recommendations because of LGR, it has done so in a way that has been understandable and transparent and with the aim of ensuring that all staff have opportunities to prepare for LGR. It is clear that EHDC wants to be the best Council it can be by the time LGR happens.

This Feedback covers all the recommendations made by the CPC. They have been grouped together where we think this would be helpful.

3.1. Outward Facing and Working with Partners

Recommendation 1 - *Adopt a more outward facing system wide approach. EHDC works well in its District. It is now well placed to start exerting its influence and take more of a place shaping leadership role at the next level with system partners in Hampshire and the wider region.*

Feedback: It was clear from those that we spoke to, that EHDC is working hard to engage with others in the system. We spoke to two council chief executives and a representative from the voluntary and community sector. We heard that the Chief Executive in particular has made an effort to keep in contact with others across the geography and is part of the CEO group leading on the work to reset relationships pending the outcome of the LGR submissions. EHDC is leading (with Gloucester City Council) a Solace leadership programme involving councils in the south east and south west of England. The County Council views EHDC as a mature and sensible partner, balancing the strategic with a connection to their communities.

We heard that work on community area partnerships is good and it will be important to keep working with them over the coming years. Some duplication with the voluntary sector is being ironed out through revised SLAs with Community First. The Community Team is doing some great work to strengthen and prepare communities for devolution and being on the “front foot” while health and local government structures change around them. Integrated Care Board (ICB) transformation is a

complication that needs to be factored into community development work. The voluntary sector is keen to support and add capacity and continuity through LGR and EHDC should make use of them.

Recommendation 2 - *Consider the best approach to engage key stakeholders to refresh the vision for Whitehill and Bordon and establish clearly understood mechanisms for communication with the community and stakeholders. Clarify the roles of different councillors involved in the regeneration of the area and interrelationships with officers.*

Feedback - We understand that work is continuing as part of the Regeneration and Economy Strategy. Within the ongoing Whitehill & Bordon regeneration programme, steps have been taken to strengthen stakeholder engagement. The Whitehill & Bordon Strategy Group has been re-established, which includes the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, Homes England, EHDC, HCC and Whitehill & Town Council. Discussions are also taking place with a local MP to explore how he can work with this group.

In addition, the Delivery Implementation Group (DIG) continues to meet, bringing together key delivery stakeholders. Both the Strategy Group and the DIG meetings took place in July, and further dates are currently being scheduled for November. EHDC is exploring opportunities to position Whitehill & Bordon as a priority in the Mayoral Local Growth Plan. The area of Bordon has been identified as a pilot for the council's Neighbourhood hub test bed. This will involve a capture of the tasks and services being delivered in the area with a renewed local 'strategy'. This is a longer-term ambition.

3.2 Financial Planning and Monitoring

Recommendation 3

(i) The council should consider a more explicit and therefore transparent identification and presentation of the in-year and cumulative budget deficits in the MTFs.

(ii) The cabinet should be provided with budget monitoring reports more frequently than currently to be able to take timely and decisive decisions.

(iii) Given the risk of "lower than average" reserves, while also having an investment

portfolio which comes with a level of risk, the council should consider setting a policy of minimum general fund reserves with the advice of the S.151 officer.

(iv) Having decoupled from Havant Borough Council and undergone significant organisational change, the council should update its financial standing orders and regulations and the contract standing orders and regulations to reflect the new structure in respect of delegations and spending authority to ensure a robust system of internal controls and checks and therefore good governance.

Feedback: Overall, we are satisfied that the Council has given consideration to our financial recommendations and has either achieved them or is actively working towards completion within realistic timelines.

The Chief Finance Officer and Section 151 Officer will be presenting the identified in year budget deficits in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) explicitly and transparently (rather than a figure on a line titled 'savings to be found') as part of the budget for 2027/27 to Council in February 2026.

It is understood that the Strategy Board and the Cabinet are briefed on budget performance every month but the Cabinet is satisfied with a formal budget and performance monitoring report on a quarterly basis. Also, the Chief Executive meets with the Chief Finance Officer and Section 151 Officer regularly and has an overview and understanding of the state of the Council's finances.

Overall, the Council's level of general fund usable reserves remains comparatively low. However, the council recognises the continuing risk of the investment property portfolio and has taken action to rebalance the portfolio and thus the risks within it. The Chief Finance Officer and Section 151 Officer has stated that he will be discussing the matter of the level of general reserves and whether a minimum level should be set with the Cabinet Finance Portfolio Holder. This will be important in light of the resource and capacity pressures not only on in-year budgets and savings targets but also on drawings from general reserves in respect of the work on the preparation for Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire and the Solent.

The Council has adopted a new set of Contract Standing Orders to ensure it complies with the Procurement Act 2023. The Chief Finance Officer and S.151 Officer stated that the financial standing orders/regulations and rules are now scheduled to be presented to the Standards Board at the next meeting in May 2026.

3.3 Member Support and Governance

Recommendation 4 - *Continue to shape a Member development programme to include councillor roles, scrutiny skills, work planning, and a buddying system. Work with the group leaders to increase engagement with training. Identify with Members the areas where they feel their support from officers can be improved, including how Members want to be communicated with and how their enquiries can be dealt with in a timely fashion.*

Feedback: A Member training panel has been set up and is working well to ensure that training is provided on what members need. A programme of training was agreed for the rest of the current council year.

We heard that a new councillor development strategy has been agreed. The Council has identified the need to adapt its training model in the future to prepare for the Mayoral Strategic Authority and Unitary Councils. Members we spoke to said they had received good information and briefings on LGR.

The South East Employers charter reassessment has now successfully taken place. Feedback received will be reported to the Standards Board with an action plan to address recommendations for continuous improvement, including taking examples of best practice into the new unitary authority.

A new Councillor induction programme is underway and 'meet and greets' for new councillors have been improved. A new buddy system is in place where a member is assigned to the latest new member to help them navigate the complexities of a council.

A variety of training has been provided including Scrutiny Training and Public Speaking and Speech writing (delivered externally). They have been well received and Members said they have helped to build confidence and focus. Attendance levels at training are reported to be "mixed" as the only mandatory training is for the

Planning Committee. Members are keen to have more training sessions on other topics.

Members said that they feel well supported by democratic services officers. However, they still do not always go through the “MyEHDC” enquiry portal because of the slow response rate. Instead, they are often emailing directors. It was not clear if this is due to a cultural or a technology issue, but it remains an area that would benefit from further improvement.

Recommendation 5 - *Review how best to use the O&S committee’s time and work programme. Agendas need to be lighter and reports more concise so that members have time to read them more productively.*

Feedback: Peers received positive feedback about Overview and Scrutiny from councillors across the political spectrum. The new Scrutiny training was well attended and helpful. Members said they feel more confident and have made two call-ins since having the training. They also feel more confident pushing to scrutinise confidential information. The Chair has received external training and is well supported by the Monitoring Officer and democratic services officers. He also has a good relationship with the Leader.

The O&S work programme is more organised and focused. Opportunities to develop skills around questioning are being planned to support members. These should focus on helping member to address “bigger picture” issues. We heard that Cabinet members were “nearly” always there for agenda items being discussed at O&S meetings but not always. Officers are there to support the cabinet member but cabinet members should be answering to scrutiny directly.

3.4 Employee Development and Engagement

Recommendation 6 - *East Hants Manager Programme: The programme is needed to drive forward with the next stages of transformation and improve the skills of managers to manage performance and address inconsistencies in the way workforce policies are applied and supported. The programme is in planning but must be delivered at a faster pace, with involvement of staff in the development process.*

Feedback - The East Hants Manager Programme has been expanded under a new wider umbrella programme called ARC (Adapt, Collaborate and Re-Skill) to support employees as well as managers. The aim of the new programme is to help employees develop the skills and knowledge that will enable them to take the next step in their careers in the context of local government reorganisation. The new East Hants Manager and Employee (EHME) programme is still at the developmental stage. Pulse staff surveys are helping to shape the programme.

We understand that there is funding to deliver the EHME, however our concern is around the ability of the Council to develop and deliver it quickly enough to enable staff to really benefit from it before LGR is introduced.

Recommendation 7 – *Service managers are a dedicated and talented group with huge potential in the organisation. They need to be empowered to meet together to address cross cutting issues and have a strong voice upward to senior managers. EHDC is developing a leadership programme to develop competency for individuals to flourish in the new environment. The programme will be codesigned and developed with those participating.*

Feedback

The Council reported that monthly on-going meetings now take place with the Service Leads. The agendas are a mix of co-design and self-driven issues. We were told that Terms of Reference were co-designed with the Group. Their work Programme is a mix of issues referred to them and has included procurement, risk management and training as part of East Hants Manager. There are also areas of activity which they initiate and work on to feed up ensuring that there are links through the organisation. They retain self-ownership of reaching out to their professional areas. Feedback is regularly given through the Communications Manager who sits on Strategy Board.

We found the group to be a very impressive cohort. We also learned that those who attend find it very useful but membership is a little unclear and attendance levels are mixed. In discussion those in the room recognised they could and should take greater ownership to drive the improvements they wanted. The group members we spoke to said that links with the senior leadership team (SLT) could be stronger and

that the training programme being developed doesn't necessarily fit the skills gaps in their teams. They felt that SLT needs to engage with them more to understand their development needs. They said that they felt well briefed on LGR and had a clear understanding of what's happening. Their LGR group worked well together to get the bid, but it had entailed very long hours as work had to be done on top of the day job. The group considered there was an opportunity to use them more and wanted to be trusted to keep taking risks and try new ways of working – to live the values and Be Bold.

Recommendation 8 - *Consider introducing regular staff pulse surveys to supplement the larger staff surveys that are run. They can be done more frequently during transformation to understand how staff are feeling and enable the council to be more agile and react to issues more quickly.*

Feedback – EHDC has introduced quarterly surveys. The first one took place in May 2025. They have been designed to ask core indicator questions and topic specific questions. The first topic for the pulse survey at the end of January will ask staff about their learning and development needs in light of local government reorganisation.

3.5 Transformation and ICT

Recommendation 9 - *The Shaping East Hampshire Future Transformation highlight report is overly complicated. It needs to be simplified and reprioritised within the new directorate structure.*

Feedback - We understand that following the announcement of LGR in January 2025 the SEHF programme has been reprioritised under the ARC programme.

There are now 5 programmes and 18 projects that constitute the ARC transformation portfolio. They include key delivery commitments such as a Food Waste collection service, a splashpad leisure provision, process redesign work, implementation of IDOX planning management systems, harnessing AI technologies and continuing to modernise the IT infrastructure, alongside the work on LGR and Devolution.

The monthly highlight report has been simplified and provides key progress updates to Strategy Board on a the newly prioritised list of projects. We are told that once the

approach is finalised there will be a simplified highlight report (following the close down of reports and alignment with new directorate structures) to be completed and shared with Strategy Board and members for standard quarterly reporting.

Recommendation 10 - *Promote better understanding and use of the current capabilities of ICT systems and engage staff and councillors in developing proposals to harness digital (AI) opportunities.*

Feedback – Since the CPC took place the Council has rolled out a project to move from the Capita IT contract to using Sharepoint for document storage and sharing. Training has been “bite sized” by department, and often provided for staff on a 1:1 basis.

Training for Members was delivered in September 2025 following the roll out of laptops which has enabled councillors to be ‘paperless’ with considerable economic and environmental savings. The core of the training was around saving documents, document control and discipline. The Council’s first paperless council meeting took place in September and saved 14,000 sheets of paper in one meeting.


The Lead for IT is now working with a group from other parts of local government across the south on the uses of AI, this includes those in Somerset. AI tools available within existing programmes are being reviewed, recognising the need for policies around data protection associated with open access tools

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank East Hampshire District Council for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an 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) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and his e-mail address is william.brooks@local.gov.uk

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