



Report to: Cabinet Meeting: 20 January 2026

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Paul Peacock, Strategy, Performance & Finance

Director Lead: Deborah Johnson, Customer Services & Organisational Development

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Report Summary	
Type of Report	Open Report / Non-Key Decision
Report Title	Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review Outcome
Purpose of Report	To present the findings of the recent LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review
Recommendations	That Cabinet review and note the Peer Team’s feedback and associated appendices of this report
Alternative Options Considered	Not applicable
Reason for Recommendations	The Peer Team’s feedback offers an independent view of how the Council is performing including areas where it can strengthen its approach. Reflecting on this feedback helps ensure the Council continues to improve, stays focused on delivering for residents and remains aligned to its strategic priorities.

1.0	<u>Background</u>
1.1	In October 2024, the Local Government Association (LGA) undertook a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) at NSDC. A team comprising senior councillors and officers from across local government conducted a comprehensive assessment, reviewing key financial, performance, and governance data, followed by an intensive three-day onsite evaluation at Castle House. Their findings, detailed in the Peer Team’s report, recognised NSDC as a high-performing authority with a strong organisational culture and a proven record of delivering effective core services that positively impact residents.
1.2	The review highlighted areas of strength, as well as opportunities for further improvement. In response, an action plan comprising 12 specific initiatives was developed by a cross-party working group, established with Cabinet approval in February 2025.

1.3	Implementation of the action plan was already underway at that point, with early progress illustrated by the completed review of the Community Plan, the outcomes of which were reported to the full Council in May 2025.
1.4	The Peer Team is returned for a progress review on the 11th and 12th of December 2025, which provided an opportunity to share achievements and challenges, and to objectively assess progress against the Corporate Peer Challenge recommendations.
2.0	<u>Position Statement Update</u>
2.1	In preparation for the visit a short position statement was prepared to update the Peer Team on NSDC's progress against their recommendations. This can be found at Appendix A and includes a detailed update on developments in strategic planning, governance, councillor development, workplace culture, and it also outlines recent achievements through local government reorganisation activities. This statement was supplemented by the action plan that was developed through the Cabinet appointed working party in 2025. This action plan can be found at Appendix B .
3.0	<u>The Peer Team's Approach</u>
3.1	The approach for the progress review involved an onsite visit on 11 and 12 December 2025 with the Peer Team meeting select groups and officers for discussions on the Council's progress against the original recommendations from their initial visit in October 2024.
3.2	<p>The Peer Team were again formed by representatives from various local authorities with the following returning for the review:</p> <p>Cllr Anthony McKeown (Leader, High Peak Borough Council) Cllr Georgina Hill (LGA Regional Lead Peer, Independent Group) Ka Ng (Chief Executive, Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council) and Becca Singh (Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association)</p>
3.3	<p>Their review was structured around the recommendations previously set out in the Corporate Peer Challenge, with a focus on key themes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review and prioritise the 2023-2027 Community Plan. 2. Review Audit, Governance, Overview and Scrutiny functions of the council to maximise councillor engagement and council productivity. 3. Ensure councillors understand the longer-term budget pressures. 4. Establish an ongoing councillor development programme. 5. Continue to foster the positive culture of the organisation. 6. Consider agreeing a Team Charter amongst the Joint Administration.
3.4	In addition, Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), which emerged as a priority for the Council after the announcement in December 2024, was considered as a supplementary area of focus during this review.

3.5	By examining these areas, the Peer Team aimed to assess both achievements and ongoing challenges, providing an objective evaluation of the Council's progress against the agreed recommendations.
4.0	<u>Progress Review – Peer Team's Feedback</u>
4.1	The Peer Team's review highlights that the Council's Leader and Chief Executive continue to be highly regarded both within and outside the organisation. Also acknowledged is the high service standards and strong customer focus maintained with staff and councillors remaining dedicated to serving the district's diverse communities.
4.2	The report goes on to highlight that after the initial CPC feedback, some 14 months ago, a positive and supportive culture persists, which has been further reinforced during a period of increased demand and ongoing council restructuring.
4.3	Below is an overview of the team's feedback against their original recommendations. For a detailed account of these findings, please refer to the full report at Appendix C .
4.4	<u>Review and Prioritise the 2023-27 Community Plan</u>
4.4.1	The report notes the thorough review and prioritisation of its 2023-27 Community Plan in light of CPC feedback which resulted in a streamlined version being approved in May 2025. The process which included evaluating completed actions and engaging key stakeholders through several workshops was coordinated by a dedicated working group which was commissioned by the Cabinet.
4.4.2	Additionally, the report acknowledges the PPIC working group which looked at activities being delivered which are beyond the Council's core remit and how the outcomes were shared to enhance understanding among councillors, particularly regarding inter-agency collaboration. The team also noted that despite some concerns about progress on matters outside the Council's control, ongoing efforts reflect a commitment to adapting and delivering on priorities, especially as attention shifts towards local government reorganisation.
4.5	<u>Review Audit, Governance and Scrutiny Arrangements to Maximise Councillor Engagement and Council Productivity</u>
4.5.1	The Peer Team's report acknowledges that following their feedback, the Council revised the terms of reference for both committees, clarified governance arrangements, and strengthened the code of conduct. Noting that in May 2025, the Audit & Governance committee's remit was divided between two new committees: Audit and Accounts (A&A), and Governance, General Purposes and LGR (GGP&LGR), each with distinct responsibilities.

4.5.2	The report notes early positive feedback regarding these changes, with improved collaboration among committee chairs and vice-chairs, and direct engagement with internal and external auditors. Notably, both new committees are chaired by opposition members, which is recognised as inclusive and good practice. Nearly all councillors are actively involved in committee work, ensuring broad representation in decision-making. The increased use of working groups has promoted inclusivity in scrutiny functions, the report advises that these groups should continue in order to facilitate efficient decision-making. Reference is made to national good practice from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, emphasising the need for scrutiny to provide adequate challenge and remain distinct from audit functions.
4.6	<u>Improve Councillor Understanding of Long-Term Budget Pressures</u>
4.6.1	The report acknowledges that, following the CPC and the review of the Council's audit and governance functions, the Section 151 and Deputy Section 151 Officer delivered finance training for councillors. It notes that the training covered the Council's statutory responsibilities, financial governance and budgetary control. It further notes that a budget planning workshop was held in October 2025, focusing on the medium-term financial plan and budget setting. The report acknowledges that while improving participation across six different political groups, as well as non-aligned councillors, requires considerable officer resource, the Council remains committed to ensuring full involvement of councillors, especially in financial arrangements.
4.6.2	The report also highlights that recent decisions demonstrate how this investment in councillor learning and development has led to increased awareness of long-term budget pressures. Councillors are reported to be asking more knowledgeable questions of officers regarding resources, resulting in a more considered approach to decision-making.
4.6.3	<p>The report also highlights the Council's success in being awarded various funds, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £19.5m in March 2025 for a decade-long investment (2026-2036) in town centre transformation following Town Deal success • £20m Levelling Up 3 funds for Ollerton and Clipstone; and • around £1.35m allocated for 2025/26 from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity fund to support businesses, skills, and young people
4.7	<u>Establish an Ongoing Councillor Development Programme</u>
4.7.1	The report confirms NSDC's strong commitment to the ongoing development of its councillors, ensuring that the highest standards are consistently upheld. The report highlights that the newly formed GGP&LGR Committee now oversees councillor development and has established a working group to identify specific training needs and preferences. It confirms that feedback from recent training sessions is being used to inform future development plans.

4.7.2	The report also recognises the Council's commitment to equipping councillors to manage public expectations, particularly in instances where requests fall outside the Council's remit or require statutory processes. Councillors are encouraged to consult with officers as needed and to respond confidently and clearly, especially when signposting the public to the appropriate channels. The report suggests that further support may be required for councillors to better understand the implications of LGR and their evolving roles throughout this process.
4.8	<u>Continue to Foster the Positive Culture of the Organisation</u>
4.8.1	The Peer Team recognises the importance of a positive culture and acknowledges the significant investment of both energy and resources into cultivating a positive organisational culture. The team again commented frequently on the positive culture experienced first-hand throughout their visit. They note that, amidst the Council's ambitious programme of work, this positive environment has been sustained, with officers continuing to express their enjoyment of working for NSDC. The report further highlights that partners speak highly of the Council's culture and their experiences of collaboration, both during the CPC and the subsequent progress review.
4.8.2	The report observes that staff remain dedicated to delivering high-quality service and routinely go above and beyond to achieve positive outcomes for residents. Whilst noting that the feedback received during the staff discussion group showed gratitude for the support received from senior managers.
4.8.3	The report concludes that, despite the significant changes brought about by LGR, it is encouraging to see the council maintain its focus on supporting staff as a key priority.
4.9	<u>Consider a Team Charter for the Joint Administration</u>
4.9.1	The report outlines that following the initial CPC recommendation around revisiting the charter idea to strengthen coalition ties and that following review this was not supported. The report recognises ongoing political tensions within the minority administration, though cooperation continues. The CPC also advised creating a communications protocol and reviewing the Code of Conduct; both matters are currently being addressed by relevant committees and officers. The report notes a substantial rise in Code of Conduct complaints, primarily among councillors, prompting additional staff recruitment and an update of the complaint's procedure. The Peer Team recommends all councillors familiarise themselves with procedural changes once revised. Additionally, the report mentions potential frustration and/or confusion arising from some councillor's social media posts and welcomes the forthcoming review of the Social Media Protocol.

5.0	<u>Local Government Reorganisation</u>
5.1	The Peer Team recognises the significant commitment shown by NSDC officers in developing and submitting the final LGR proposal on 28 November 2025. The team acknowledge the strong community leadership throughout negotiations, committing time and resources at both officer and councillor levels, this was also noted by partner councils during their meeting with the Peer Team.
5.2	The Peer Team recommends the Council carefully assess risks involving its two owned companies, Arkwood and Active4Today, during the LGR process. Noting that scrutiny and thorough review of business plans are essential for robust assurance and risk management.
5.3	<p>The Peer Team also highlights and appreciate the positive approach illustrated by NSDC's objectives through LGR.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave a legacy of a high performing, financially resilient council with completed and progressed key regeneration capital projects. • Contribute fully and influentially to the shaping and establishment of the new councils. • Support our colleagues to take advantage of opportunities presented by LGR.
6.0	<u>Summary</u>
6.1	The Peer Team's report again highlights several strengths, while also encouraging the Council to continue making improvements. The Council's response to the team's initial report, which followed their October 2024 visit, was a collaborative effort involving both elected members and officers. Unsurprising therefore that the team once again emphasised our strong and positive organisational culture in their feedback. The Peer Team's full report can be found at Appendix C .
7.0	<u>Next steps</u>
7.1	Following endorsement by Cabinet the Council's webpage will be updated with the LGA's latest report and broadcast by our communications team.
8.0	<u>Implications</u>
	In writing this report and in putting forward recommendations, officers have considered the following implications: Data Protection; Digital & Cyber Security; Equality & Diversity; Financial; Human Resources; Human Rights; Legal; Safeguarding & Sustainability and where appropriate they have made reference to these implications and added suitable expert comment where appropriate.

Implications Considered			
Yes – relevant and included / NA – not applicable			
Financial	NA	Equality & Diversity	NA
Human Resources	NA	Human Rights	NA
Legal	NA	Data Protection	NA
Digital & Cyber Security	NA	Safeguarding	NA
Sustainability	NA	Crime & Disorder	NA
LGR	NA	Tenant Consultation	NA

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

18 Feb 2025 - Cabinet - Corporate Peer Challenge - Final report