

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Newark and Sherwood District Council

11-12 December 2025

Feedback



Contents

1.	Introduction	3
2.	Summary of the approach.....	3
3.	Progress Review - Feedback.....	4
4.	Final thoughts and next steps	11

1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in October 2024 and published the full report with an action plan.

The Progress Review is an integral part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. 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 Newark and Sherwood 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 Newark and Sherwood District Council took place onsite on 11-12 December 2025.

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

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.

An additional area of focus is local government reorganisation (LGR) which became a priority for the council in December 2024, after the CPC took place.

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

- 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
- Becca Singh, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association

3. Progress Review - Feedback

As stated in the CPC feedback in October 2024, the leader and chief executive are held in high regard internally and externally and both are viewed as effective. Staff and councillors are clearly committed to serving communities in the district, recognising differing needs in different places.

Fourteen months on from the CPC, there is still a positive, supportive and welcoming culture, with staff going the extra mile to support each other and the communities they serve. This is particularly important at this time of increased demand and changing council structures, and the peer team were pleased to see that this culture has been maintained and strengthened since we were last on site.

The council is still one that delivers good services and focuses strongly on customer service. Many of the staff live in the district and therefore have family and friends who are residents, customers, and clients of the council, and are proud to work for the council.

Out of the CPC's six recommendations, the council's RAG rated action plan reports that all recommendations were considered by the council, and five of them have progressed significantly. The remaining one (about establishing a charter for the administration) was considered and the council decided it was no longer appropriate with changed political realities such as LGR.

3.1. Review and prioritise the 2023-27 Community Plan

The Community Plan is the council's plan for activity, originally set by the incoming administration setting out its priorities and key activities for delivery until the next election. At the time of the CPC, the council recognised that this was too detailed and needed prioritising.

In response to the CPC feedback, the council evaluated the plan, documenting all actions delivered. It also held dedicated workshop sessions with key stakeholders, including councillors and the senior leadership team (SLT) to inform the review.

As a result, Full Council approved an updated and slimmed down Community Plan on 20 May 2025. The council also set up a working group to address issues that may be beyond the scope of a district council's core remit. This working group has now completed its work. Peers encourage the council to ensure the working group's conclusions are communicated to all councillors to support their understanding of the council's powers. For example, the working group identified opportunities for more inter-agency coordination and collaboration, which has already been taken forward (e.g. the Environment Agency reporting to the council). However, there are still some councillors disappointed with the lack of progress on issues outside the council's remit. With LGR a major focus, the peer team recommends that the council undertakes a further review of the Community Plan to affirm priorities in the remaining time available. This should consider the capacity it has to deliver cabinet's priorities alongside day-to-day business, as well as the transition phase for LGR.

These actions demonstrate the willingness of the council to learn from wider sector experience in other councils and partners and adapt as necessary. It continues to be an ambitious council, aiming to leave the best legacy possible of Newark and Sherwood District Council, doing the best for its communities right to the end.

3.2. Review Audit, Governance and Scrutiny arrangements to maximise councillor engagement and council productivity

The CPC reported that although the council did have audit, governance and scrutiny arrangements in place, the work of the two committees covering these areas of work - Audit and Governance (AGC), and Policy and Performance Improvement Committee (PPIC) - often overlapped. Councillors were not always clear of the remit of both committees, and work programmes were developed in isolation. The CPC team encouraged the council to explore different overview and scrutiny tools such as setting up task and finish groups to engage more councillors, considering the merits of deep dives into subjects before committing officer time and resources into different areas of work.

Following the CPC, the council reviewed the terms of reference of both AGC and PPIC. This included the composition of the committees, particularly looking at governance arrangements and strengthening the code of conduct for councillors. The review reported in May 2025, resulting in AGC remit being split between two new regulatory committees: Audit and Accounts Committee, and the Governance, General Purposes and LGR Committee (GGPLGR), with clear remits for each.

It is too early to determine how effective these changes have been, but early signs are encouraging, with positive feedback from both councillors and officers. The chairs and vice-chairs work with other committee chairs and vice-chairs to co-ordinate work programmes. This is a much more collaborative, effective and efficient way of working than before. The Audit and Accounts Committee demonstrates good practice by meeting directly with both internal and external auditors, which is a change from previous practice.

In addition, the two new committees are chaired by members of the opposition. This should be regarded as notable practice and has proved to be a successful and inclusive approach. The council also has a good record of allocating committee positions proportionately. Building on this good work, the peer team recommends that the council considers how to continue to improve the scrutiny function, which is the remit of PPIC.

Nationally, good practice is available from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

(cfigs.org.uk), particularly the “Structures, resources and formal powers” practice guide ([Structures, resources and formal powers - a practice guide - CfGS](#)). It is important that the scrutiny function provides adequate challenge to the cabinet and undertakes a clearly different role from the audit function. The recent changes to the committee structures and remits have helped ensure this is now the case.

It is worth noting that out of the district’s 39 councillors, 36 currently sit on committees. Two of the remaining three are newly elected through by-elections, and the third is a substitute member of a committee. This ensures that all councillors, across the political spectrum, are involved in decision-making.

The increase in the use of councillor working groups has helped to develop an inclusive approach to the council’s scrutiny functions. It will be important to ensure that working groups enhance decision-making without delaying it, and provide a focused, efficient resolution to the issues they explore.

3.3. Improve councillor understanding of long-term budget pressures

Since the CPC and review of the council’s audit and governance functions, the Section 151 and deputy Section 151 officers delivered finance training for councillors. This included the council’s statutory responsibilities, financial governance and budgetary control. A budget planning workshop was held in October 2025 focused on the medium-term financial plan and budget setting. Whilst improving participation across six different political groups, plus non-aligned councillors takes considerable officer resource, the council is committed to ensuring full involvement of councillors, particularly in financial arrangements.

Recent decisions demonstrate that this investment in councillors’ learning, and development has resulted in increased awareness of long-term budget pressures. Councillors are asking more knowledgeable questions of officers about resources, and there is a more considered approach to decision-making.

The council has been successful in being awarded various funds, for example:

- £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

The government has not yet set the timescale for financing LGR; when this happens, councillors may need further support to understand the implications of how this could have an impact on the financial position. The LGA has provided a series of guidance notes on LGR and finance which the council may find useful:

[Local government reorganisation: Finance essentials | Local Government Association](#)

3.4. Establish an ongoing councillor development programme

Newark and Sherwood District Council is, and always has been, committed to supporting ongoing development of its councillors to maintain high standards.

Following the CPC, and review of its committee functions, in June 2025, a councillor training day provided a refresher for new and more experienced councillors.

The new GGPLGR committee is responsible for councillor development and has established a working group to identify specific wants and needs of councillors. It is important that the council uses the feedback from training that has already been provided to inform councillor development plans.

Managing expectations is essential to a councillor's role, for example when a member of the public requests something that is outside a district council's remit or requires a statutory process to follow to resolve the issue. It is important for councillors to consult with officers as appropriate and be more confident in how they respond to such requests, especially when it may mean turning down, or refusing something. Councillors need to be clear on the remit and powers of the district council and can help to direct questioners to the right path.

There may be additional areas that councillors need extra support on - particularly in understanding the implications of LGR and their role as councillors during different stages of this process - that the officers will need to advise on. The LGA can also provide support around LGR.

3.5. Continue to foster the positive culture of the organisation

The chief executive has put significant energy and resource to developing a positive culture, which was very noticeable at the time of the CPC. In all the ambitious work that the council wants to achieve, the positive culture has been maintained, and officers continue to enjoy working for Newark and Sherwood District Council and demonstrate their dedication to the work. Partners speak highly of the culture at the council, and how good it is to work with the council, both on the CPC and on the Progress Review.

The peer team recognises that the sector is now in a challenging climate, such as scarcity of resources to support communities. Senior managers recognise the pressure frontline staff can be under and have taken steps to foster the positive culture across the organisation. This has included extra communications staff roadshows, increasing integration with staff based outside Castle House, and continuing the staff awards scheme.

Staff remain dedicated to doing a good job and still go the extra mile to achieve a positive resolution for the residents they serve. Staff, and the peer team, are grateful for the support that they receive from senior managers. This is particularly difficult at a time of considerable change through LGR, and it is good to see this continue to be a priority for the council.

3.6. Consider a Team Charter for the joint administration

The election in 2023 returned a council under no overall control. The council considered setting out a charter for the coalition administration setting out how the different parties would work together. This involved researching and talking to other councils in a similar political situation. However, at that time, it was felt that this would not add value to the political relationships that existed and instead focused on drawing up the Community Plan. The CPC in 2024 suggested the administration revisited the idea, to maintain a strong coalition between all the parties involved. The council considered it amongst other CPC recommendations, but it is not something that the council's politicians, of all the coalition parties, feel would be useful.

There is a fine political balance, with an administration comprising different political groups and operating in a minority. Some relationships between and within political

groups are being strained, but the coalition is continuing to work together.

The CPC team also suggested establishing a communications protocol, and a review of its Code of Conduct. The GGPLGR committee is considering a communications protocol, and the monitoring officer is working with councillors to review the Code of Conduct.

There has been a significant increase in the number of Code of Conduct complaints in the last eighteen months. They are largely between district councillors, and between parish councillors. The current complaints process may not be fit for purpose, as many complaints are being treated as a Code of Conduct complaint when this may not be appropriate. This puts a strain on political relationships.

As a result of the number of investigations – with over 30 currently being investigated – the council has taken on additional staff to address the backlog. The Monitoring Officer is currently updating the complaints procedure to address these challenges. The peer team recommend that when the complaints procedures have been revised, all councillors familiarise themselves with the changes. The Monitoring Officer will have to work with parish council clerks to improve the understanding of parish and town councillors.

The CPC team noted that when councillors communicate on social media, members of the public may not be able to distinguish easily if the message represents the view of the council or a private view of the member. It is encouraging to see that the GGPLGR committee will be reviewing the Social Media Protocol in the near future.

3.7. Local Government Reorganisation

Newark and Sherwood District Council submitted its final proposal for LGR on 28 November 2025. Three proposals have been submitted for the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire area, each proposing to replace the current nine councils with two unitary councils, but with different boundaries. Two councils in the county have chosen not to support any option.

Throughout the process, Newark and Sherwood District Council has demonstrated good community leadership by being actively involved in negotiations at both officer and councillor levels. Partner councils highlighted the commitment Newark and

Sherwood District Council showed through ensuring officer time and resources are available to work on these issues.

The peer team suggests that the council considers the potential risks with the two council-owned companies, Arkwood and Active4Today, through the LGR process. It will be important to continue applying appropriate scrutiny and oversight of them, and that the business plans are thoroughly reviewed to support strong assurance and risk management through the LGR process.

The council has three key objectives for the transition to the new councils:

- 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.

The peer team want to acknowledge this positive approach.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Newark and Sherwood District Council for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review. The review marks the end of the CPC process for this cycle, but not the end of the relationship between the council and the LGA.

We have an on-going offer of support to councils through sector-led improvement. 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.

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

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