



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

Hyndburn Council undertook an Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) from 29- 31 October 2024 and promptly published the full report with an action plan. Supporting transparency, a copy of the council's CPC report and action plan are readily available on the council's website on the following link: [Performance and Statistics | Hyndburn Borough Council](#)

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
- Better understand any changes in context which may affect the council's progress or alter previously developed plans.

The LGA would like to thank Hyndburn for their commitment to sector led improvement and for the time and preparatory work which they invested into this process. 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 Hyndburn took place onsite on Thursday 4 September 2025. This work focused on the original 10 recommendations from the CPC. To support joined-up conversation at a strategic level rather than focusing on the transactional tasks of the council, these recommendations were aggregated into the following themes and headings:

- Strategy and leadership (including corporate strategy, place strategy and organisational leadership and relationships)
- Organisational development and communication (including review of

organisational structure, engagement with the sector and learning)

- The council's corporate core (including effective decision making, digital transformation and income generation)

To support this review the council developed an update to their action plan that set out their progress to-date and intended future actions. For this review, the council brought together their senior leadership team and political leadership to provide a presentation on their update, with these representatives receiving feedback at the end of the process. The process also included seven 1-2-1 meetings/phone calls with the council Leader, Chief Executive, Directors, Head of Policy & OD and the Digital & Transformation Lead, and a further four focus groups with the leader and deputy leaders of the opposition, Cabinet members, Chairs of Audit & Scrutiny Committees, and managers and staff. This work was supported by the following members of the original peer team.

- Ian Miller, Chief Executive, Wyre Forest District Council
- Dominic Bradley, Director of Resources, Horsham District Council
- Anne Brinkhoff, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association Associate

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Out of the CPC's ten recommendations, the council's RAG rated Action plan reports that 100 per cent of actions are either completed (20 per cent) or in progress (80 per cent).

There has been good progress in many areas. Since the original CPC, the council's context has significantly changed with the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and the Fair Funding Review 2.0, both of which have created uncertainties and are absorbing significant officer and member capacity.

The council has achieved significant progress on its major strategic projects, with momentum continuing. Work on the initial Phase 1 state of the Accrington Town Square project is now complete or nearly so, including works to repair and restore the building fabric on two key heritage buildings: Burton Chambers and the Market Hall. There is good progress with the enabling works for the Huncoat Garden Village project with the validation of a full planning application for the proposed residential

relief road in April 2025 and further complex enabling works to acquire the land for the construction of the relief road. The new Wilson Sports Village is scheduled to open to the public in October 2025 and will be managed by Hyndburn Leisure.

The council launched its new Culture and Heritage strategy earlier this year, setting out a clear and ambitious plan for how culture, creativity and local heritage will shape the borough's future over the next five years. Developed by the Culture and Heritage Investment Panel, with input from residents, artists, local organisations and national funders, the strategy celebrates everything that makes Hyndburn distinctive. The council is investing some of its UK Shared Prosperity Fund to build capacity for this strategy to be delivered. Hyndburn's New Local Plan 2040 was submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for examination in March 2025 with examination in public scheduled to start later in September 2025. These projects and strategies are creating an important legacy for the council in the context of LGR.

The council continues its strong focus on supporting its staff and is stepping up its efforts in the run up to LGR and the need to meet key government deadlines including detailed proposals to be submitted to government on 28 November 2025. Results from the recent staff survey are positive with very high percentages of staff who responded to the survey being satisfied with their job and feeling valued and supported in what they do. The survey is managed by the staff engagement group who will also devise and oversee a plan of action. This inclusive process highlights good levels of trust between senior managers and staff and is likely to strengthen engagement further. This work will provide an important foundation for the organisation in working through the LGR process, it would be a natural development for this work to progress and consider any personal support, training, and communication that staff may need over the coming months.

Detailed work using external financial modelling experts to establish the potential impact of the Fair Funding Review 2.0 has been undertaken and submitted to Government as part of the consultation response. This has also been reported at a summary risk level in the Cabinet report of 10 September 2025 about the revenue and capital budget setting process for 2026/27. This work will feed into the October Cabinet report about the MTFs 2026/27 to 2028/29 which will spell out the risks in more detail .

Compounding this, the February 2025 MTFS had indicated that there would be growth in funding, so the gap could be as large as £2m in the worst-case scenario.

Some sources of funding have been identified from other grants and a review of reserves that could be repurposed to plug the gap in the short term which will help buy time to put together and evaluate different income and expenditure options that might have to be taken to reduce the ongoing gap in funding. Discussions have been had with the Cabinet Member for Finance and the wider Cabinet. This work should prove helpful to have in place as the detail of the funding is only likely to be understood when the draft Financial Settlement is issued in mid to late December 2025. However, the Peer Team suggest that a more sustainable approach to raising income or reducing expenditure is undertaken, as reserves and one-off grant incomes can only be spent once.

Changes to remove Cabinet Members from the Audit Committee were made, and some training sessions have been held before Audit Committee meetings to help the members understand their roles better. Completing this training across all topics remains important. Disappointingly, the two independent co-opted Members of the Audit Committee have still yet to be appointed.

The statutory officers (Chief Executive, Director of Finance and Monitoring Officer) are now dedicating time after management team meetings to get together to discuss statutory issues and noting their meetings where there are key concerns. These are being well led and managed by the Chief Executive.

Performance reporting has much improved, with a deep dive into the key indicators from one theme being taken to the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee each meeting, allowing more time to scrutinise in that area. Benchmarking to data across Lancashire is also being undertaken. As the council repeats this process on a regular basis, the organisation will benefit from the increased discussion, use, and application of this performance data across service areas.

Although £21m for the Huncoat Village has been re-profiled into a future year, capital programming remains weak, with a 100% forecast that the remaining £30.8m will be spent before 31 March 2025. Whilst a review of the capital programme is undertaken at Capital Programme Working Group, this is not a public meeting and the key outcomes from this are not shared at Cabinet. The report to Cabinet is not RAG

rated, nor did it offer any commentary on any of the line items to say how and when key items will progress and why there might be any internal or external delays. Further improvements to the capital programme reporting should be implemented.

Furthermore, £0.84m of the capital programme remains unfunded, albeit that £1m has been generated from capital receipts since the initial peer review was undertaken and progress is being made on disposal options which reduces the risk of this happening.

Community cohesion remains of critical importance, particularly in line with the current political focus and public interest on asylum and immigration. In our CPC report last October, the team commented very positively on the council's focus and its formal and informal work in building relationships and supporting and running events that bring together people from different cultures to celebrate the borough's diversity. This strategy has served Hyndburn well. It remains important to continue to build and invest in embedding engagement with local communities, creating multiple points of contacts and gateways and flexible yet robust community tension monitoring. Compassionate and visible leadership from councillors and senior officers collectively and individually remains critical.

3.1. Progress Theme: strategy and leadership

This theme considers the progress made by the council regarding recommendations on the council's corporate and place strategy, leadership and relationships. These recommendations are available in full in the council's original CPC, and have been summarised below:

- Conduct the planned review of the corporate strategy (R1)
- Develop effective relationships with Cabinet/CMT as a group (R2)
- With partners, lead the development of a vision for the whole borough (R3)

A new corporate strategy was approved in July 2025 by Council with cross-party support. Whilst many of the priorities and actions outlined are a continuation, others are new. A fourth priority has been added (embrace the opportunities of devolution) following the significant announcement from Government around devolution and LGR. This provides a clear strategy framework for delivery.

Relationships between Cabinet and the CMT have strengthened considerably, and we heard about high levels of trust overall. Much of this has come about by the recent review of the strategic projects which provided an opportunity to grow working relationships and for Cabinet to discover and appreciate the expertise and experience of their senior team. The Peer Team also heard about positive 1:1 relationships between managers and their Cabinet portfolio holders. The introduction of monthly Cabinet briefings is important to create informal space for open discussions and the opportunities to voice disagreements and provide challenge to each other. There are regular away days to focus on specific topics, for example the MTFS or changes to the organisational structure. The Team note the changes to Cabinet portfolios, including the appointment of a single cabinet member for Finance. Moving to just one Cabinet Member for Finance covering both revenue and capital has helped establish a closer working relationship between officers and the Cabinet member and a more efficient and effective approach. This bodes well for the future and is a significant improvement since our visit in October 2024.

In a political organisation there will always be scope for contest and tension between different groups of councillors, and political point-scoring or 'banter' can be a natural part of public meetings. We heard many reports from members and officers about professional and cordial relationships between the administration and the opposition, although these were not universally shared by all members.

In March 2025, Government announced Plan for Neighbourhood funding for Accrington. A new Neighbourhood Board has been created and is now developing an initial four-year regeneration plan for Accrington. This is now a key priority for Hyndburn and aligns well with its focus on regenerating Accrington Town Centre. Given local government reorganisation we support the council's decision to revisit the recommendation about a vision for the Borough once the regeneration plan has been submitted and there is clarity around the new unitary authorities within Lancashire. We note the importance of officer capacity to support the Neighbourhood Board and understand that this is being addressed as part of the review of the current organisational structure. We also noted the steps to appoint a permanent Chair for the Board: applications closed on the day of our visit.

3.2. Progress theme: Organisational development and communication

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Chief Executive: Joanna Killian

President: Baroness Grey-Thompson

This theme considers the progress made by the council against the following recommendations:

- Consider what capacity and skills the council needs to develop and address this as part of a review of the organisational structure (R4)
- Continue and broaden external engagement in order to learn from others and offer your experience (R10)
- Review and implement new plans for internal and external communication (R7)
- Promote the council's approach to climate change and decarbonisation (R9)

The council has commenced a review of skills and capacity required to create a strong legacy for Hyndburn and to support staff with acquiring qualifications, skills and expertise that prepare them for securing a new role in the new unitary council. There has been an increase in the training budget to enable staff development. This process also involves mapping the current and recent use of external consultants to determine opportunities to recruit or develop these skills in house. The Chief Executive has gathered feedback from Service Managers and discussions are now taking place with Cabinet to agree changes. The council is aware of the need to implement changes swiftly yet managing any HR or financial implications in line with the uncertainty created by the Fair Funding review. The designation of a dedicated operational lead officer will be important to ensure that this important piece of work can progress swiftly in order to enable the council to create the legacy it desires.

We note some progress in broadening the council's engagement with local government and beyond to learn and share learning. The Deputy Leader attended the LGA conference in the summer and other members from the administration and opposition are planning to attend future LGA events. The political and managerial leadership have been actively involved in shaping the work on local government reorganisation with Lancashire County Council. As part of a refreshed personal development review (PDR) process, staff at all levels are encouraged to engage in networking and learning from others. Following a recent visit from MHCLG's Levelling Up Fund (LUF) Unit, the council has been asked to provide an exemplar case study of its work in Accrington Town Centre. These are encouraging steps, and it will be

important for managers and leaders to continue to promote external engagement and lead by example.

There is a continued strong focus on climate change and decarbonisation with clear alignment between the draft climate strategy and action plan and the corporate strategy and political leadership through a portfolio lead for climate. There are some impressive projects including the decarbonisation of Market Hall and installation of solar panels and a range of community initiatives, for example Eco fest in Accrington town centre. The new Wilson Sports Village has been designed to optimise energy efficiencies including air source heat pumps, solar panels and utilisation of the latest Low and Zero Carbon Technologies. The council is engaging with the LGA to produce a case study on its climate change work and is working with the Lancashire officers group. Consideration should be given to identify how the good work in Hyndburn can be a legacy for a new unitary authority and how Hyndburn might be able to build the capacity of local organisations (e.g. Prospects) to deliver on a larger scale.

The council has reviewed its branding guidelines which were approved by Cabinet in June 2025. There is sustained focus on internal communication and the creation of a new staff engagement group who are overseeing the current staff survey is playing an important role in refining and delivering internal communications and sense checking that messaging and channels are right. In the meantime, we heard about more frequent e-bulletins and positive feedback about the speed and content of the all staff e-mail updates from the Chief Executive about LGR. Monthly meetings of the Service Managers Group are being re-vitalised and used as a conduit to cascade key corporate messages into teams. We heard about health and wellbeing initiatives, such as the 'learning and wellbeing month' (October 2025). The council's website has been updated and there are now dedicated individuals for each service with responsibility for their website pages. The website has a cleaner look and feel as a result.

3.3. Progress theme: Corporate Core

This theme considers the progress made by the council against the following recommendations:

- Design a transformation & digital strategy and action plan (R5)
- Develop a strategy for income generation (R6)
- Create a well understood and effective process for forward planning of council decisions (R8)

The establishment of a permanent digital and transformation manager and restructure in IT have meant that more dedicated time has been spent on transformation which is already providing dividends. The Digital & Transformation lead quickly identified the key issues and is putting in place a programme of improvements to bring the council in line with others. There are also good links into colleagues in other Lancashire authorities in preparation for LGR, helping to future proof. The wide ranging programme of activities includes a programme of PC replacement with laptops facilitating a more agile workforce, improvement of WiFi across the council offices, plugging satellite offices into the network via fibre connections so their speed of access is the same as in the main office, providing all members with ipads to reduce printing costs and moving systems into the cloud, rather than on premise. The council is also taking some first steps with AI.

Whilst noting the good progress being made, the challenge will be to front load the changes and speed up the process, for example, shortening the roll out of laptops to within one year, rather than across three, in order to capture benefits for longer. More investment in tech as well as resources with which to make the changes would drive faster benefits to the council.

Staffing and capacity issues outside the council's control over the last 10 months, the important focus on the responses to a detrimental Fair Funding Review 2.0 consultation from Government and LGR have meant slower progress than anticipated with the preparation of a strategy for income generation. Nonetheless, work underpinning the review of existing and new income streams - collating and implementing a fee list and discussing this with stakeholders - has started. Although this work will feed into the 2026/27 budget setting process in time for January and February, earlier groundwork would have helped establish a clearer position on the financial impact of this work for the revised MTFs in October. Having a clear record remains important, as does knowing which other levers can be pulled should the revenue be required. It will be important to accelerate pace, not least in the light of

possible outcomes of the Fair Funding Review 2.0. The intention to retain the interim resource through to year end to provide some continuity and capacity is eminently sensible.

A forward planning calendar has been introduced and is managed at Cabinet briefings. This enables better planning of Cabinet agenda's and has been welcomed. The process has been communicated to relevant members and staff and ensures that all parties are aware of relevant timescales and deadlines.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Hyndburn 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. Whilst it is not the intention of these progress reviews to provide additional recommendations to change existing action plans or present new recommendations, we recognise that this report contains findings that the Council will wish to respond to. This includes specifics regarding the impact of the Fair Funding Review 2.0, the challenges of moving towards a sustainable financial footing in the medium-term, and the emerging implications of Local Government Reform.

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

Appendix 1.0: Full List of Original Recommendations:

Recommendation one

Conduct the planned review of the corporate strategy and align the organisational structure accordingly.

Recommendation two

Engage in top team development to develop effective relationships within cabinet/CMT as a group to create agreed ways of working and clarity of roles and responsibilities.

Recommendation three

With partners, lead the development of a clear and well understood vision for the whole borough (place strategy).

Recommendation four

Consider what capacity and skills the council needs to develop and address this as part of the review of organisational structure, including options for collaboration with partners and the use of consultants.

Recommendation five

Design a transformation and digital strategy and action plan.

Recommendation six

Develop a strategy for income generation, including commercial income, fees and charges and council tax.

Recommendation seven

Review and implement new plans for internal and external communication, aligning it with the new corporate strategy.

Recommendation eight

Create and implement a well understood and effective process for forward planning of council decision making which engages cabinet members and scrutiny.

Recommendation nine

Promote the council's approach to climate change and decarbonisation and play a



key role in leading the Borough on this agenda.

Recommendation ten

Continue and broaden your engagement with local government and beyond in order to learn from others and offer your experience and learning.