

# **LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review**

Southampton City Council

18 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 ..... 14

# 1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 7-10 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

The LGA would like to thank Southampton City 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 Southampton City Council took place (onsite) on 18 November 2025

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

- Theme 1: Shaping our priorities
- Theme 2: Transforming our council
- Theme 3: People and culture
- Theme 4: Championing Southampton

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

- Lead Officer Peer: **Ian Davis**, Chief Executive at LB Lambeth (previously LB Enfield during the CPC in January 2025)
- Lead Member Peer: **Cllr Muhammed Butt**, Leader at LB Brent
- Officer Peer (Transformation): **Polly Cziok**, Executive Director of Change and Innovation at LB Merton
- Officer Peer (Growth): **Richard McGuckin**, Deputy Chief Executive and Executive Director of Place at Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
- Peer Challenge Manager: **Sophie Poole**, LGA Senior Regional Advisor London & South East

### 3. Progress Review – Feedback

Out of the CPC's 11 recommendations, the council's RAG rated Action Plan reports that 64 per cent of actions are completed and 36 per cent of actions are being progressed. There were no actions that have not been either completed or progressed in some way. The 11 recommendations are grouped under the four themes set out in Southampton City Council's Action Plan.

#### Theme 1: Shaping our priorities

##### Recommendation 4: Develop and deliver a Corporate Plan with a clear vision and key priorities.

- Urgently develop and deliver a medium term sustainable Corporate Plan, with a clear vision and set of key priorities which are relevant to Southampton, underpinned by values and behaviours which are coproduced by staff, members, and partners.
- Ensure you have expert senior leadership in communications to lead engagement with residents and staff in shaping and telling the city story.

- Recognise your EDI responsibilities in this piece of work - make sure your priorities reflect the diversity of your population.

The council agreed a new corporate plan alongside a Southampton 2035 City Plan in July. Both plans provide a clear vision and priorities for the city and the council and an opportunity to create a 'culture of golden thread delivery' throughout the organisation.

The Southampton 2035 City Plan was developed collaboratively with partners and informed by feedback from nearly 4,000 residents through the city survey. It sets five missions: creating a more equal city, and making Southampton healthier, safer, greener, and economically stronger. Each mission is led by a city partnership board with agreed KPIs and actions. To underpin this work, a new equality working group has been set up with a representative from each directorate, employee resources groups and trade unions and is chaired by a member of the management board.

The peer team could see a detailed framework which aims to embed performance management and business planning, ensuring transparency and accountability. It is essential that the plan delivers the outcomes the council has set and is supported by a clear infrastructure. However, the resources needed to manage this framework must be proportionate as it could absorb vital corporate capacity needed to prepare for Local Government Reorganisation and the establishment of a new unitary authority on 1 April 2028.

The council has also brought in a new head of communications and created a strategy and communications director role which has enhanced the organisation's communications leadership and activity. However, the peer team believes there is a still a need for the council to invest in more expert strategic place communications that leads engagement with residents, staff, and partners in telling the city story.

## Theme 2: Transforming our council

**Recommendation 1: Reflect, learn, and celebrate the progress made from the 'adapt' phase of your transformation programme.**

- Reflect, recognise, and celebrate the progress made over the last 12 months and make sure that is secured and consolidated.
- Understand the learning from the council's transformation plan's 'Adapt' phase, before moving onto the 'Grow' stage of your transformation journey.
- Keep up the momentum and stick to the plans for transformation/savings

The Adapt | Grow | Thrive Transformation programme adopted in July 2024 has been pivotal in enabling the council to set a balanced budget for 2025/26 and strengthen the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) through to 2028/29. Transformation savings of £34.5m are assumed in the current year's budget, with contributions expected to exceed £50m by the end of the MTFS period.

The programme has also delivered a number of service improvements including the acquisition of 23 new homes reducing reliance on emergency accommodation and 20 per cent reduction in children placed in residential care.

Understandably the council's initial 'adapt' phase of the transformation programme was fully focused on finding savings and that was the right approach as Southampton stabilised its finances. However, the peer team feels there now needs to be a shift towards innovation. The peer team heard business plans are in development as the programme moves to the "grow" phase of its transformation programme, looking at prevention and early intervention, customer and digital experience, and growth. However, with the director of transformation having recently left the organisation, there is no obvious lead driving this forward. The peer team felt the organisation could benefit from a 'deputy chief executive' type role who is responsible for driving transformation as well as the corporate functions that currently directly report to the chief executive. This would free up the capacity of the chief executive to fully focus on strategically driving the organisation forward.

While it was pleasing to see that the momentum of transformation up until now has been delivered at pace, the peer team did not get a sense that the council is reflecting and learning as much as it could as it moves through each phase of the programme. The peer team were told that a communications plan is being developed

to inform staff about the programme's purpose, impact and alignment with staff briefings and visual storytelling. However, it is important to continuously celebrate the small wins along the council's transformation journey as an opportunity to build momentum and trust and foster a positive culture that focuses on success. This will help the council sustain a motivated workforce who are committed collectively and individually in the face of rising service demand and change to services.

### **Recommendation 3: Agree the parameters that will trigger your Improvement Board's exit strategy.**

- Agree with the Improvement Board an objective set of parameters that trigger their exit strategy at the appropriate time

Southampton's voluntary Improvement Board was originally established in October 2023 with Theresa Grant as chair. It is now chaired by original board member Rob Whiteman. The peer team were told that following a progress update in September, it was agreed through an exit strategy that the board will stand down by the end of December 2025. It is clear that the board has been an invaluable resource supporting the council to achieve a sustainable budget and been a significant partner in helping the organisation strengthen its culture and governance.

The peer team heard consideration is being given to not taking some of its original transformation savings which make up the £34.5m savings identified to balance the budget. As long as replacement savings are found and there are no savings gaps, this is not a risk to the council. However, the peer team suggests setting up an improvement board "check in" arrangement six months and 12 months after the board has wound up so the council continues to have arm's length access to the board's expertise in maintaining financial stability over the first year.

The council has also worked with other external partners to support them on their improvement journey including the LGA who have facilitated both a cabinet and management team away day focused on leadership development. In addition, a number of the cabinet have also taken up mentoring opportunities that the LGA offers. The council's new chief executive is also participating in the Chief Executive

Foundation Programme delivered in partnership by the LGA and Solace. The council should continue to seek external opportunities for its officer and member leadership to reinforce a culture of continuous professional development and sector engagement.

**Recommendation 7: Urgently drive improvements in governance.**

- Urgently drive improvements in governance and decision making to solidify the future stability and growth of the organisation with a fast-paced plan that shows clear accountability. This will also attract inward investment to the city

The peer team were informed the council is close to completing the urgent governance improvements and has reviewed 95 per cent of its constitution led by the CfGS (Centre for Governance and Scrutiny) working alongside the monitoring officer and supported by the LGA. The review involved cross-party member and officer working groups with the aim of streamlining the structure of the constitution. Work has also taken place to simplify complex and duplicating informal decision-making processes and standardise cabinet member briefings. A revised decision-making template now requires links to corporate plan objectives and health implications. A full report was due to go to full council just after the peer team were on site. The next step is to fully embed these changes with a full-scale training programme. While the monitoring officer takes the lead on governance in the organisation, it is important that all staff know that good governance in any authority only works if there is an understanding that robust and transparent governance is everyone's responsibility.

**Recommendation 10: Work with the Improvement Board to tackle the housing challenge.**

- Don't underestimate how difficult the housing challenge is. Work with the Improvement Board to improve member oversight, create capacity so that services are equipped to drive stepped change and tangible improvement. This will require organisational change

The peer team could see that the council has made good progress on this recommendation and was impressed with the work that has been taken place which

is already paying dividend with a nine per increase in resident satisfaction. Housing improvement will continue to be supported after the improvement board has wound up in December through Pamela Leonce, former board member for housing who will chair the newly established tenant insight panel which will give tenants and leaseholders a voice in shaping the future of council housing. This is advisable given the council's C3 rating for housing. Southampton has also commissioned Transform UK as a delivery partner to provide additional capability and resource for the housing transformation programme. At the May 2025 AGM, a housing scrutiny committee was created to oversee housing services, including landlord functions and regeneration. Work is underway to improve electrical installation condition report compliance and address housing health and safety rating system hazards. Safety and quality standards, with recovery plans have been introduced. Under the transparency, influence and accountability standard, a customer segmentation survey is being conducted by Acuity, alongside improvements to information accessibility, complaint handling, governance, and digital systems.

A new housing strategy, aligned to the city and corporate plans, is out for consultation with cabinet approval expected January 2026. Additionally, a five-year asset management strategy and updated 30-year HRA Business Plan are in development, supported by extensive asset data work and tactical modelling to improve decent homes compliance and inform future investment. A 6–18-month project is also underway to improve the council's social housing stock especially around improving decent homes performance. The peer team were also impressed that the council has developed a new 30-year HRA business plan model which enables modelling of the impacts of acquisitions and disposals and will inform the updated HRA business plan to be approved by council in February 2026. The peer team were impressed with how the council has driven these housing improvements - it is essential the council continues this momentum in this critical service area.

### **Recommendation 11: Resolve issues with the audit of your accounts.**

- Dedicate resources across the council to ensure issues with the audit of the 2023/24 accounts are not repeated in future years and that Value for Money judgements do not indicate significant weakness particularly around housing.

The council set a balanced 2025/26 budget without exceptional financial support and increased the general fund reserve to £12m. Governance has strengthened through enhanced audit and risk processes, including an internal audit tracker driving a 20 per cent rise in completed actions and quarterly audit committee reporting with deep dives. Internal audit recommendations are now tracked as KPIs and reported to cabinet. Directorate risk registers and bi-annual strategic risk reporting have improved transparency, with a revised risk strategy due in quarter four. A financial essentials training programme has also launched. An agreed equal pay settlement has been reached with trade unions, with litigation expected to conclude by March 2026. The council's external auditors were due report to management on their value for money commentary for 2024/25 by the end of November. The council told the peer team that they expected that this will reflect progress made against the recommendations raised in 2022/23 and 2023/24.

## **Theme 3: People and culture**

### **Recommendation 2: Recognise and mitigate the risk around your chief executive appointment and align senior management recruitment timescales.**

- Recognise the inherent risk around the chief executive recruitment process and mitigate this.
- Align future senior recruitment with timescales that allow the future chief executive to own the organisational structure.
- Create a strategy for stabilisation and retention to reduce current levels of churn.

Since the peer team visited in January, the council successfully recruited a new chief executive and executive director for resident services. It is the first time in several years that the management team are all permanent in post. The current executive director community wellbeing, children and learning role which brings together the director of children services (DCS) and director of adult services (DASS) roles together into one post will be separated. The council is due to recruit a new director of adult social care in the new year. The new chief executive who joined in April 2025

has been described as bringing “calm” to the organisation. The peer team were told that work is underway to address previous senior leadership turnover, including analysis of historic exit interviews and development of a retention plan. The peer team felt that the senior management appraisal process also needs a full review and should be fully led by the chief executive. It is important that the council maintain this period of stability so that those in post can create a strong leadership team and continue to build on the progress that has already been made.

**Recommendation 8: Drive your organisational development function, your culture change and customer service programmes at pace.**

- Centrally drive at pace the organisational development function and culture change and customer service programmes so there is a consistent approach which is realised across all services.

Although the council is still developing a new people and culture strategy to reflect the organisation’s shared vision and support transformation, the peer team were impressed with the progress made since January. It is clear that engagement has been central to this work, including ‘Colleague Connect’ sessions across all council and an all-staff survey launched in October 2025 to benchmark progress and gather anonymous feedback. Results will inform directorate-level action plans.

Leadership development is a priority, with three new programmes designed, including Leadership Essentials, which has received highly positive feedback and is helping embed strong leadership practices. The peer team were impressed that all HR policies and procedures have undergone a comprehensive review, with greater emphasis on early intervention and informal resolution. This work has been supported by trade union colleagues through regular engagement and formal six-monthly policy review meetings.

A new employee relations tracker, integrated with Power BI, now provides real-time data to inform workforce planning and proactive interventions. Strategic workforce planning capability is being strengthened through investment in specialist roles. These initiatives, alongside a new operating model for people and culture, aim to

build organisational resilience, improve consistency of HR advice, and foster a culture of trust, accountability, and continuous improvement.

## **Theme 4: Championing Southampton**

### **Recommendation 5: Develop a delivery plan for growth.**

- It is essential to develop and deliver a clear plan for growth that draws together housing growth and renewal, connectivity, land use, and skills with an appropriately resourced delivery plan

The council has made significant progress in developing Southampton's first dedicated growth and prosperity plan. The new plan builds on the city, corporate and local plans and aligns with Southampton's renaissance vision. The directorate is also due a redesign so this will be the right opportunity to ensure there is the right capacity and skills in the organisation to support the growth ambition for Southampton. This approach will enable Southampton to attract investment, strengthen its economy, and ensure its communities benefit from the growth opportunities

The development of a new growth plan also means the council now has a clear narrative which champions Southampton. The plan defines what growth means to people who live in the city, visit the city, and want to invest in the city – this was the missing element when the peer team visited earlier in the year. The city plan also places a 'backdoor' into your growth and prosperity plan and creates a moment in time to celebrate and how you lead your narrative and your LGR proposal. The plan creates a springboard for all further developments. This is so the plan itself becomes the first announcement as the blueprint for a strong pipeline of development opportunity, backed up by evidence. As an example, the ToysRUs site, would then be the second announcement. It is important to keep up this momentum by hanging every announcement off the growth plan. The peer team can see that external engagement is starting to come through, and the council is stepping up and playing its part. The council is responsible for leading the place and driving that agenda with political leadership integral to the narrative.

## **Recommendation 6: Lead and embrace government agencies and investors to help deliver growth outcomes for Southampton**

- Lead and embrace, but also hold to account, government agencies, anchor institutions, and investors to help deliver growth outcomes for Southampton. A focused growth plan is one tool

Southampton is taking a leading role in preparing for the establishment of the Hampshire and Solent Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) and has created a “healthy pipeline” being “first up and best dressed” and ready to work with the new Mayor once elected\*. The growth and prosperity plan positions Southampton within the MCCA’s initial pipeline through five key areas: housing-led regeneration, delivery of renaissance masterplan sites, high-frequency mass rapid transport, investment in cultural and creative infrastructure, and acceleration of strategic renewable energy development. The council’s management board has been closely involved in the development of the overarching programme for the establishment of the new Hampshire and the Solent MCCA, including as chair of the MCCA portfolio board (made up of senior officers across the upper tier local authorities) that is overseeing all programme activity across the themes and areas required to establish the new authority.

## **Recommendation 9: Create a confident and an externally facing culture and move away from being an insular organisation.**

- Be confident and embed an externally facing culture. As leaders of place seek good practice, learning from others to raise Southampton’s regional, national, and international profile. This should be driven by both the senior political and officer leadership.

The peer team recognises that the council has improved its communications function since the beginning of the year and were encouraged to see the creation of a new head of communications role and director of strategy and communications who are in the process of developing a strategy and improvement plan. However the peer team felt there was still work to do in breaking down silos, and using the organisation's

collective knowledge to demonstrate externally that the council has got a grip on its finances – that it has not had to call on EFS to balance its budget and understands the impact of the significant savings it has had to make. This can only be achieved when the senior leadership and cabinet work together and collectively agree what are the outcomes from those savings and how the organisation engages with residents about the impact those savings will have.


The renaissance masterplan has been launched. The council and renaissance board are being supported by a nationally recognised strategic development advisor partner and site prioritisation is well advanced. The council attended key investor events such as MIPIM, UKREiif (UK's Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum) and EXPO Real this year to promote the major investment opportunities, showcasing the city and region's potential for growth. However, there is still a need to install greater strategic communications capacity which brings life to the Southampton 2035 City Plan and the Renaissance Masterplan with a real opportunity to 'shout from the rooftops.' The peer team heard that capacity is being rebuilt in the council's communications team to ensure the council has the right communications skills. However, there is an urgent need for place based strategic communications expertise which brings energy and life to the city's story and achieve the ambitions of Southampton.

## 4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Southampton City 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 their e-mail address is [William.brooks@local.gov.uk](mailto: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](#).

\*At the time the peer team were on site, the government had not made the decision to postpone the Mayoral Elections until May 2028.