

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Hart District Council

19 February 2026

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) on 23-25 April 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 Hart 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 Hart took place onsite on Thursday 19 February 2026.

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

- Vision and legacy
- Service development
- Strategic governance

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

- Mari Roberts-Wood, Chief Executive, Reigate and Banstead Council
- Cllr Keith House, Leader, Eastleigh Borough Council

- Lloyd Griffiths, Corporate Director (Operations, Homes and Communities)
Worcester City Council
- Ellie Greenwood, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

3. Progress Review - Feedback

The council's ten CPC recommendations have been grouped into three overarching themes, with the council's RAG assessment rating its work on vision and legacy as amber, and the work on service development and strategic governance as green.

The peer team heard that Hart has used the CPC as a catalyst and that it has galvanised activity across the council. There has been good progress in a number of areas since April 2025, with work taking place on all of the recommendations. While responding to the CPC, the council has also continued to deliver good services, as well as implementing a new food waste service, deploying resources to support and develop its Local Plan and retaining its coveted Green Flag awards (with ambition to secure more).

Despite the uncertainty of LGR, the organisational culture at Hart remains very strong, with staff survey results that would be the envy of other organisations. An internal restructure has been seamlessly embedded and well received by staff; staff at different levels within the organisation again spoke positively about internal communication and training and development opportunities.

There has been active consideration of the council's vision and legacy, with plans for a Hart Social Prosperity Fund (SPF), Investment and Opportunities Fund and community asset transfers. With two years to go to LGR, and opportunities for the council to deliver significant infrastructure projects having realistically passed, the council should maintain a focus on how it enables others to deliver longer lasting benefit for Hart – as it is already doing in a number of areas.

The council is playing a full part in positive joint working ahead of LGR, with sound internal preparatory work underway and good joint working with councils that Hart is expected to unitarise with. As noted, there is good training and support available to staff in Hart; the council should supplement this by focusing on equipping staff for the transition to a new unitary with a different culture and practices (while also seeking to

influence the culture to bring the best of Hart). Similarly, the council should ensure that its members are taking up opportunities to understand county services and the LGR journey.

Changes to governance have been implemented in line with the peer team's recommendations to strengthen some structures and procedures – for example, the Monitoring Officer now attends senior leadership team and has a direct reporting relationship with the chief executive. The peer team was pleased to hear that the council plans to implement further changes in line with the peer team's recommendations.

Pleasingly, the peer team heard about a new confidence to promote Hart's work. A new communications and engagement strategy has been signed off; council teams reported receiving good support from the communications team, with business partners in place. The council is achieving reputational recognition for its work and reaping the benefits of being more willing to promote itself, with a Public Finance award leading to an opportunity to pilot new software and an invitation to an MHCLG housing / AI pilot sitting alongside cyber security exemplar status.

3.1. Vision and legacy

- Recommendation 1: the council's political leadership should identify its vision for Hart in a pre- and post-LGR context, then work backwards to map out how to position the organisation and place to get there by 2028. Allocate resources to support this.
- Recommendation 2: the council should consider a facilitated Cabinet session with a particular emphasis on your role as place leaders.
- Recommendation 3: review opportunities to deliver lasting benefits for the area (eg more affordable housing) ahead of LGR and ensure risk appetite is aligned to your new vision.
- Recommendation 8: take pride in promoting and communicating the good work you do externally and implement the actions from the recent LGA communications health check.

In early September, the council's Cabinet held a focused session to consider the

future vision and legacy for Hart. With less than three years to LGR at that point, there were challenges in identifying physical projects that the council could deliver within the timescale to LGR and limited options available. However, the council has been proactively considering alternative options to deliver lasting change through smaller-scale infrastructure improvements and community benefits.

The council has devised a local Hart SPF, with a minimum of £500,000 to be made available to local schemes that wouldn't qualify for Hart's national SPF allocation. There are also plans to progress community asset transfers (CAT) within the district following the election in May; the council has developed a long list of options and begun work to identify what transfers may be feasible. In support of this, the council is currently undertaking an audit of all the information it holds, including about the authority's assets, which will have significant benefit as it moves towards LGR.

The council is also establishing an Investment and Opportunities Panel, due to meet in September, to develop a forward plan of investment opportunities and support the delivery of transfer ready projects to the new unitary. In support of its green agenda, it has invested in heat pumps at Frogmore Leisure Centre, despite the business case for doing so stretching beyond the lifespan of the council. It has used £1m of section 106 funding adapting Hart Leisure Centre to create an internal extension that keeps up with demand for the facility. The council also offered to support Fleet Town Council with the installation of a heat pump as part of the refurbishment of the Harlington Centre, although the Town Council has subsequently opted not to do so.

In the run up to LGR, the peer team recommends that the council continues this pivot to investing in existing assets and enabling other bodies to enabling deliver lasting improvements for the area. There are other good examples of how the council is doing this in partnership – for example, the council is using money from reserves to refurbish and improve Heathlands Court, a 23-unit temporary accommodation facility owned by Vivid Housing, and at Thurlow House, the council has invested £600,000 to repurpose an old county council building into social rented accommodation.

The council has recently agreed an updated corporate plan to lead the organisation into LGR; this has been consciously aligned with neighbouring districts. A Hart 2028 vision is due for publication in July 2026 to provide a route map to LGR.

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Building on the LGA communications health check the council undertook prior to the CPC, a new communications and engagement plan has been developed, providing a firm foundation for future communications activity. Communications business partners are now in place and working with individual services to develop strategic communications plans and tailored communications activity. It was clear that staff feel more empowered to publicly champion the good work the council does through proactive news stories and by seeking national recognition for best practice approaches. The peer team was pleased to hear of the opportunities and benefits that have come from this; for example the finance team, having won a Public Finance best in class award, have been invited by the council's software provider to pilot new artificial intelligence functionality, and the section 151 officer has been invited to speak at national forums. The finance team's success has also encouraged other teams to put themselves forward for other awards, with the Communities team also now shortlisted for an award.

Ahead of an announcement on the future local government map for Hampshire, Hart is working sensibly to position the organisation for LGR. There is agreement and good joint working between members and officers across the prospective Northern Hampshire footprint. Hart has put a budget in place to support the transition and as noted is undertaking important preparatory work to map out and audit key information about the organisation. An internal communications plan on LGR is also being developed.

3.2. Service development

- Recommendation 5: ensure you allocate sufficient resources and capacity to maintain service performance at the same time as protecting Hart's interests through the process of LGR
- Recommendation 6: take forward the opportunity to transform services. Maximise the use of resident and service data to shape current service delivery: this will also help inform the development of the successor organisation. Share embryonic organisational learning on the use of AI and frame this in a policy.
- Recommendation 7: build upon the council's good work on prevention and engagement, health and housing, with a focus on positioning this to transition

into a new unitary organisation.

Hart has continued to provide good services, with its strong service delivery acknowledged nationally: the council has been recognised as an exemplar on cyber security and invited by MHCLG to take part in a pilot trialling the use of AI in housing. The council's AI policy was approved in October.

There is continued evidence that in-sourcing has worked very well for Hart, with the customer services team now fully embedded since coming back in house shortly before the CPC and taking on new services to support the wider organisation. As noted, the restored in-house finance team, which was highly praised during the CPC, was recognised as best in class and has successfully implemented new software.

The route to developing a new Local Plan by 2028, an urgent priority at the time of the peer challenge, is now mapped out. There has been investment in additional staffing, consultancy support for the Plan's evidence base and software resources to help with site assessments and engagement. The planning policy team is reporting directly to the chief executive on what is recognised as a priority project.

The council has continued to strengthen and evolve areas of work that the peer team identified as good practice. For example, the Here for Hart directory has been refreshed to make it more appealing, subsequently relaunched and is being heavily promoted on social media. A target operating model is being mapped out and the council is proactively engaging with Rushmoor Borough Council to help position Here for Hart for a Northern Hampshire unitary. The council has been working closely with the Citizens Advice Bureau, funding a debt outreach post intended to maximise benefits take up amongst local residents. It is also working with Vivid Housing to support a programme of downsizing in social housing.

In its environmental work, Hart's five Green Flags have been retained, with plans to secure a further three (covering all the main publicly accessible sites in the area) over the next 18 months. The council has recently launched the Hart Habitat Bank (the first council to do so) to support net gain as a resource alongside Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces which can be shared with other local authorities and landowners. The exemplar approach is attracting interest from other councils keen to learn from the authority's work in this area.

3.3. Strategic governance

- Recommendation 4: the organisation should support members and officers for the transition to LGR and what comes next, including an enhanced member development and training offer and effective utilisation of the staff training resource.
- Recommendation 9: the council should review its working and governance practices.
- Recommendation 10: ensure strategic leadership and a joined up programme of work on EDI.

The council has responded to the CPC recommendations by refreshing key meeting and governance mechanisms. Revised reporting arrangements are now in place for the golden triangle, with the monitoring officer having a reporting line directly to the chief executive on MO issues and sitting on the senior leadership team. Six-monthly meetings take place between the golden triangle officers, or more regularly when required. The monitoring officer is participating in county-wide MO meetings, further increasing the support around this role.

The council has restructured, and the senior leadership team has been strengthened since the CPC, with a clear sense that this has gone very smoothly and quickly become embedded. The previous three directorates have been consolidated into two, but four deputies have been appointed to support the remaining executive directors, providing additional resilience at senior level. The extended senior leadership team – chief executive, executive directors and deputies – meet weekly with the council leader, while the three senior officers also meet separately.

The council's committees' terms of reference have been reviewed and refreshed; a Plain English review of the constitution is due for completion by May 2026. The peer team recommends that the council progress other governance changes suggested by the CPC, specifically the appointment of independent members of the Audit Commission and ensuring regular attendance by Cabinet members at overview and scrutiny meetings: the council intends to do so.

Hart's work to develop an approach to EDI has been impressive. A new member of staff with a background and interest in EDI has led work to develop a five-phase

action plan, working closely with the chief executive. A Cabinet lead and EDI member champion have been designated, and the council is using the LGA's Equality Framework for Local Government to benchmark its activity. There are plans to introduce quarterly monitoring by SLT and Staffing Committee on EDI metrics, and an ambition to take an exemplar approach on EDI issues into the new authority. The recent staff survey indicated strong organisational support for this.

The peer team heard again during the progress review about the council's support for staff training and development, with a coaching and mentoring offer for staff in place, as well as a focus on wellbeing. Looking ahead, there is already good management involvement in preparing the organisation and individual services operationally for LGR. There is active consideration of the training offer for members and officers ahead of LGR, with plans to finalise this once the future direction for Hart is clear. The peer team suggests that as part of this, Hart should ensure a focus on member and staff readiness for the changes that will come with a new authority with a different culture, for example perhaps through observing meetings and practices in other councils and bringing in councillors and officers with earlier experience of the LGR journey.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Hart 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) and Ellie Greenwood are the main points of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA): William.brooks@local.gov.uk and ellie.greenwood@local.gov.uk

Further information, support, and resources on LGR/Devolution, can be found on the



[LGA's devolution and LGR Hub website.](#)