

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Burnley Borough Council

24th June 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	12

1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during September 2024 and promptly published the full report with an action plan ([Corporate Peer Challenge - burnley.gov.uk](https://www.burnley.gov.uk/corporate-peer-challenge)).

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 Burnley Borough 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 Burnley Borough Council took place onsite on 24th June 2025.

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

- People and Performance
- Prosperity
- Finance and Governance
- Capacity Building

For this Progress Review, the following peers were involved:

- Paul Medd, Chief Executive - Fenland Borough Council
- Cllr Neil Prior - Pembrokeshire County Council

- Cllr Alan Rhodes, Cabinet Member for Corporate and Financial Services - Bassetlaw District Council
- Julian Jackson, Director of Place - Tameside Council
- Rachel Robinson, Peer Challenge Manager - Local Government Association

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Peers conducted this Progress Review against the backdrop of substantial changes across the local government landscape at a national level, with significant implications in Lancashire. This includes the formation of the Lancashire Combined County Authority (CCA), which held its inaugural meeting in March 2025, as well as proposed local government reorganisation following the publication of the English Devolution White Paper. It was within this changing context that the peer team considered the progress that has been made by Burnley Council with the implementation of the CPC recommendations.

In advance of the Progress Review, the council shared a short position statement and RAG rated Action Plan (Red, Amber, Green) to update peers on the progress made to date. The council provided a self-assessment against each of the nine recommendations within the plan, with six rated as 'green' (on track and progressing well) and three rated as 'amber' (progress made, but slightly behind planned trajectory). None were rated as 'red' (not being progressed).

The peer team were pleased to see that the council has made excellent progress in addressing the CPC recommendations. It is clear, as noted by the council themselves, that the outcomes and findings of the CPC have been used to inform and shape future direction and to make changes to the operating environment of the council.

In the context of local government reorganisation, the council remains focused on improvement for Burnley, continuing to drive forward initiatives and service developments that will support the achievement of improved outcomes for residents and ensure that the council is in the best place to hand over a positive legacy as local government reorganisation is implemented. Examples since the CPC include the opening of Newtown Mill (transforming a heritage asset into a modern educational



facility for the University of Central Lancashire) and the completion of Dovestone Gardens (the first extra care facility in Lancashire). The council has also launched a new council strategic plan, outlining the borough's priorities and initiatives over the next five years, refreshed the interconnected communications strategy and launched a toolkit for workforce planning to aid future resilience.

Peers were impressed with the council's strong community and political leadership along with its collegiate and pragmatic approach to devolution and local government reorganisation. Building on the borough's strong partnership foundations, peers suggest that the council continues to consider how it can best position Burnley within the context of forthcoming structural reform across both local government and the NHS. Early engagement will help to shape and maximise emerging opportunities to help ensure that Burnley is effectively represented in the context of a successful Lancashire.

3.1. People and Performance

This includes considering the council's progress against the following recommendations:

- **Refresh the overarching communications strategy in line with the review of the Council's Strategic Plan.** This should incorporate mechanisms to promote Burnley Council including successes and areas of best practice, along with marketing Burnley as a place to live, work and visit.
- **Continue to work collaboratively with local, regional and national partners to focus on tackling the root cause of deprivation and inequalities.** This should include developing shared outcomes that can be monitored and evaluated to more effectively demonstrate the impact of this work.

Since the CPC, a new communications strategy 2024-26 has been approved by the council, with the aim to encourage two-way communication both internally and externally to improve service awareness, resident satisfaction and staff engagement. Internally the focus has been on ensuring staff feel informed, valued and aligned with the council's vision. Key developments include the establishment of communications

champions for each service unit and the continued roll out of staff engagement events.

The external communications approach has focused on increasing visibility, improving access to information, enhancing civic pride and celebrating Burnley's successes. Activity has included an expansion in digital engagement, including the use of new tools and platforms, such as TikTok and Sprout Social, supplemented with proactive involvement with members including the launch of a pilot WhatsApp channel for executive member updates. Targeted campaigns, such as 'Keep Well in Winter' which is run in collaboration with partners, have been designed to improve inclusivity and engagement with seldom-heard groups, whilst civic and community events have seen increased promotion. The council's well-established and innovative approach to place marketing and promotion via the Burnley place brand team continues to strengthen, supported via the Burnley Bondholders (a network of over 200 businesses that actively champion the borough).

The feedback of the CPC Team, and the positive practice reported in the council's original report, encouraged the organisation to better showcase their achievements and practice to the wider sector. It was hoped that this process would enhance the borough's reputation as an attractive place to live, work, and visit, whilst also enabling the wider sector to learn from the council's achievements. Positively, this culminated in the council being shortlisted for both the Municipal Journal (MJ) and Local Government Chronicle (LGC) Awards for '2025 Council of the Year', being 'highly commended' in the latter and winning the MJ 'Rising Star' category.

Peers were impressed with the considerable progress, energy and passion that the council has demonstrated in response to this recommendation, particularly the tangible evidence of impact such as the substantial growth in the council's social media presence (between September 2024 and February 2025 the total audience increased from 11,488 to 16,862), along with the quality of printed material including the Burnley Lifestyle magazine (which is almost entirely self-funded and has seen an increased print run from 8,500 to 10,500 copies due to high demand).

Moving forward, the council recognises that there is still a need to engage further with the seldom reached, with activity such as the re-purposing of a council trailer

(designed to take council services into communities by visiting a new neighbourhood every fortnight) and collaboration with grassroots community partners providing opportunities to enhance two-way engagement.

Peers heard that Burnley Together (a partnership of local organisations including the council, health, leisure, housing and the faith and community sector) continues to work collaboratively to address the root causes of deprivation and inequality through initiatives such as the Thrive Hub (enabling youth employment), Workwell Programme and UKSPF backed employment schemes. Recent developments include the identification of shared priorities for the health and wellbeing partnership, covering themes such as childhood nutrition and respiratory diseases linked to poor housing conditions. These initiatives are progressed using data to inform targeted interventions, integrated action plans and referral pathways. This approach is also embedding a framework for the evaluation of long-term impact.

Peers commended the committed and effective partnership network that is in place, particularly in the context of a complex public sector landscape. Moving forward it is hoped that public service reform and forthcoming structural changes to both local government and the NHS will provide the foundation for further improvements to the wider system that will enable continued positive progress in Burnley. Despite the uncertainty, peers suggest that dialogue should continue to explore and shape opportunities that can then be leveraged when structural reforms are implemented.

In addition, peers were impressed with the asset-based approach to community development that the council is progressing, for which there is good engagement from partners and the voluntary sector. To strengthen this further and demonstrate the impact of this work, consideration could be given to utilising techniques such as 'Most Significant Change', which is a participatory, qualitative method used in monitoring and evaluation to identify and learn from significant changes within a program or project.

3.2. Prosperity

This theme provides an overview of progress against the following recommendation:

- **Consider future housing and commercial land supply, including the**

potential need for a new local plan, once the implications of proposed planning reforms are clear.

During the original CPC, it was acknowledged that the council had an ambitious and up to date local plan with good land supply, but recommended that consideration should be given to commencing work on a new local plan once the implications of future housing delivery targets and plan making reforms are clarified by the government, to ensure that a pipeline of housing and employment land is maintained.

Peers were informed that a new local development scheme was published in March 2025, recommending no immediate need for a new local plan. The plan was written to be flexible and forward-looking, particularly in terms of anticipated population and household growth and proactive regeneration activity (although it remains under informal review). The council can currently demonstrate a five-year housing land supply and passed the Government's latest housing delivery test. It was acknowledged however that as a new plan needs to be in place by the end of July 2032, work would need to commence no later than 2028 and likely sooner to meet the requirements of the new plan-making system.

Looking ahead, peers heard that although the current local plan prioritises brownfield sites for future development, there remains challenges in delivering these, relating to ownerships, owner aspirations, viability and lack of public sector funding for smaller (less than 150 units) sites outside of mayoral combined authorities.

It was also highlighted that although various reforms have been partially enacted via the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2024, there is no legal framework in place to progress strategic or local plans under the proposed new system. Under the new system a new layer of statutory strategic planning has been introduced – Spatial Development Strategies, with future housing and employment targets being set in these county-level strategic plans. The Lancashire Combined County Authority does not yet have the power to prepare this for Lancashire. The Council should engage with the Lancashire Combined Authority on strategic planning whether that be the new statutory or any non-statutory plan prepared in the meantime to identify the associated implications for the borough.

3.3. Finance and Governance

This theme incorporates recommendations that relate to finance, asset management, governance and scrutiny.

- **Enhance the role of scrutiny in holding partners to account.**
- **Review the asset management strategy to underpin future financial planning and investment.** This should also complement the local plan and housing improvements programme.
- **Continue to embed jointly owned monthly budget monitoring between service managers and budget holders.** This should also ensure joint ownership and accountability for addressing budget pressures.
- **Continue to contribute positively and constructively towards the Devolution debate to ensure the best outcome for the residents and businesses of the borough and Lancashire**

During the CPC, peers identified that the council has effective scrutiny and audit committee arrangements in place. However, peers felt that the approach could be developed by enhancing the role of scrutiny in holding partners to account, leaning into the principal power of scrutiny committees to influence the policies and decisions made by both the council and other organisations involved in delivering public services in the locality. Peers heard that whilst strategic partners, the Leisure Trust and Liberata provide annual reports to scrutiny and a presentation was also received from Calico Homes last year, this recommendation will be considered in more detail via the creation of the scrutiny work programme for the forthcoming municipal year. Peers suggest that this should incorporate consideration of how scrutiny can be positioned to support the partnership work that Burnley are progressing, particularly in relation to reducing inequalities. For example, preparing the committee in advance of the meeting to enable constructive conversations and maximise the impact of the sessions with partners.

The CPC highlighted a need for the council to review the asset management strategy to underpin future financial planning and investment. The peer team were informed that the council's property and facilities management services were brought back in-house on the 1 April 2025, enabling a more collaborative approach to property



management and supported by the council resourcing a new head of facilities position to strengthen leadership in this area. The existing asset management strategy has been reviewed and updated to set out how the council will use its property assets to support the delivery of strategic objectives. However, it was acknowledged that the council is on a journey, with work still to be completed to understand the council's asset base and condition, so that decisions can be made as to the best course of action in relation to individual assets. There is a recognition by the council that they may not see the direct benefit of some of the decisions made in this space, but that this puts Burnley in the best place to hand over a positive legacy as local government reorganisation is implemented.

The CPC highlighted that the council has a comparatively sound and sustainable financial position. For example, the council has increased useable reserves from £13.1m to £34.2m during the period 2015-2024 and the 2022/23 External Audit report identified that the council has been successful in the delivery of savings. Peers were pleased to see that the council has continued to embed jointly owned monthly budget monitoring between service managers and budget holders. The reports (which are also reviewed by the management team and executive members) have been further developed this year and processes refined to provide more robust and timely reporting. This has also improved joint ownership and accountability, along with greater transparency and understanding of financial pressures. Peers received a strong sense that the approach is increasingly embedded and supporting sound financial stewardship.

At the time of the CPC, the future of devolution in Lancashire was uncertain. However, peers encouraged the council to continue to contribute positively and constructively towards the devolution debate, to ensure the best outcome for the residents and businesses of the borough and wider county. Since the CPC the Lancashire Combined County Authority (LCCA) has been established and peers heard that the council has played a proactive role in this, contributing to the establishment of the LCCA, taking an active role in sub-boards and responding to a consultation by the LCCA on a draft Lancashire growth plan making a strong case for investment in Burnley and ensuring the borough's voice is heard.

Simultaneously, the council has engaged constructively and collaboratively in

discussions around local government reorganisation, working to ensure that Burnley is effectively represented within the context of a successful Lancashire. For example, the chief executive chairs the Lancashire chief executive meetings where LGR is a priority workstream.

Peers praised the strong political and community leadership demonstrated by the council, including the transparent and active approach to engaging with Burnley Borough Council councillors, which has in recent months included various reports and motions being debated at scrutiny, the executive and full council.

3.4. Capacity Building

The final theme explores progress against recommendations related to workforce development and future service delivery models.

- **Champion effective succession planning to embed future workforce resilience.** This should incorporate a review of the approach to workforce planning in conjunction with the development of service plans.
- **Consider future service delivery models to ensure organisational resilience and the ability of the council to address future community needs and remain dynamic.**

The CPC provided evidence that staff working for Burnley are well supported, with a strong focus on health and wellbeing, staff engagement, opportunities for progression, and training and development, that are all clearly driven through the organisational development strategy. There was a need however for greater succession planning and skills sharing, particularly in areas where there are current or potential shortages, recruitment challenges, or capacity issues (such as that seen in planning, legal and housing) and to consider if workforce planning is effectively embedded into service planning models.

Peers were pleased to see the positive progress against this recommendation, including the launch of a new toolkit for workforce planning that is being implemented as part of the 2025/26 service planning process. The talent management programme goes from strength to strength, this year with a key focus on exploring mechanisms to encourage young people to consider a career in local government. Next steps

include reviewing recruitment methods and associated advertising routes.

The peer team remarked on the positive and powerful organisational culture that is evident from the staff that they spoke to, including their commitment to and belief in the council's priorities.

Peers were particularly impressed with the approach that the council is taking to prepare staff for local government reorganisation by fostering a culture of adaptability and inclusive engagement. Future skills needs are being identified and targeted training is being delivered to build resilience and capability across the workforce, aligned to the workforce planning activity already underway.

The original CPC included a recommendation for the council to review the service delivery operating model to ensure that it remains fit for purpose as a mechanism to assist with ensuring organisational resilience and the ability of the council to address future community needs. Recognising the impact of local government reorganisation on the delivery of this recommendation, peers were pleased to see the progress that has been made and the pragmatic approach that will support them in the future. Developments include the insourcing of property services and facilities management, along with environmental health and licencing from 1 April 2025, which will provide opportunities to consolidate service delivery and ensure more effective alignment with the strategic direction of the council.

In addition, the council has taken key steps in the delivery of the digital services strategy, including the replacement of the GIS system to improve the management and sharing of spatial data. A new digital platform is being launched, with planning, environmental health and housing services scheduled to migrate during the summer and licencing and customer services later this year. The approach will increase the number of end-to-end digital processes in the short-term and in the longer-term will form the basis for AI enabled delivery.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank Burnley Borough Council for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review. It is not the intention of these progress reviews to alter or amend the existing action plan of the Council or develop new recommendations. However,

the organisation may wish to remain live to the following considerations:

- **Championing Burnley in a context of change:** Building on the borough's strong partnership foundations, peers suggest that the council continues to ensure that Burnley is best positioned within the context of forthcoming structural reform across both local government and the NHS.
- **Demonstrating Impact:** To demonstrate the impact of the asset-based approach to community development, consideration could be given to utilising techniques such as 'Most Significant Change', which is a participatory, qualitative method used in monitoring and evaluation to identify and learn from significant changes within a programme or project.
- **Reconciling Planning Ambitions:** The Council should continue to engage with Lancashire Combined County Authority on strategic planning whether that be a statutory or a non-statutory strategic plan.
- **Strengthening scrutiny:** lean into the principal power of scrutiny to hold partners to account, positioning this to support the partnership work that Burnley are progressing, particularly in relation to reducing inequalities.

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.

Dan Archer (Senior Regional Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). As outlined above, Dan is available to discuss any further support the council requires, his email address is Daniel.archer@local.gov.uk.