

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

West Suffolk Council

21 May 2025

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

The council undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 23 – 26 July 2024 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 West Suffolk 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 West Suffolk Council took place (onsite) on 21 May 2025.

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

- **Engagement**
 1. Use the community voice to reflect an outcomes-based narrative that links strategic priorities to decision-making and resource allocations.
 2. Explore how the council's communications and engagement strategy could be optimised to engage residents to shape and support the delivery of organisational priorities and outcomes.
- **Growth**
 3. Define the conditions needed to underpin the sustainable growth priority to



meet the needs of the district's different communities and the wider region. Use this to influence the strategic infrastructure requirements to meet that growth.

- **Environment**

4. Build on significant work towards environmental resilience by agreeing what the intended outcomes are and developing an accessible route map with key milestones and costings.

- **Governance**

5. Continue to develop the Senior Leadership Team and Cabinet Members in their roles, creating capacity for the Leader and Chief Executive to further enhance West Suffolk's profile on the wider stage.
6. Continue the excellent people-focused work, particularly building on EDI work to build staff networks, engaging with the trade unions.
7. Maximise the scrutiny function to drive further improvement and ensure effective
8. Consider implementing a structured governance mechanism, such as a dedicated Capital Assurance Board, comprising both members and officers. This could serve as a single point of contact and provide outcomes focused coordination and assurance for capital projects.

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

- Lead Member Peer – Councillor James Dawson, Leader, Erewash Borough
- Council
- Chief Executive Peer – Mark Davies, Chief Executive, Lancaster City Council
- Member Peer – Councillor Marianne Overton MBE, Lincolnshire County Council and North Kesteven District Council, and Leader of the LGA Independent Group
- Member Peer – Councillor Nick Worth, Leader, South Holland District Council
- Aimee Wittams-Smith, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association



3. Progress Review - Feedback

Out of the CPC's eight recommendations, the council's RAG rated Action plan reports that 100 per cent of actions are completed or being progressed.


Since the Corporate Peer Challenge in July 2024, West Suffolk Council has been navigating a rapidly changing policy landscape. Although Suffolk was initially progressing towards a Level Three devolution deal, this was withdrawn in Summer 2024. A renewed national focus followed with the English Devolution White Paper in December 2024, and Suffolk was accepted onto the Devolution Priority Programme. A public consultation on a proposed Mayoral Combined County Authority for Norfolk and Suffolk took place in early 2025. Alongside this, Suffolk councils are developing plans for local government reorganisation, with full proposals expected by September 2025 and potential implementation by April 2028.

3.1. Engagement

West Suffolk Council (WSC) has made significant steps in embedding the community voice into its strategic narrative and decision-making processes, directly addressing the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) recommendation to link outcomes-based narratives with resource allocation.

Peers observed that the council has adopted a more inclusive and progressive approach to engagement, shifting from traditional consultation to co-design. This is evident in the development of the Local Plan and Housing Strategy, where community input has shaped the delivery mechanisms as well as the content. For example, the 40 per cent affordable housing target emerged from a cross-party working group informed by local needs, and engagement events were held in accessible community venues to ensure broad participation.

To bring strategic priorities to life, WSC has developed a suite of visual and narrative tools, including icons, graphics, and relatable case studies, that are now embedded across all communications. Peers noted that these tools help articulate how community feedback informs decisions and resource allocations, making the council's work more transparent and relatable. Internal communications, such as staff briefings and the annual staff film, have also been aligned with these priorities,



reinforcing a shared understanding across the organisation.


One example of this approach that particularly stood out to the peer team is the council's engagement with local markets. WSC undertook targeted engagement with both market traders and residents, which included listening to feedback on what would encourage greater footfall and trader participation. As a result, the council invested approximately £300,000 into market improvements enhanced trader and stakeholder engagement and provided more specialist markets and events such as young trader's events, as well as addressing practical concerns such as waste management and infrastructure. These actions were supported by promotional campaigns, including social media outreach on platforms like TikTok, showcasing individual traders and reinforcing the council's commitment to community-led development.

West Suffolk Council's approach is increasingly data and insight-led, with efforts to segment audiences and tailor messaging accordingly. Engagement with young people, for instance, has been enhanced through recent partnerships with West Suffolk College and youth groups, using formats such as virtual town halls and face-to-face sessions. The council is also active in over 60 local Facebook groups, using these platforms to monitor sentiment and share updates. A strong emphasis is placed on the "You said, we did" feedback loop, helping to build trust and demonstrate impact.

While traditional key performance indicators (KPIs) are used to track digital communications and engagement volumes, the council recognises that these metrics capture activity rather than impact. Officers are working to better codify and document business-as-usual engagement to ensure these efforts are visible. Peers suggest that WSC continue developing mechanisms to measure the impact of engagement, as well as the activity.

The peer team commended West Suffolk Council's proactive and inclusive approach to engagement on Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and devolution, highlighting its recognition of the need to root future governance models in the lived experiences and priorities of residents. Peers heard that, rather than presenting predetermined solutions, the council has taken a more open and collaborative

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approach by asking communities, “What do you need from your council?” This shift was welcomed by the peer team as a move toward genuine co-design. Engagement launched on 15 May 2025 and has been supported by cross-district collaboration, including a joint LGR survey hosted on Mid Suffolk’s platform, alongside ongoing dialogue through local forums and digital channels.

The peer team highlight that as LGR progresses, maintaining and strengthening this open, insight-led engagement will be essential, not only to ensure legitimacy and local buy-in, but also to clearly articulate West Suffolk’s role and value to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and future regional leadership.


3.2. Growth

In response to the Corporate Peer Challenge recommendation on sustainable growth, West Suffolk Council has taken an evidence-led approach to shaping the conditions that will support inclusive development across the district and region.

The council has developed a strong and coherent narrative around growth, underpinned by a robust evidence base and a deep understanding of local needs. This includes the production of a comprehensive Growth Data Pack and the commissioning of further studies such as those by CACI and ARK, alongside forthcoming work focused on Mildenhall. These efforts have helped the council better understand the district’s economic, social, and spatial dynamics and ensure that growth strategies are grounded in local realities.

Peers noted a clear link between strategic planning, infrastructure lobbying, and place-based regeneration. The council’s emerging Local Plan, now nearing adoption, sets out a bold and locally grounded ambition. Peers heard this ambition is already being implemented on key sites, supported by targeted engagement with housing providers and communities to ensure delivery is viable and responsive to need.

The council’s place-based approach is evident in its regeneration work in Haverhill and Brandon. In Brandon, the council launched the Brandon Commission to explore development constraints and opportunities, with outcomes expected in December 2025. In Haverhill, the council is building on the Mildenhall Hub model to align




housing, health, and economic development, focusing on Provincial House and the future development of the wider high street area. These projects are supported by the Place shaping Board and peers considered reflect a commitment to tailoring growth strategies to the unique characteristics of each community.

Peers heard that the council's housing strategy, adopted in November 2024, has already led to significant improvements in areas such as homelessness. The council is leading a partnership in Newmarket that is developing an action plan to explore options for regeneration. This aims to be a community-led approach where outcomes will be shaped with the community and using data from a range of sources to build a comprehensive understanding of the local area. This will include utilising the established clear-hold-build policing model to improve the quality of life for residents by reducing criminal activity.

The council's understanding of local conditions has also informed its lobbying and influencing work. WSC has actively lobbied for strategic transport improvements, including the Ely and Haughley junctions, East West Rail, and the A11 Fiveways junction at Barton Mills. Peers observed that the council's ambition to unlock economic potential, enhance connectivity, and drive sustainable growth extends beyond West Suffolk, aiming to benefit the wider Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, and Norfolk regions.

It was notable to peers that West Suffolk Council recognises its role in progressing work in preparation for a new mayoral structure, with an elected Mayor expected in May 2026. The council is actively preparing to engage with the new mayoral arrangements, ensuring that Suffolk and West Suffolk are well understood and represented. The leader has also written to the newly elected Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough to initiate dialogue, and the council is keen to be on the front foot in building this relationship, recognising the importance of West Suffolk in helping to deliver regional outcomes.

WSC has used its understanding of local economic needs to support business growth. A notable example is the relocation of Greene King from its current town centre site on Westgate Street to a new, state-of-the-art brewery at Suffolk Business Park. This move, formalised through a Memorandum of Cooperation, will support the



council in working with Greene King to maximise the wider benefits that can be achieved. As well as delivering environmental benefits, this will explore how this might address specific needs of the local community and enhance the town centre economy by building on the heritage of the site. Peers considered the project as a strong example of joint working that aligns with the council's broader ambitions.

Looking ahead, the peer team encourages the council to continue articulating its ambitions for growth. This includes being explicit about the outcomes it wants to achieve, whether that's attracting business investment, reducing inequalities, or protecting the environment. Being explicit about the outcomes the council seeks will strengthen its influence and ensure alignment with regional and national priorities.


3.3. Environment

West Suffolk Council has made substantial progress in addressing the CPC recommendation to build on its environmental resilience. In response, the council has undertaken a full review of its Net Zero strategy, carried out between January and May 2025 under the leadership of the Environment and Sustainability Reference Group (ESRG). The review aimed to embed national policy developments, including the Government's Simpler Recycling initiative.

Following the above review, WSC has adopted a revised trajectory to achieve Net Zero by 2039. A Cabinet meeting held the evening before the peer team visit agreed to adopt the new target date and confirmed funding for immediate interventions to remove a further one thousand tonnes of carbon emissions (20 per cent of the balance) before 2029, and plant 5,000 new trees which would assist with any residual off-setting required in the long-term.

. Peers agree that the revised plan reflects a pragmatic response to external constraints while maintaining the ambition that has driven significant progress to date. The updated plan includes a fully costed trajectory and is supported by a communications strategy to ensure the roadmap is clearly understood by both internal and external audiences. With the new trajectory developed, WSC recognises that it will need continuous review until Net Zero is achieved.

A key element of the revised plan is a high-level cost analysis of the council's two



largest emission sources: its vehicle fleet and buildings. Given the rural nature of the district, waste collection freighters present a particular challenge. The council has committed significant investment in this area and advised peers that officers used a mixed-method approach to estimate the financial implications of transitioning to electric vehicles and decarbonising its estate. This work is informing a detailed investment plan to support long-term financial and operational decision-making.


WSC shared with peers that it has secured £4.1 million from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to decarbonise the Bury St Edmunds and Haverhill leisure centres. WSC is contributing £600,000 towards the project, which can be funded through a loan facility secured with the National Wealth Fund. Peers heard that, in partnership with Abbeycroft Leisure, this investment will fund improvements that are expected to save 755 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year, with completion expected by spring 2027. The peer team welcomed this example of targeted investment in decarbonisation, and the use of external funding alongside council-backed finance.

The “Rent-a-Roof” solar initiative stood out to peers as a strong example of innovation and partnership. The scheme helps businesses and schools use solar energy without paying anything upfront. The council installs solar panels on their roofs and keeps ownership of them for 25 years. In return, the businesses get lower electricity supply and therefore lower bills. The setup supports local green energy goals and enables re-investment for the council, making it a mutually beneficial solution. The scheme is now being expanded to neighbouring districts, including Babergh and Mid Suffolk.

Peers were impressed that West Suffolk Council has articulated a clear and credible route to Net Zero and has also aligned the necessary funding to support delivery in the short to medium term. Peers encourage the council to continue communicating the rationale behind changes to targets and plans, emphasising that this is about doing things properly and sustainably, not stepping back from ambition.

3.4. Governance

West Suffolk Council’s thoughtful response to the CPC recommendations was evident to the peer team. A restructure of the Senior Leadership Team, implemented




prior to the CPC, has since been complemented by a restructure of the managerial layers below director level. Some of the components are the creation of additional Head of Service roles, increasing the number of senior managers from 18 to 24, and realigning the senior management structure with the director level. WSC reported the changes reflect a commitment that savings from the previous Leadership Team structure would be reinvested into the organisation at the right levels. Implemented in December 2024, the new structure aims to enhance internal capacity, strengthen succession planning, and create space for more strategic leadership.

Throughout the progress review, peers noted a high level of positivity around the new structure. It was clear that the enhanced leadership team (now consisting of the senior management team and leadership team) felt more engaged and empowered, and staff at all levels expressed pride in working for West Suffolk Council. Vacancies created from realignment were recruited internally to support opportunities for current staff progression before any external recruitment was required, and the council's culture and reputation were credited with making recruitment easier.

Since the CPC, cabinet members have benefited from targeted development opportunities, including participation in LGA programmes such as the Leadership Academy and Sustainability Masterclass. Monthly away days between cabinet, the chief executive, deputy chief executive, chief operating officer and directors have enabled deeper strategic discussions, while the leader's active involvement in regional panels has helped raise West Suffolk Council's profile.

The above developments have created the space for the leader and chief executive to engage actively and strategically on regional and national platforms, including infrastructure lobbying and discussions around LGR and devolution. A strong example, highlighted by peers as evidence of effective delegation and empowered leadership at all levels, is the council's work with Greene King. Responsibility for this partnership rests with the relevant head of service and cabinet member, rather than the chief executive and leader.

The peer team observed a continued genuine cross-party partnership in the top team and constructive relationship with the opposition, whilst still leaving space for them to do their job. This ethos of positive collaboration and acceptance of differing opinions



for discussion, is reflected in a positive working atmosphere enjoyed by staff and councillors alike.

WSC has continued to prioritise equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), building on its strong foundations to foster a supportive and inclusive workplace culture. Initiatives such as the promotion of the Suffolk Black Workers Forum, in collaboration with UNISON, provide valuable networking and learning opportunities for staff. Regular engagement with UNISON, including quarterly Joint Negotiating and Consultative Meetings, aims to ensure open and constructive dialogue on workforce matters.


Since the CPC, West Suffolk Council has reviewed its scrutiny arrangements, resulting in several enhancements to strengthen governance and accountability. WSC reported that practical improvements that have been introduced include a new streamlined form for inviting cabinet members to scrutiny sessions and the encouragement of concise summaries in committee papers. The scrutiny function has also been bolstered by creating stronger links and dedicated scrutiny capacity with the Policy Team.

Peers heard that the integration of independent members into the Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee (PASC) in November 2024 has enhanced the quality of discussions. To support ongoing development, members continue to receive training in chairing meetings and effective questioning techniques.

The leader, deputy leader, and scrutiny chairs and vice chairs assessed the effectiveness of current mechanisms and concluded that existing structures support robust pre-decision scrutiny and call-in processes.

While the CPC suggested separating audit and performance functions, the council has opted to maintain current structures in light of potential local government reorganisation, with a commitment to revisit this in due course. Peers were satisfied that the council's approach is both rational and proportionate. They also noted that audit oversight remains in line with CIPFA guidance, providing assurance that governance standards are being upheld.

In response to the recommendation on capital governance, the council reviewed its arrangements and benchmarked them against best practice, including the concept of a Capital Assurance Board. The review concluded that existing structures, such as



the Commercial Programme Board, quarterly reporting to PASC, and oversight by Cabinet members, already provide robust governance for capital projects.

To further strengthen transparency and coordination, the council plans to enhance capital reporting to include development build stages, key milestones, and completion timeframes. While a dedicated Capital Assurance Board was deemed unnecessary at this time, the council remains open to evolving its governance framework as needed. Peers were satisfied the capital programme is being managed effectively, with appropriate oversight from both officers and elected members.

West Suffolk Council has shown strong commitment to the Corporate Peer Challenge process, responding constructively to recommendations with clear actions and meaningful changes. The council continues to demonstrate a proactive, collaborative, and ambitious approach, even while navigating complex challenges such as local government reorganisation, devolution, and environmental pressures. Its investment in staff development is building resilience and positioning the organisation well for the future. The peer team encourages WSC to keep sharing its story both regionally and nationally, to continue nurturing its people and partnerships, and to be bold in setting out its ambitions and the outcomes it seeks to achieve.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank West Suffolk 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.

Rachel Litherland (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and their e-mail address is rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk