

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council

Wednesday 19 November 2025

Team Feedback Report



Corporate Peer Challenge

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1.0 Introduction:

Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council (Wigan Council) completed a Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) in January 2025. The council published the report from this CPC alongside a corresponding action plan setting out the organisational response to the team's recommendations in May 2025. The peer team's original report as well as the council's action plan are available on the council's website [here](#).

As part of the CPC process, there is a commitment that Progress Reviews will be completed within 12-months of the original CPC. These Progress Reviews are designed to provide space for the political and managerial leadership of the council to consider:

- **Operating Context:** Better understand any changes in context which may affect the council's progress or alter previously developed plans.
- **Progress:** Receive feedback from peers on the progress made by the council against the CPC recommendations and the council's action plan.
- **Opportunities and Challenges:** Consider the reflections of peers on any new opportunities or challenges that may have arisen since the peer team were 'on-site' including any further support needs.
- **Learning:** Discuss any early impact or learning from the progress made to date, including potential learning for wider sector.

2.0 Summary of the approach:

This Progress Review was completed on Wednesday 19 November 2025 and was held in-person at Wigan Town Hall, approximately 10 months since the council's original peer challenge. The peer team recognise that with this length of time, there are likely to be recommendations which may not be fully embedded and that there will be areas of ongoing work. In this context, the peer team considered both progress to-date and plans for the future as part of this review.

To support this progress review and make best use of the peer team's time onsite, the council's nine previous recommendations (listed in full in Appendix 1.0) were consolidated under the following themes to enable wider conversations and minimise a focus on transactional issues. These themes included:

- **Performance Management and Prioritisation:** This theme included a consideration of the council's performance management framework, including the relationship of this with scrutiny.
- **Partnerships, Neighbourhood Working and Staff Engagement:** This theme included the ongoing engagement of the council with the Combined Authority, and the furtherment of the council's neighbourhood working through the recently developed 'Progress with

Unity' approach.

- **Financial Management:** This final theme considered the council's ongoing financial position, recognising the potential to extend the council's financial planning horizons as part of a wider three-year settlement through the fair funding review, as well as the recommendation regarding oversight of the council's capital programme.

To support the progress review, the council produced an updated position statement that updated the peer team on the current operating context and progress against the action plan. The peer team used this information to inform discussions with the council's Leader, chief executive, and wider Cabinet representatives, as well as dedicated focus groups / meetings with officers in neighbourhood services, transformation, with frontline staff and wider partners. The members of the team for this progress review were as follows:

- **Lead Peer:** Steve Mawson (Chief Executive – Kirklees Council)
- **Labour Member Peer:** Cllr Sir Steve Houghton (Leader – Barnsley Council)
- **Senior Officer Peer:** Andrea Watts (Executive Director – Sefton Council)
- **Challenge Manager:** Matt Dodd (Senior Regional Advisor – LGA).

3.0 Progress Review – Feedback:

Throughout this progress review, the council has demonstrated a thoughtful and thorough response to the original findings from the CPC. This is reflected in both the structure and detail included in the updated position statement, but also the depth of interviews and focus groups provided during the team's time onsite.

The council's operating context remains largely unchanged since the original CPC in January 2025, with there being no local elections held in May, and a high level of consistency across the 'top team' of the organisation including the Cabinet and Senior Management Team.

The council's progress over the past 12 months is illustrated by a number of significant achievements. This includes the progress that the council has made with regards to embedding the 'Progress with Unity' approach. This approach brings together the council's ambitions on partnership working, collaboration with partners, around seeking to ultimately address the issues of inequality in the borough. This approach is built around two clear 'missions' to coordinate the activity and priorities of the council and partners and was informed by extensive engagement.

The peer team previously recognised that the Progress with Unity approach was a 'brave' and 'conscious' move towards a new approach across the borough that was based on building on existing assets and moving away from 'transactional terms' towards a wider 'relational model'.

Through this progress review the peer team can see the continued progress of this work and approach, as illustrated through the learning festival and sports summit which are examples where further momentum has been generated. The team recognise the feedback from members and officers - *“we’ve come further with progress with unity than we originally expected”*.

Alongside these events the council also provided examples that included targeted practice to support residents, including the ‘here for you’ initiative which targets residents at risk of poverty through the use of focused data. This work has utilised this data, to then access an additional £12.5 million through increased income and reduced expenditure, from which the council can then further support these families. This work has the potential to offer learning to others in the sector, and demonstrates the importance of data in illustrating unmet need.

The CPC included recommendations regarding changes to the council’s performance framework to support alignment with Progress with Unity, to provide increased visibility of key metrics, and support the contribution of overview and scrutiny. The council has responded positively to these prompts, including the development of a single power business intelligence report which includes tiered indicators and uses both quantitative and qualitative information. Similarly, the council have strengthened the use of performance information with overview and scrutiny, including councillor input into designing the framework and committee engagement on this information.

A further illustration of the council’s progress over the past 12 months has been shown by the council’s recent OFSTED ILACS inspection. This report, published in November 2025, showed the council’s prioritisation of improving children’s services had been effective with services rated good (with outstanding features) from their previous position of ‘requires improvement’ overall. Through this progress review, the peer team were struck by the council’s ongoing appetite for continued improvement for these services and there being no-sense of complacency.

Previous recommendations from the peer team encouraged the council to continue ‘championing’ the needs and aspirations of the borough in their relationship with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. As part of this progress review the peer team have heard tangible examples of this relationship bringing local impact, including the ‘Live Well Trailblazer’ which is designed to support residents furthest from the labour market, as well as wider work with the Department for Work and Pensions, the Combined Authority, and range of voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise organisations illustrating the council working to facilitate relationships across tiers of government.

The council has also responded positively to the peer team recommendations regarding financial management. The council’s appetite for extending their horizons of financial planning is publicly stated, however, the timing of this review shortly before the

announcements of the 2025 Fair Funding Review meant that the organisation was still using assumptions ahead of these announcements. Through this review the peer team felt that this was appropriate at this point in time and that these assumptions were well informed and supported the council's approach.

The council's financial position is clearly set out in their budget papers, and includes budget gaps of £10.3 million, and £12.5 million for 2026-2027 and 2027-2028 respectively. These figures were prior to any agreed council tax rises. The council has clear saving and transformation proposals worth a total of £12.4 million over this financial year and the coming two years. Moving forward as the final information becomes available, it will be of significant importance for the council to work through the full, detailed implications of the Fair Funding Review on the organisation, including the impact on the assumptions and context outlined above.

4.0 Performance Management and Prioritisation:

This theme was designed to support exploration of the three recommendations summarised below (and set out in full in Appendix 1.0). These recommendations are as follows:

- **Recommendation One:** Refining the council's Performance Management Framework.
- **Recommendation Two:** Further develop the relationship between the council's Performance Management Framework and scrutiny committees.
- **Recommendation Seven:** Continue the focus and prioritisation of improvement to children's social care.

A significant theme within the council's further movement into the Progress with Unity approach, has been to build the council's priorities, partnership working, and model of public service reform around two clear missions: '*creating fair opportunities for all children, families, residents and businesses*', and '*making all of our towns and neighbourhoods flourish for those who live and work in them.*' Through this progress review the peer team can see that these approaches are increasingly embedded within the organisation and were struck by the ownership and enthusiasm for this approach which came from both frontline staff and wider partners.

A key recommendation from the original CPC was regarding the need of the council to ensure that there was a strong performance framework aligned to Progress with Unity. The peer team appreciate that a draft framework was developed in January, built around a number of key measures but encouraged a focus on quarterly reporting in order to '*monitor progress, track outcomes, and support the communication of success*'.

The council has responded positively to this feedback including refining the performance framework through a single reporting structure which aligns to the missions of Progress with

Unity, and positively, reports regularly to SMT, Cabinet, and Scrutiny. The council has structured this report to include two tiers of outcomes to provide additional information as needed. This approach has been led by a cross-organisation working group (led by the council's insight team) to co-design the approach and engage councillors and scrutiny on the content. Furthermore, the council has automated much of these processes including the use of a 'Power BI' platform and artificial intelligence to support the process. Recognising these advances, the peer team encourage the council to remain live to the information needs of both the council and Progress with Unity to support further iterations and improvement.

The original CPC recognised that alongside the council's Progress with Unity ambitions, there was 'clear and specific targeted improvement in a number of priority areas', including the council's response to the 2022 OFSTED inspection. The council has invested significant resources in this area (approximately £30.3 million recurrent growth) and that local performance against key outcomes including placements within the borough, completion of child protection plans within timescales, and reductions in repeat child protection plans was above national averages.

These positives have been formally recognised by OFSTED following the councils' inspection in October 2025. This report recognised that "*services for children and care leavers in Wigan have been considerably strengthened*" and that the commitment and focus of senior and political leaders had "*led to tangible progress across children's services*". This positive feedback is reflected in a Good overall rating, with outstanding features for the experience of children in care and care leavers.

5.0 Partnerships, Staff Engagement and Neighbourhood Working:

This theme was designed to support conversations with the council regarding the three recommendations summarised below (and set out in full in Appendix 1.0). These recommendations are as follows:

- **Recommendation Three:** Champion the needs, opportunities, and achievements of Wigan in the wider context of Greater Manchester.
- **Recommendation Four:** Develop the council's neighbourhood working model at pace to support the engagement with the delivery of Progress with Unity.
- **Recommendation Eight:** Consider the next phase of workforce engagement.
- **Recommendation Nine:** Maximise the energy of frontline staff including the delivery of the Progress with Unity missions.

Linked to the wider theme of partnership working and engagement, there were a number of points of feedback included in the council's original peer challenge report. This included

recognising the positive relationship and achievements from working with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, such as the Leigh Guided Busway and alignment with the Places for Everyone (Greater Manchester spatial plan). Alongside this, the CPC report also recognised the personal contributions of the Leader and Chief Executive with their respective leadership of resources and health and social care portfolios in Greater Manchester.

Given the advent of an integrated funding settlement across Greater Manchester, the peer team recognised this development would require an ongoing alignment of the council's work with any associated outcome framework. Also, there will remain a need for the council to communicate the needs and opportunities within the borough on an ongoing (and repeated) basis to support the mutual alignment of goals.

A further area of feedback from the CPC was regarding the interface of the council's neighbourhood working model with the delivery of Progress with Unity. The council gave specific focus to this area as part of the progress review, including updates on their work of 'eco-system mapping'. This includes the council working alongside Wigan Borough Community First to understand the breadth of partners and work in the borough, which is supporting the council's redesign of these services. This work has identified that across the borough significant resources are allocated annually across partners on 'coordination roles' and illustrates the potential 'prizes' for new ways of working. This work has been supported by enabling projects including detailed neighbourhood profiles and a regular oversight group.

This work has supported progress with the council's infrastructure and the ability to align local work with national and regional initiatives, including the NHA Partner Plan, Neighbourhood Plan, Greater Manchester Living Well Plan, and the partnership work of local social landlords. The council provided examples of tangible impact of this work, including a refreshed approach to falls prevention, and additional capacity given to this area through the appointment of a new Assistant Director. A further example is through the trailblazer work with economically inactive residents, where the council has committed to using their partnership relationships to distribute the full £1.2 million to local organisations without any transaction costs to ensure that this provides the most impact for local groups and residents.

Through this progress review the peer were provided with additional examples of this relationship with the combined authority, including the establishment of a Mayoral Development Zone for Leigh which includes a proposed university campus for health and social care and aligns to wider sub-regional ambitions on neighbourhood-health and the NHS 10-year plan. The council have also worked with the combined authority and Bolton Council to launch the 'Northfold growth location' which plans to deliver 13,600 new homes as well as wider employment opportunities by 2039. Finally, the council is looking to build on their joint work with the Combined Authority and the Arts Council in recent years by applying to become the Greater Manchester Town of Culture for 2027 which would provide an exciting platform to further this work.

Central to the success of the Progress with Unity approach is the support and engagement of the workforce. Through the original CPC, the peer team reflected that *'the most striking asset of the council was the organisations' positive and enthusiastic culture'*. The council have continued to invest in this area, co-designing a new organisational development plan which is due to launch in early 2027. This plan, uniquely, is designed as a plan for the borough, rather than the council and cuts across organisational boundaries.

6.0 Financial Management:

This theme was designed to support conversations with the council regarding the three recommendations summarised below (and set out in full in Appendix 1.0):

- **Recommendation Five:** Move towards a three-year budget approach to support longer-term planning.
- **Recommendation Six:** Revisit the council's approach to overseeing their collective capital programme.

The original CPC report recognised that the national move towards a three-year settlement would provide Wigan and other councils with an opportunity to extend their financial planning horizons and suggested a three-year budget process from 2026 onwards. The peer team recognise the timing of this progress review is ahead of the outcomes of the fair funding review which will significantly shape this work.

Nevertheless, the council has updated their Medium-Term Financial Plan to cover the period of 2026/27 through to 2028/29 and aspires to extend their planning once the review has been published. Through this progress review, the peer team were told that the council's approach to this work included a focus on balancing medium-term sustainability and the delivery of the council's two priority missions.

The council's capital programme is ambitious and stood in excess of £400 million at the time of the original peer review for the period of 2025-2028. This includes supporting town centre regeneration, the redevelopment of Haigh Hall, and investment in social housing. At the time of the CPC the peer team recognised that there was slippage against this programme with the 2024-2025 delivery of £142 million against a proposed figure of £202 million for year. In this context, the peer team encouraged the council to consider this programme in the round to support the management of interdependencies and capacity in the round.

The council has responded positively to this recommendation, reviewing and mapping their governance of the capital programme, including a wider check to ensure that proposals are aligned to the council's priority missions through Progress with Unity. The practical changes

which will be introduced following this review include the establishment of a Strategic Capital Board which will provide monitoring and oversight of current schemes and support the pipeline of future proposals. Given the timing of the original peer challenge, this board will be introduced for the municipal year of 2026-2027. This board will be supported by an operational group to provide more focus on operational issues and oversight as well as help to ensure clear links between forums.

7.0 Final thoughts and next steps

The Peer Team recognises that the political leadership and senior management of the council will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions. In-line with the principles of transparency associated with sector led improvement, it is suggested that this report is published alongside the original CPC to provide a comprehensive view on the council's progress.

Under the umbrella of sector led improvement, the LGA will continue to offer ongoing support and advice to councils following these reviews and will continue to coordinate this support for members and officers, through engagement with the council's chief executive. Whilst it is not intended for this Progress Review to create additional recommendations for the council, the peer team believe that the council may wish to consider the following:

- **Continue to iteratively improve and refine the council's performance framework:**
The council has made progress in area since the original CPC and the operation of this model for a full municipal year will provide important insight. The council should capture the learning and ensure that there is a clear review process to support further iteration and improvement as needed to build on this progress.
- **Manage the relationship and opportunities across different geographic footprints:**
As 'Progress with Unity' continues to embed there will be further opportunities for the borough that will emerge at both a national and sub-regional level. The council will need to marry and translate these opportunities with their local approach, and this interface will require ongoing management and attention.

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

Appendix One: Full List of Previous Recommendations:

- **Recommendation One: Refine the council’s performance management framework:** Build on the existing performance reporting arrangements and processes to develop a clear framework that tracks advances made against the two missions of Progress with Unity and reports publicly to Cabinet. This should bring together outcomes linked to these missions, an overview of service standards, and wider organisational health in a single report.
- **Recommendation Two: Further develop the relationship between the Council’s performance management framework with the work of Scrutiny Committees:** A revised performance framework creates the opportunity to take a more systematic approach to using Scrutiny task and finish groups and maximise the contribution of elected members to strategic areas.
- **Recommendation Three: Champion the needs, opportunities, and achievements of Wigan in the wider context of Greater Manchester:** The Council has positive relationships with partners across the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, but in the context of a single funding settlement, there will be a continued need for the Council to champion issues of the borough. This will require ensuring that the Authority’s work aligns to the emerging outcome framework associated with the single settlement included in the recent Devolution White Paper.
- **Recommendation Four: Develop the Council’s neighbourhood working model at pace to support the engagement with the delivery of Progress with Unity:** The Council is further reforming their approach to neighbourhood working, this will require further clarity regarding the ambitions of this work, and the role and contribution of councillors.
- **Recommendation Five: Move towards a three-year budget approach to support longer-term planning:** The potential national move towards three-year funding settlements presents an opportunity for the council to extend the timeline of their financial planning.
- **Recommendation Six: Revisit the Council’s approach to overseeing their collective capital programme:** The Council currently monitors capital programmes at an individual level and would benefit from establishing a wider oversight board to consider the cumulative picture as well as interdependencies, and impact on the missions of Progress with Unity.

- **Recommendation Seven: Continue the focus and prioritisation of improvement to Children’s Social Care:** The Council has invested time, resource, and clear corporate sponsorship to improve outcomes in this area and should continue this focus and approach over coming years.
- **Recommendation Eight: Consider the next phase of workforce engagement:** The Council’s Team Wigan Experience is a valuable asset for embedding culture, values, and behaviours within the organisation and partners. Going forward, the Council needs to ensure that these issues remain lived and visible on an ongoing basis.
- **Recommendation Nine: Maximise the energy of frontline staff including the delivery of the Progress with Unity missions:** The team recognise the clear enthusiasm of frontline staff to deliver for the residents of Wigan. In this context, the Council should consider how these ideas are captured, prioritised, and progressed to support and test new ways of working.