

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review

Forest of Dean District Council

3 September 2025

Feedback



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

Forest of Dean District Council (FODDC) undertook an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during 1 – 3 October 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 FODDC 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 FODDC took place (onsite) on 3 September 2025.

The Progress Review focused on each of the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge:

- Prioritise delivery
- Build on strong partner relationships
- Communications and engagement plan
- Improve programme, project and business case management
- Focus on finance
- Develop a workforce plan
- Establish a strategic board and ensure capacity through transition

- Focus on people
- Member development programme

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

- Chief Executive Peer - Maxine O'Mahony, Chief Executive, Breckland Council
- Member Peer (Green Party) - Cllr Natalie McVey, Worcestershire County and Malvern Hills District Councils
- Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association – Kathryn Trant

3. Progress Review - Feedback

Out of the CPC's nine recommendations, the council's RAG rated Action plan reports that 100 per cent of actions are completed or progress has been made. The peer team have the following more detailed feedback in relation to progress on some of the CPC recommendations and corresponding actions.

3.1. Prioritise delivery

This recommendation referenced the need for FoDDC to prioritise actions within the delivery plan so that they could be appropriately resourced and delivered. The peer team heard that the delivery plan was reviewed in March 2025 for implementation during the year 2025/26. Positively, the review took place in line with the budget approved for the same year ensuring a link between priorities and resources. With support from the LGA, facilitated workshops took place and both councillors and officers spoke of the success of the workshop outcomes in developing a team approach. In light of local government reorganisation, it may now be helpful for a further session to take place so that the council is clear on the legacy priorities that it wants to leave for the residents and communities of Forest of Dean, how they link to the delivery plan and how they will be funded.

3.2. Build on strong partner relationships

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) has required the council to work with



neighbouring councils across Gloucestershire as they each determine the most appropriate outcome for Gloucestershire as it is reorganised into one or more unitary councils. The significant number of meetings taking place has impacted on the capacity of both councillors and officers to broaden the scope and strength of relationships across wider boundaries. However, the relationship with town and parish councils is growing stronger as LGR progresses through increased efforts to coordinate and the joint funding of a market towns officer. There are several examples of the council successfully developing its Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) principles for the benefit of residents such as the Climate Citizen Visioning Project delivered in partnership with Coleford Town Council to explore how residents of Coleford can build a fair and happy future while tackling climate change.

3.3. Communications and engagement plan

The above example highlights progress made against the external communication recommendation which suggested that the council consistently use ABCD principles to improve external communication.

The recommendation to improve internal communication was to develop a communication and engagement plan. An internal communications team is now in place and a plan has been developed. However, whilst there have been improvements, the view of both the peer team and the communications team is that there is still more that could be done.

Whilst the quarterly all-staff briefings held in person are seen as incredibly valuable, there were mixed views about the Forest portal, which is the intranet site set up for staff and councillors. Members of staff within Publica could potentially have more than one portal to access. As a result, staff may not proactively engage with the portal and messages will be missed. Consideration of what the portal is used for and how easy it is to access could address the lack of consistent messaging. One suggestion to make access more convenient is that the portal automatically opens when staff log in rather than just being set as the homepage when accessing the internet. Also related to communications improvements, reference was made to the need for some myth busting and keeping staff updated on changes to the building

would be beneficial.

3.4. Develop a workforce plan

Significant progress has been made in relation to this recommendation and work is ongoing. A draft People Strategy has been developed along with an equality and diversity policy and procedure. Various staff workshops have been held to contribute to the development of the People Strategy and there are staff networks and a wellbeing champions group which will continue to be used to shape the narrative and delivery of the workforce plan. This will support positive staff engagement which was evident to the peer team on our visit. Staff that the peer team met spoke with pride about being part of the 'Forest family' and delivering the best possible services for the residents of the Forest of Dean. The peer team were impressed by several initiatives which are being planned to support the wellbeing of staff such as walking Wednesdays and lunch clubs.

3.5. Focus on people

One of the key recommendations from the corporate peer challenge team was for the council to deliver an effective Induction Plan for the staff that were transitioning into the council as part of Phase One in November 2024 and Phase Two when that took place. As part of the progress review the peer team heard how successful the transition in Phase One had been. Phase Two was also successful but on a smaller scale.

As staff join FoDDC, it will be important to keep the Induction broad so that new staff who have not come from a local council are given the opportunity to learn about local government and how a council works, as part of their onboarding process.

The peer team heard that there may be a small number of further services returning to the council, although the advent of local government reorganisation means the council will be working with Publica partners towards what is now likely to be a more organic process based on where there is an easy fit for teams. Consideration should be given to FODDC colleagues still within Publica and how they can be protected.

Unsurprisingly, there are some worries about the impact of local government reorganisation. There is a strong sense of community across FoDDC, and concerns

were expressed by staff around how to continue that within a unitary council. Staff are proud of the culture that is being created across the council, and they should be encouraged to continue that approach in the future.

3.6. Member Development programme

In response to the recommendation to develop a robust member development programme that incorporates an understanding of roles, responsibilities and acceptable behaviour, the council has a Member Development Working Group that meets on a quarterly basis and reviews member development needs. A programme of member development has been developed, but the peer team heard that there is at times limited attendance from councillors. The Working Group should be conscious of the distinction between briefing and development as some of the sessions that the peer team were told about seemed to be briefings, albeit on key matters that councillors would have found helpful such as the Local Plan and housing viability. The Working Group should continue to liaise with councillors to seek their views on the development and skills that would be beneficial to them in their role, particularly the skills that would be helpful to them as councillors in a unitary council.

4. Final thoughts and next steps

The LGA would like to thank FODDC for undertaking an LGA CPC Progress Review. The progress made has been brilliant despite the challenges the council is facing. Councillors and staff are focused on delivery and expressed a pride in their Place. The council has ambitions for the Forest of Dean and despite the challenges of LGR is working hard to create thriving communities for now and for future generations.

We appreciate that senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions 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.

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