

<b>Classification:</b> Open	<b>Decision Type:</b> Non-Key
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<b>Report to:</b>	Cabinet	<b>Date:</b> 17 April 2024
<b>Subject:</b>	Local Government Association Corporate Peer Review	
<b>Report of</b>	Cabinet Member for Corporate Affairs and HR	

## Summary

1. As part of the Council's commitment to continuous improvement, the Local Government Association were invited to Bury in December 2023 to undertake a full Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC). It is expected that all councils will receive a CPC at least every five years.
2. This visit was intended to assess progress since the last full CPC in 2018, and in particular to validate actions taken through the Finance Improvement Plan to deliver a balanced Medium Term Financial Strategy in for Full Council in February 2024.
3. This report summarises the approach taken by the Local Government Association and the feedback received from the Peer Review Team. It also incorporates the recommendations that have been received and the commitment to action these through the Council's 2024/25 Corporate Plan.

## Recommendation(s)

4. That Cabinet note the progress made by the Council as captured in the Position Statement and Full Report from the Local Government Association.
5. That Cabinet agree that the recommendations from the Challenge are accepted by the Council and incorporated into the 2024/25 Corporate Plan.

## Reasons for recommendation(s)

6. As participating in the Corporate Challenge is done through mutual agreement with the Local Government Association there is an expectation that all councils having a corporate peer challenge will commit to publishing the feedback report and an action plan. This report fulfils that obligation.

## Alternative options considered and rejected

7. None applicable.

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## Background

8. In December 2023 the Local Government Association visited Bury Council with a Peer Review Team to undertake a mutually agreed Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC). Undertaking a CPC is a robust and rigorous assurance and improvement tool, managed and delivered by the sector, for the sector. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. The peers used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by the people they met, the things they saw and the material that they read. The Peer Review Team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.
9. It is expected that all councils will receive a CPC at least every five years. Each CPC has a focus on five core questions with the opportunity to add a local priority, which for Bury Council was specific feedback on its financial standing and approach to financial improvement. The five standard areas of exploration were as follows:
  - **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
  - **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
  - **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
  - **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
  - **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?
10. The Peer Review Team who visited Bury consisted of seven external peers, including a chief executive from a metropolitan borough in the North East, a deputy chief executive and two Council Leaders. The team also included a former Executive Director of Children's Services given Bury Council's commitment to improving Children's Lives and the need to ensure sufficient corporate focus on the Children's Improvement Plan.
11. Bury Council last undertook a full CPC in 2018 and with a subsequent follow up visit in 2021, just as the Covid restrictions were being lifted and there was a move from response to recovery. At the time the Peer Review Team provided the Council with a series of recommendations to set a clear and concise strategic plan which provided a roadmap for place leadership whilst allowing for a focus on getting the basics right within internal operations, particularly within corporate services.

## **CPC Feedback**

12. During the December 2023 visit the Peer Review Team gathered information and views from more than 60 meetings, in addition to further desk-based research and data analysis. They spoke to more than 150 people including a range of Bury Council staff, together with members and external stakeholders.
13. Their work was also influenced by a comprehensive Position Statement which is included as an appendix to this report. During the visit the information provided in this self-assessment was verified through further data analysis and interviews with staff and partners.
14. Based on this analysis, the Peer Review Team were able to comment on a much-improved Council to the one they visited in 2021. Their overall observations were that they found:
  - A Council that had “really stepped-up” in its place leadership role.
  - A clear vision for inclusive growth and reducing inequalities which was widely known and understood.
  - Evidence of delivery of some ambitious regeneration schemes with the Council “as a strong partner” who fosters collaboration.
  - A Leader and Chief Executive who are “highly regarded” both locally and in Greater Manchester more broadly and with the NHS GM Integrated Commission Board (ICB).
  - A hard working, dedicated team with a strong work ethic, “where people care very deeply about what they do”.
  - A respectful nature to politics which has helped move the Council forward.
  - Strategic positioning within the NHS GM ICB and good operational performance in Adults and Health.
  - Good examples of teams working together at a neighbourhood level which they described as “innovative and brave”.
15. Overall they concluded that **“People can see how Bury as a place is changing and are really positive about the difference this represents”**.
16. Of note, against the five core headings the report highlights are set out below.

## ***Local priorities and outcomes***

17. The Peer Review Team reflected that “LET’S Do It!” is a well-recognised and unifying strapline across the Council’s staff and its partners. The ‘LET’S Do It! Challenge’, which had seen over 1,200 staff, elected members and partners take part in an immersive organisational development aimed at helping people to better understand the purpose behind the borough strategy, was described as impactful, creative, playful and emotive. It has helped to connect people to the ‘LET’S Do It!’ call to arms and created a buzz about this locally. This is an example of how the Council is seen to have “moved on a lot from old fashioned approaches to a culture focused on serving residents”.

18. The team observed particularly strong partnership working with the Health and Care Sector, within the broader context of the Bury Public Service Reform model and the creation of the NHS GM ICB. The Council was described as being “on a journey of innovative, integrated neighbourhood working” and the geographical opportunity to cluster teams into local population sizes through our neighbourhood model was endorsed.
19. To capitalise on this momentum, the Peer Review Team identified the need to “re-tell” the LET’S Do It! vision in a way which recognises that the “context for the borough is now different to when this document was originally written” and reenergises the wider partnership to double-down on achieving the outcomes. This will include further leadership and facilitation for the Council, including strengthening the role of Cabinet Members as part of the professional network that the borough draws on to deliver it’s ambitions within a complex working environment.
20. The Peer Review Team also observed that the Council is working towards too many priorities and the Corporate Plan was regarded as overly complex. A focus on a smaller, sharper number of priorities will better secure staff and partner engagement.

### ***Organisational and place leadership***

21. The Peer Review Team heard from partners that Bury has recently “stepped up” its place leadership role and is a well-regarded partner within Greater Manchester. In particular, it is playing a positive leadership role in progressing Atom Valley and the Northern Gateway which are significant long-term inclusive growth opportunities for the borough and Greater Manchester more broadly.
22. The Team observed that the Council has a number of impressive local regeneration schemes. Of note is the funding base for many of these schemes, through Government grants and/or Council borrowing, as well as delivery in partnership with private sector partnerships through two Joint Venture Partnerships and the business leaders’ network. Plans were described as “ambitious” and due to deliver “significant assets” to the borough, although capacity to progress was observed to be very tight. Advice was given to strengthen delivery teams to ensure success.

### ***Governance and culture***

23. The Peer Review Team were able to see how the LET’S Do It! vision and values were shaping the culture and influencing the governance structure within the Council and wider Team Bury partnership. It was, however, also observed that the Council has an unnecessary habit of “talking itself down” and continually referencing historical difficulties which the Team felt the Council has now moved past.
24. Improvements were noted in the Council’s approach to quality and inclusion, with recognition of the contribution of “a strong and committed working group”.

It was observed that there remains more work to do, however, particularly in terms of workforce representation, the action on which is an outstanding recommendation from the 2023/24 Corporate Plan.

25. It was recommended that the governance structure of the Council should be organised around key priorities, to better inform the allocation of resources. Within this, planning for the next municipal year to ensure that the Overview & Scrutiny and Audit Committees work programmes are aligned to corporate plan priorities is an important next step in further strengthening governance and culture. On the basis of risk, particular attention is required to Housing Services and the quality of social services in children's service, adult care and SEND.

### ***Financial planning and management***

26. During the visit in December the Peer Challenge Team were able to observe that the Council was in an "extremely challenging financial position, with a small window of opportunity to act". The actions within the voluntary Finance Improvement Plan were endorsed, but it was agreed to be too soon to validate the impact. Since the Corporate Peer Challenge, the Council has set a budget for 2024/25 and agreed a Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), albeit through the use of reserves and a commitment to identify further savings across the next three years.
27. The Peer Team acknowledged the challenge of funding social care, which is being experienced across the sector but is particularly acute in Bury as an authority subject to a Children's Services Improvement Notice. Finalising an appropriate budget for Children and Young People, which allows for investment in improvement whilst sustaining funding across other Council services, was recognised as the primary challenge and one which required detailed modelling within the MTFS and a "One Council" approach to ownership across all services.
28. The Peer Review Team also reviewed the Council's Capital programme and found that this is an area which would benefit from additional review to ensure a realistic profile of investment, borrowing and returns on investment can be achieved within the MTFS. This work is included in the Financial Improvement Plan.
29. The Peer Review Team were keen to stress the importance of recruiting to a permanent senior management structure in finance and ensuring the whole organisation, including Elected Members, continue to own the commitment to designing a financially sustainable council, fit for the future.

### ***Capacity for improvement***

30. Throughout their visit to the borough the Peer Review Team commented on many examples of "people going above and beyond their roles to help deal with the demands and pressures the council faces to support local communities".

31. Improvements in staff engagement as evidenced through the Pulse survey were backed up with case studies from staff and by feedback from partners who commented on “the Council has changed in recent years” and become “less focussed on providing internal services” and become an organisation that is “there to listen to and work with local communities”.
32. The visit of Peer Review Team coincided with the final planning stages for the transfer of the Council’s Housing Services back to the direct management of the local authority. Whilst recognising that this would provide “opportunities to improve the offer to local tenants, as well as support local communities more widely”, the resource and risk implications for the Council need to be fully reviewed, especially alongside existing commitments to regeneration, improvement and transformation.
33. Further strengthening the Council’s resources to be able to deal with these challenges will require a workforce strategy which accelerates work to retain, recruit and develop staff, enabled by corporate services which are transformation focussed and digitally enabled. To achieve this, it was recommended that the Council should articulate its transformation ambition as an implicit part of the MTFs, to improve outcomes and as a lever to reduce cost.

## **Action Plan**

34. In their report back to the Council the Peer Review Team recognised that the borough of Bury is changing and that the Council’s focus on inclusive growth and reducing inequality is well recognised by those inside and outside. The ambitious delivery programme behind the LET’S Do It! Vision was endorsed, but a range of recommendations made to ensure that the ambitions of the Council and wider Partnership are delivered through appropriate resource, resilience and relentless focus.
35. The Peer Review Team agreed 13 recommendations with the Council which have been embedded within the Corporate Plan for 2024/25. These will be monitored through a separate Action Plan as required by the Local Government Association. The recommended actions are as follows:
  - Refresh your 2030 strategy, using this to tell the story as a positive vision, based on the strengths and assets that now exist locally.
  - Sharpen up the priorities for the council and use them to shape decision making processes and resource allocation consistently.
  - Establish a ‘One Council’ culture and ways of working to better position the council in dealing with its challenges and achieving its priorities across the short, medium and longer term.
  - Develop a single, clear and robust MTFP for the council. Ensure everyone understands this and what it means.
  - Establish a corporate transformation plan, approach, resource and culture to support delivery of your MTFP.

- Further develop finance, HR and IT – including their role and the relationships they require. These services are key to enabling the delivery of the council’s transformation needs.
  - Work with the finance team to further develop a capable team into a stable and supported finance function – including moving quickly to appoint permanent leadership to work with the interim CFO.
  - Build the resilience of the Children’s Leadership Team – including appointing to the vacant senior officer posts.
  - Take steps to help further support and develop the Cabinet team.
  - Ensure the council’s inclusive growth ambitions are suitably resourced to see them realised.
  - Start to prepare a new Local Plan to complement the Greater Manchester Places for Everyone Plan.
  - Plan for the risks and opportunities around Six Town Housing in realising the changes the council seeks from this move.
  - Support the further development of risk and audit within the council. This includes the use of the Corporate Risk Register, the role of Internal Audit and the development of the Audit Committee.
36. These recommendations have been reflected within the 2024/25 Corporate Plan and will be monitored as a standalone Action Plan to ensure appropriate resource allocation. This action plan is summary in Appendix One of this report.
37. The Local Government Association will undertake a return visit in Quarter Three 2024/25 to assess progress. A full copy of the report is available here: [LGA Corporate Peer Challenge: Bury Council | Local Government Association](#)

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**Recommendations:**

38. That Cabinet note the progress made by the Council as captured in the Position Statement and Full Report from the Local Government Association.
39. That Cabinet agree that the recommendations from the Challenge are accepted by the Council and incorporated into the 2024/25 Corporate Plan.

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**Links with the Corporate Priorities:**

40. The LGA CPC is an important mechanism for assessing the Council’s capacity to play it’s part in the delivery of LET’S Do It! The report concludes that Bury Council is a strong partner demonstrating place leadership in promoting the vision and ensuring wider understanding of, and commitment to, the ambitions. The Council needs to ensure that it continues to resource it’s priorities to maintain this position and ensure the delivery of the 2030 Strategy.

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**Equality Impact and Considerations:**

41. N/A

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**Environmental Impact and Considerations:**

42. N/A

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**Assessment and Mitigation of Risk:**

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
Lack of capacity to deliver against the Corporate Plan priorities and specifically the CPC recommendation which reduces our ability to achieve the LET'S Vision and achieve financial sustainability.	Further attention will be given to the activities identified within the CPC feedback to ensure that resources are used to appropriately to support priorities as these underpin the Council's ability to deliver the wider Corporate Plan.

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**Legal Implications:**

43. There are no legal implications arising from this report. This report fulfils our obligation to the LGA to report on the peer review findings.

**Financial Implications:**

44. There are no financial implications arising from this report.

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**Appendices:**

Appendix One: LGA Peer Review Action Plan

Appendix Two: LGA CPC Self-Assessment Position Station

Appendix Three: LGA CPC Feedback Report

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**Background papers:**

None.

**Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.**

Term	Meaning