



Knowsley Council

Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council

Corporate Peer Challenge

An aerial photograph of Knowsley, Merseyside, taken at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. In the foreground, a large church with a tall, dark spire is visible on the left. To the right, there are several modern buildings, including a large, multi-story red brick building with a glass facade. The middle ground is filled with residential houses and trees. The overall scene is a mix of old and new architecture.

Action Plan | January 2026



Foreword

In November 2025, we had the privilege of inviting the Local Government Association (LGA) to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge. Led by Dale Owens (Chief Executive of Gateshead Council) and Councillor David Molyneux (Leader of Wigan Council), alongside five other experienced local government officers and elected members, this Corporate Peer Challenge provided us with invaluable external insights.

Corporate Peer Challenges are a proven tool for improvement and assurance which provides challenge and shares learning. It is considered to be key to Councils meeting their Best Value duty.

To ensure that Councils have adequate arrangements in place, Corporate Peer Challenges review:-

- Local priorities and outcomes
- Organisational and place leadership
- Governance and culture
- Financial planning
- Management and Capacity for improvement

Our decision to invite the LGA to undertake this Corporate Peer Challenge is an important step in providing assurance that the Council is best placed to deliver on its priorities and achieve more for the communities who we serve.

Since our last Corporate Peer Challenge in 2017 and revisit in 2021, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council has faced, and successfully managed, some significant challenges. This Corporate Peer Challenge provided an opportunity to reflect how far we have come over the last few years and help inform the Council's future direction.

The feedback received is instrumental in shaping the next phase of our journey, making sure we continue to evolve as a Council that delivers more for the people of Knowsley.

The Peer Team recognised that Knowsley Council is a well-managed organisation with notable achievements including sector awards and the successful delivery of major regeneration projects. They highlighted strong financial management and a positive organisational culture built on trust and collaboration, and effective governance arrangements such as scrutiny and audit processes. The Council was also praised for its proactive partnership working and for having clear strategic priorities embedded in the Council Plan 2025-2030, aligned with the 2030 vision. The Council was also commended for its positive culture and the relationships that have been built across members and officers. Furthermore, the Peer Team acknowledged that the Council recognises its areas for improvement, including the need to improve Children's Social Care.

The Peer Challenge team has made several thoughtful suggestions for improvement. This action plan has been developed in direct response to these recommendations, to address the key points raised and continue to build a stronger, more effective Council for the future.



Graham Molyneux



James Owens





Introduction

The Council would like to express its sincere gratitude to the Peer Challenge team and the Local Government Association (LGA) for their time, insights, and thoughtful recommendations. We fully recognise and agree with the feedback provided.

The Council is committed to making sure that any actions taken result in lasting, positive change for both the organisation and the Borough. We are eager to work collaboratively with staff, elected members, partners and the community to bring these recommendations to life and make meaningful progress toward our shared goals.

Delivering the Plan

Our work on action planning began as soon as the Peer team delivered their recommendations and many of the recommendations relate to work that was already underway. The Council is taking a streamlined and pragmatic approach to delivering and monitoring this action plan, utilising existing teams and governance wherever possible. Where existing work programmes are in place, leads have been asked to review plans utilising the Peer Challenge feedback. They will outline the changes to be made and accelerate specific outcomes which relate to the recommendations.

Governance

Reporting on the specific Corporate Peer Challenge action plan will be to the Council's Governance and Audit Committee on a bi-annual basis.

By October 2026, the Local Government Association will organise a progress review visit. This will create space for the Council to explore progress and challenges with peers and discuss next steps.





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RECOMMENDATION 1 - DEVELOP A MORE CONSISTENT APPROACH TOWARDS CORPORATE CHANGE	
The Council should consider the benefit of increased standardisation regarding corporate change initiatives. This will support consistent comparison and prioritisation within the Council's wider approach towards transformation, including potential alignment of the change progress with the Council's medium-term financial strategy.	
ACTIONS	LEAD OFFICER – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (RESOURCES)
Develop a standard framework for transformation programmes.	
Deliver awareness raising and training sessions to ensure all managers are aware of the approach.	
Establish a formal reporting cycle for transformation programmes and projects for Executive Management Team and Elected Members.	

RECOMMENDATION 2 – UNDERTAKE VALUE FOR MONEY BENCHMARKING AT A CORPORATE LEVEL	
Building on work completed within services, a corporate approach to value-for-money comparisons will support the Council to consider issues of performance and value in the round.	
ACTIONS	LEAD OFFICER – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (RESOURCES)
Commission the Policy and Performance service to undertake an independent benchmarking study to compare costs against outcomes.	
Report findings (and any identified areas for improvements) back into Executive Management Team and Elected Members.	



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RECOMMENDATION 3 – STRENGTHEN MEDIUM TERM PLANNING	
The opportunity exists for the Council to build on its renewed approach to risk, performance and financial planning by bringing together complementary data to support medium-term planning and horizon scanning.	
ACTIONS	LEAD OFFICER – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (RESOURCES)
Develop an integrated medium term planning framework, combining risk and performance with finance data.	
Introduce “horizon scanning” reports to identify emerging trends and risks for consideration by the Executive Management Team on a quarterly basis.	
Refresh appendices and the action plan attached the Council Plan to reflect progress in Year One and provide more clarity regarding the “Areas of Focus” in Year Two onwards.*	
Build on performance management handbooks, including incorporation of risk and increased ‘public’ communication of performance issues.*	
Include the issue of historic equal pay claims to the Council's risk register.*	

*Sub-recommendation



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RECOMMENDATION 4 – BE ‘INTENTIONAL’ IN DEFINING AND EMBEDDING THE CULTURE OF THE COUNCIL	
The Council has a healthy working culture. The development of a new Workforce Strategy, as well as wider governance policies, will require this culture to be articulated and a conscious effort by the organisation to further embed these principles.	
ACTIONS	LEAD OFFICER – CHIEF EXECUTIVE
Prior to launch, undertake further consultation and co-design with staff for the new People Strategy.	
Ensure the launch of the new People Strategy includes definition and protection of current ways of working.	
Once launched, ensure there is a comprehensive awareness raising and communications strategy to underpin the People Strategy.	
Review of the Council’s Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy to ensure it reflects best practice in the Sector.*	
Consider structured team development sessions to support the new appointments to the Executive Management Team and support collaboration and delivery of the Council's priorities.*	
Consider the addition of a further independent Member to the Council's Governance and Audit Committee.*	
Remain live to the benefits of political challenge and discourse ensuring that governance practice and culture reflect this.*	
Revisit Membership and practice of Planning Committee to ensure it is in line with sector norms and best practice.*	
Ensure that the Council's updated Workforce and Organisational Development Strategy is supported by wider policies, procedures and strategy documentation.*	

*Sub-recommendation

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RECOMMENDATION 5 – INCREASE FINANCIAL RESILIENCE AND REPORTING	
Consider the levels of General Fund Reserves (un-earmarked) and the need for refinements in the Council's communication and reporting of financial issues moving forwards.	
ACTIONS	LEAD OFFICER – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (RESOURCES)
The Council's financial strategy will reflect resource allocations required to raise General Balances to 6% of the 2026/27 Net Revenue budget, with an annual risk-based review thereafter.	
Develop a business case for investment in capacity required to address underperformance in the collection of local Council Tax.*	
Increase the reporting frequency of the Council's risk register and internal audit plan.*	

RECOMMENDATION 6 – CONTINUE TO CHAMPION THE NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE BOROUGH WITHIN THE COMBINED AUTHORITY	
The Council has benefited from a proactive relationship with the Combined Authority in recent years, moving forward there is a need to continue to champion and forward plan a pipeline of both the priorities and opportunities of the borough, and ensure that these are emulated within the City Region's growth priorities to support mutual recognition and benefits.	
ACTIONS	LEAD OFFICER – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (REGENERATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT)
Continue to hold joint management meetings with Combined Authority to forward plan and discuss opportunities to deliver shared priorities.	
Establish a process and report on delivery of Knowsley's contributions to Combined Authority projects.	
Consider opportunities for secondments and shared appointments to jointly manage challenging employment markets alongside the Combined Authority.*	

*Sub-recommendation



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RECOMMENDATION 7 – CONTINUE TO PRIORITISE CORPORATELY THE IMPROVEMENT OF CHILDREN’S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES	
There is a need for the Council to continue the investment of time, effort and corporate sponsorship to support this area, especially in the context of the transition to a new Director of Children's Services.	
ACTIONS	LEAD OFFICER – CHIEF EXECUTIVE
Maintain corporate sponsorship for Children's Services Improvement plans, including ensuring resources across the Council are provided as required.	
Ensure a transition and induction plan for the new Executive Director (Children's Services) is developed.	
Monitor and report on the progress of Children's Services improvements.	

RECOMMENDATION 8 – DEVELOP THE COUNCIL’S NARRATIVE	
The Council's communications need to include an overarching narrative that captures achievements, progress, and ongoing challenges, as well as consideration of who is best placed to tell this story to partners and residents.	
ACTIONS	LEAD OFFICER – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (REGENERATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT)
Refresh the existing communications strategy to ensure the Council is maximising opportunities to share the Council narrative.	
Develop case studies and success stories to promote key achievements / successes / progress and challenges to share internally and externally.	
Work with the Stronger Communities Team and build links with the community and voluntary sector network enabling them to help share messages from and on behalf of the Council where appropriate.	
Establish links with the Knowsley Place Board and develop mechanisms to enable cross partner sharing of messages where appropriate.	

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RECOMMENDATION 9 – PRIORITISE AN EXTERNAL FOCUS	
Building on recent ‘reset’ of partnership working, the Council should consider the emerging opportunities for joint approaches on priority issues, recognizing the emerging opportunities for transformation and improvement across organizational boundaries.	
ACTIONS	LEAD OFFICER – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (RESOURCES)
Monitor and report on emerging opportunities to the Council’s Executive Management Team on a quarterly basis.	
Develop a proposal to establish a Boroughwide external calendar for stakeholders and partners to share key opportunities.	
Develop Borough opportunity briefs for investors and developers.	



