

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Bracknell Forest Council

3-6 March 2026

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge

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1. Introduction

A team of local government peers, led by the Local Government Association (LGA) delivered a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) of Bracknell Forest Council from 3-6 March 2026. This was the council's third CPC, following the [previous CPC in 2021](#).

CPC is a well-established and respected improvement and assurance tool that provides robust, strategic and credible challenge and support to councils. Further details about the CPC process can be found in Appendix A.

Our peer team consisted of highly experienced and knowledgeable senior local government councillor and officer peers (see section four). We considered the five core areas covered by all CPCs: local priorities and outcomes, organisational and place leadership, governance and culture, financial planning and management and capacity for improvement.

This report provides Bracknell Forest with feedback on the peer team's findings, illustrated by quotes (*in italics*) that supported the peer team's findings. It provides the council with a set of a high-level recommendations alongside further recommendations under each of the CPC's core areas. There is an expectation the council will publish this report and a clear action plan to respond to all the recommendations highlighted.

2. Executive summary

Bracknell Forest is a well-respected authority delivering good services to residents. The council is leading impressive work to support regeneration and economic development within the town centre and wider area and can highlight well regarded and innovative practice in many different areas.

Members are engaged and visible and there are capable staff doing good work, with both dedicated to what they are doing and the local place. There are positive personal relationships between members and officers, and largely constructive relationships between members, with a transparent and open culture across the organisation. The council is widely seen to be a values-led organisation that lives the ethos of being ambitious, inclusive and always learning.

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The CPC came at a significant juncture for the council; accidentally, with the peer challenge coinciding with an unexpected change of council leader a year before all out elections in 2027, and with the council facing a much more challenging financial position than it has to date.

It is almost three years since the current administration and many new councillors were elected, following the retirement of a long-serving chief executive a few months beforehand. Despite being much closer to the next election than the previous one, the peer team felt there is a tendency for the organisation to still think of the chief executive, and members in particular, as 'new.' The organisation should move on from this framing.

Although relationships between members and officers are good, there is a need to reset roles and responsibilities between them, to fully enable members to set the direction for the organisation and area through visible political decision-making which officers translate into operational implementation.

In support of this, the council could strengthen the impact of key committees to ensure there is appropriate challenge and to provide enhanced assurance about how the council operates. This should form part of a wider piece of work to ensure that the council's governance is fully match fit for the outcome of the next election and what is likely, based on national trends, to be a more complex political environment.

The confirmation of a new council leader is an opportunity to identify a clear set of priorities for the final year of the administration. Alongside this, there is scope to simplify the council's multiple vision, strategy and priorities documents, which have left both staff and partners confused as to the council's strategic ambitions and priorities. Linked to this, there is a need for a simple place narrative for Bracknell Forest that summarises its story, its strengths and where it's going. This will be important to articulate as the council increasingly operates in a larger footprint across the Thames Valley. Political leaders and senior staff are recognised to have played an important role in convening cross-Berkshire work on devolution to date; a stronger narrative for Bracknell Forest will support continued leadership on this agenda.

The council is in the early stages of designing a new Target Operating Model, with

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three design principles – continuous evidence-led decisions, empowering communities, and collaborating and innovating for results – identified. As it takes forward the development of the new way of working, the council will need to work closely with its partners, communities, town and parish councils and residents. Partnerships are generally strong in Bracknell Forest; partners praised the council's collaborative, accessible and proactive approach. However, work is needed to build relationships with the six town and parish councils in the borough, all of which are relatively large and will be crucial to the implementation of the model.

The target operating model is one part of a change approach necessitated by a considerably tougher financial picture following the fair funding review, with the council reliant on drawing on £5m of its existing reserves to balance its 2026/27 budget. Yet while budget shortfalls are a new and difficult challenge for Bracknell Forest, the council is nevertheless in a comparatively favourable financial position, with lower demand pressures than other councils, a comparatively healthy level of reserves and investment assets to draw on.

In this context, there remains an opportunity for the council to take proactive action to address its budgetary issues, rather than rely on external solutions to do so, but there is a need to urgently clarify plans to balance the budget in the short as well as longer term. The council will need to clarify quickly how its emerging change work dovetails with the 2027/28 budget setting timetable; the timetable should build in early engagement with political leaders to ensure clear political direction on savings opportunities.

On its approach to change, the peer team recommends that the council draw together the different elements of its change work into a single, council wide change programme, then draw on the advice that will be provided by the external transformation partner it is currently procuring. The council should empower staff to lead change through processes that enable rather than hinder, facilitating invest to save opportunities and building a positive mindset for change across the whole organisation.

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3. Recommendations

The following are the peer team's key recommendations which have been prioritised on the grounds of urgency and importance.

- 3.1 Recommendation 1: reset roles and responsibilities between politicians and senior officers to improve how political decision making translates into operational implementation.**
- 3.2 Recommendation 2: consolidate different visions and strategies to clarify priorities for the council and place. Develop and promote a clear vision for Bracknell Forest.**
- 3.3 Recommendation 3: strengthen the council's financial management arrangements and clarify the 2027/28 budget timeline to help address the immediate and future funding gap.**
- 3.4 Recommendation 4: take steps to bring together disparate transformation work into a single, whole council programme that supports political priorities and helps address the budget gap.**
- 3.5 Recommendation 5: empower staff to lead change and innovation; actively develop an organisational mindset and processes that promote change. Create funding routes for staff to tap into to support change, potentially through a corporate invest to save pot.**
- 3.6 Recommendation 6: build on existing governance and assurance to ensure there is appropriate challenge and oversight from members and key committees.**
- 3.7 Recommendation 7: recognise the importance of a strong relationship with parish and town councils. Consider involving them more, and earlier, and it will pay dividends in supporting your new operating model.**

In addition to the key recommendations, section five of this report captures our detailed feedback and additional recommendations within each of the CPC's core areas of focus.

4. Peer team

Peer challenges are conducted by experienced LGA peers, including elected councillors and senior officers. The composition of the peer team was shaped by the specific focus of the challenge, with the LGA selecting peers based on their relevant expertise. The peers for this CPC were:

- Tracey Lee, Chief Executive, Plymouth City Council
- Cllr Pete Marland, Leader, Milton Keynes City Council
- Cllr Richard Clewer, Conservative Group Leader, Wiltshire Council
- Alan Foster, Head of Finance, South Tyneside Council
- Chris Sivers, Executive Director, Department for People, South Gloucestershire Council
- Sally Agass, Solace Associate / Interim Director of Place
- Bev Thomas, Adviser, LGA
- Ellie Greenwood, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association (LGA)

5. Detailed feedback and recommended actions

This section of the report provides detailed feedback along with additional recommendations related to the five core areas of focus.

When developing the action plan (in response to the CPC's findings), the council should consider both the key recommendations presented in section three and the additional recommendations set out below.

5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

Bracknell Forest delivers good services to local residents, with strong performance reporting in place. The council has consciously sought to co-produce work with residents and partners, the recent Communities Strategy being an impressive example of this. The council has facilitated impressive work on regeneration and local development, and climate change and EDI are recognised as important priorities in and for the organisation. However, there is confusion about the council's overall vision and top priorities, with scope to streamline the multiple strategies that make up the council's strategic framework. As it does this, the council should seek to embed greater use of data and intelligence to shape its work.

Are the council's priorities clear?

Following the change of control in 2023, a new council plan 2023/27 was developed with three borough priorities (engaged and healthy communities; thriving and connected economy and green and sustainable environment) and an internal enabler priority (ambitious, resilient and sustainable organisation) was agreed. The council prepares an annual refresh of the delivery plan that supports the council plan priorities.

Sitting alongside the council plan is a plethora of overarching vision, strategy and priority documents that form the council's 'strategic framework', including the recently agreed Borough Vision 2050 (a place focused vision), the Local Plan 2024-2037, the newly endorsed Communities Strategy and the embryonic new operating model. All of these sit above the council's various service plans and thematic strategies.

The complexity of this framework and overlap between different documents has led to confusion amongst both staff and partners about the council's key strategic priorities, which people struggled to articulate: *'there are so many different visions.'* The peer team recommends that the council streamlines these multiple documents to help achieve a much clearer focus on the council's top priorities and how it will deliver them, then align this with its medium term financial strategy (MTFS): *'We have a strategy and a plan for everything – what is less clear is the so what and outcomes.'*

Despite confusion about the council's different strategies, climate change and sustainability is well recognised as one of the council's top priorities, with strong political leadership on this agenda. The council has helped establish good partnership working on climate change (see section two) and developed a new climate strategy supported by an annual action plan.

Similarly, the council's commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion is well-understood. The recent All of Us Equality Scheme 2025-29 refreshed the council's statutory equality objectives; this was published alongside a 2024/25 equalities monitoring report which includes general commentary, action plan progress and performance measures relating to equalities; detailed individual service area reports are also published. The council's equality work is overseen by an internal Equalities Group headed up by the Assistant Director Communities and Policy. The Executive Director of Resources attends this group as the Corporate Management Team (CMT) Equalities Lead.

Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context?

The council has sought to develop a co-production approach and strengthen engagement with communities. The Communities Strategy is an impressive example of co-production, with the focus on community action and community cohesion in part a response to cohesion challenges experienced within Bracknell Forest and other areas in 2024. Over twenty organisations and more than 3,000 residents were involved in the development of the strategy and there is good awareness of it among local stakeholders. The new strategy builds on work developed through the Thriving Communities programme, a three-year strength-based programme between the council, health services and voluntary, community and faith sector (VCFS) to empower communities. The peer team was impressed with the Thriving Communities stakeholder engagement observed during the peer challenge.

To further enhance the co-production approach being adopted across the council, Bracknell Forest should continually review its approach to assess what worked well and less well and identify parts of the population where it achieved less engagement (this approach was adopted in the development of the Communities Strategy, with independent evaluation identifying population cohorts to target in later engagement

work). The council should ensure it consistently undertakes engagement on a place basis as well as on a demographic basis and is able to articulate this, mapping this in terms of ward and / or lower super output area rather than town / parish areas to enable highly targeted local engagement. The council should also continue to strengthen its relationship with the VCFS by reviewing where its working practices may inadvertently create challenges for local partners.

Although there are examples of good practice in using data across the council, Bracknell Forest has not yet developed and embedded a consistent, data led approach across the organisation: *'We were told we would be a data driven organisation but we lack time to use and analyse data'*; *'We need to live what we say about being an evidence / data led organisation.'* Currently, individual services have their own structures for managing data, and there is no corporate data or business intelligence function within the council. There is good scope for the council to become more data and intelligence led and use data to inform demand modelling and budget forecasting, which the council has recognised in the principles for the new operating model.

Delivery against priorities and comparative performance

Bracknell Forest Council delivers good services across a range of different areas. Its inspection results are very positive, with 'good' outcomes from regulators for youth justice services (2024), adult social care (2024) and an outstanding judgement for the council's children home (2025); impressively, it recently retained its 'outstanding' judgement in children's services. An area special educational needs (SEND) inspection in early 2025 identified systemic weaknesses and issued an improvement notice but the council has an improvement plan and is making progress in its plans to strengthen the service. The council has responded to a letter of contravention from the Building Safety Regular in October 2025 with its plan to address the issues identified.

The peer team was impressed with the examples of good practice it heard about in Bracknell Forest. There is effective preventative work taking place in children's services; the family safeguarding model has helped reduce the number of children in care, with the new model is helping the council to support children outside of

expensive care packages. There has been highly impactful work to identify young carers, with the number the council is aware of and supporting increasing from 160 to 960.

On housing, Bracknell Forest has been identified as an exemplar by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for its work on temporary accommodation. The council has invested general fund money in new units of accommodation, with a current stock of 155 units leading to minimal use of bed and breakfast accommodation. The council is looking to make creative and effective use of its allocation policies to help address specific challenges with housing demand and prioritise those in the greatest need, such as care leavers. This flexible and proactive approach is worth both noting and encouraging

The council is proud of its shared services, with a long-standing joint public protection partnership with West Berkshire council, and it has managed its external, contracted services effectively, leading to a visibly well-maintained local area. Following the earlier development of the Lexicon, the council is progressing further regeneration plans for the town centre, using developer contributions to support new housing.

[The council's LGA LG Inform report](#) shows that the council is similar to or compares favourably with its CIPFA near neighbours on a significant majority of indicators, including those directly within the council's control (for example, NNDR collection rates, the time taken to process housing benefit claims and the percentage of child protection cases reviewed within required timescales) as well as more contextual indicators (such as skills achievement levels within the local population). The council has a poorer comparative performance on a much smaller number of indicators, including the number of affordable homes delivered. The council's average Band D council tax rate is also below that of its near neighbours.

[Bracknell Forest's performance reports for quarter two 2025/26](#) also indicates a generally strong performance picture. 78 percent of actions were RAG rated green, 21 percent amber (with no concerns) and just one action (one percent) was RAG rated red. Of the council's 90 performance and contextual indicators, 80 percent were RAG rated green, seven percent amber, and eleven percent red.

Is there an organisation-wide approach to continuous improvement?

There is a shared sense internally that the council lives its value of 'always learning', with a focus on learning and development and sharing knowledge / skills to support improvement across the organisation (see section five).

The council plan is the primary focus of Bracknell Forest's performance monitoring, with an annual delivery plan and indicators informed by individual service plans and quality assured by the corporate performance team. A new in-house performance management system, PRISM, supports the council plan performance metrics, with plans to roll this out to cover service plan performance reporting too.

Corporate reporting is through the council plan overview report (CPOR), an integrated quarterly performance report combining a progress update on actions supporting the council plan's strategic themes; revenue budget monitoring; the latest corporate health statistics, and a short section on strategic risks and audits. The report combines highlights and commentary as well as RAG ratings and trend data for individual actions. Corporate health data includes the latest workforce statistics, complaints data and a more detailed overview of some complaints.

The CPOR is shared with the corporate management team, Overview and Scrutiny Commission and Cabinet and reported to council; it is also published on the performance section of the council's website, alongside links to individual service plan performance reports.

The peer team was impressed with the integrated approach to performance reporting in Bracknell Forest. To enhance this further, the council could in future incorporate capital budget monitoring and more detailed information about the council's risk management, including the strategic risk register; it could also include benchmarking data against other authorities where this is available.

The peer team heard strong praise both internally and externally for the health and care dashboard produced by the public health team: the council could use this as a model for other services as the council seeks to strengthen its use of data and intelligence.

In addition to key recommendation two (clarifying the council's priorities), we also

recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **In the short term, the new political leadership should identify a clear set of priorities to take it up to next year's election.**
- **Build on co-production work by continually reviewing what worked and what didn't to ensure you are consistently reaching all parts of the community and can articulate this, building on existing work targeting health inequalities and the engagement work for the Communities Strategy.**
- **There is less progress in the use of data and intelligence, with no systematic approach to demand management and modelling: strengthen your forecasting and link this to budget planning**

5.2 Organisational and place leadership

The council is involved in impactful partnership working that is helping to improve services and amenities in Bracknell Forest; partners praised the council's willingness to engage and the responsiveness of its staff in support of local partnerships.

Senior officers and political leaders at Bracknell Forest have played an important role in convening cross Berkshire work to establish the Berkshire Prosperity Board and develop the joint devolution bid for the wider Thames Valley. However, to support Bracknell Forest as it increasingly operates in this wider footprint, the council should help develop a clear place narrative and pitch for the area. At a more local level, the council should focus on building relationships with its parish and town councils, which are notably less positive than with other partners.

Leadership in the council is visible and well respected. Although the council has a collaborative and supportive culture, it should reflect on how to break down the silos that exist within the organisation.

Does the council provide effective organisational leadership?

Senior officers in Bracknell Forest are felt to be visible and available within the organisation. Staff communications are good, with a weekly email authored by a member of corporate management team (CMT), a weekly staff email bulletin and a

monthly staff magazine. All staff briefings take place quarterly; on a six-monthly basis, the leader attends to brief staff on achievements and upcoming developments. Staff appreciate the visibility of the leader and portfolio holders within the organisation.

The council's CMT meet weekly, while the senior leadership group (SLG) (also including Assistant Directors) meets monthly; managers forum meetings – comprising SLG and all managers – also take place monthly. Politically, Cabinet meet monthly for routine meetings, with Cabinet briefing taking place in advance of these. There are also quarterly CMT and Cabinet workshops. As it reflects on the peer team's feedback on roles and responsibilities of senior members and officers (see section 3), the council should think about how these shared leadership spaces can support this reset.

The council could strengthen its leadership structures through the creation of a heads of service network: this is common in other authorities and would provide a valuable forum for this group to discuss common challenges and share learning across the organisation. In doing so, it would help to break down silos within the organisation; the peer team heard consistently that although the council is very collaborative, it can also be silo-ed, with partners remarking on a lack of join up between different teams that they engage with.

Golden triangle officers – the chief executive, section 151 officer and monitoring officer – meet regularly, around every four to six weeks. For historic reasons, the monitoring officer does not sit on CMT, although the role has access to all CMT papers and can feed in to it. The council should review this arrangement as the [CIPFA / LLG / Solace Code of Practice on Good Governance](#) is clear (point 4.2C) that a monitoring officer 'should be a full and active member of the authority's most senior leadership team' and that the 'monitoring officer should have a clear and direct relationship to the head of paid service (chief executive), normally through line management or other equivalent arrangement.' Bracknell Forest should review where the role currently sits in its structure chart and the capacity required to support it, balancing the needs of operational demands with importance of the monitoring officer role.

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Are there good relationships with partners and local communities? How does the council lead its place?

The peer team heard very positive feedback from most partners about their work with the council, with good relationships evident across numerous areas. Partners appreciate the council's willingness to engage and its clear commitment to partnership working.

The council's strong relationship with local health services is enabling real benefits for local residents; joint work to co-locate health and community services includes the Binfield health and community hub and a new Bracknell town centre health and wellbeing hub, while the Heathlands integrated care home provides dementia and immediate care beds to support hospital discharge. With changes to ICB structures formally taking effect in April, there is a risk of this strong partnership working being disrupted, however. The council will work hard to mitigate this, but some factors will be beyond its control.

There has been effective joint work in relation to regeneration and place shaping. The council is working with private sector partners to drive further town centre regeneration projects following the impressive Lexicon development; a town centre masterplan has been developed with proposals to increase housing and affordable housing and redevelop the station and bus station as a gateway to the town. The council's joint venture with Countryside Properties, the Cambium Partnership, is leading on the development of sites already identified for regeneration and intended to bring forward additional sites. Service oversight of the Partnership within the council currently sits with the Resources Directorate; the peer team felt this could be moved to the Place Directorate given the linkages to its work (something the council is already considering). As it considers moving this, the council should also conduct a review of the current governance, assurance and oversight arrangements for the Partnership to ensure these are in line with best practice.

The council is also working with other commercial and non-commercial partners to drive developments elsewhere in the borough. It has shaped and benefitted from an innovative approach to working with the Land Trust at Buckler's Park, a new residential community in Crowthorne including a modern care home, community hub,

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a planned primary / specialist SEND school and which will ultimately deliver 1,000 new homes. The council is managing land owned by the Land Trust adjacent to the development and has helped transform it from a site with low biodiversity value into one of the best local wildlife and nature sites in the borough. Developer contributions from the site have been used to support a new housing development in Bracknell town centre.

Bracknell Forest has shown strong local leadership on the climate change agenda, with a Joint Climate Action Board established to bring together volunteers and council representatives to take a coordinated approach on this and link up residents, businesses and partners such as health. As a forerunner of the council's more recent coproduction work, the wider Bracknell Forest Climate Community Action group brought together a group of volunteers and representatives that has since established working groups on key topics, run school workshops and supported the development of a community climate strategy.

Although generally very positive in their feedback, partners acknowledged confusion about the council's overlapping strategies and questioned whether there may be overlaps between different partnership boards and sub-boards. To further enhance its partnership working, Bracknell Forest could consider reviewing its partnership structures and their terms of reference to ensure they align with its clarified key priorities, are not duplicating each other and are action-focused.

Parish and town councils, the VCFS and regional relationships

Bracknell Forest has played an important role in convening work to develop the new Berkshire Prosperity Board and the joint expression of interest with Oxfordshire local authorities and Swindon Borough Council for a Mayoral Strategic Authority, with personal praise for the role of the council chief executive, former leader and Executive Director of Place in supporting this. As the council increasingly operates in a larger Thames Valley footprint, it will become more important that it can tell, and sell, the story of Bracknell Forest; where it fits within the wider region and its role in relation to bigger and higher profile towns and cities. The council does not currently have a simple place narrative that does this; the peer team recommends that alongside streamlining its visions and priorities, the council works on a simple place

story for Bracknell Forest which it can promote with the support of local partners, who are keen to do this.

At a more local level, relationships with Bracknell Forest's six town and parish councils were noticeably less positive than with other partners (although there is a good relationship with the democratic services team), with frustration expressed at the perception of the council asking for help and financial contributions on issues where it could have engaged more beforehand. It will be important for the council to address this and build stronger relationships. Bracknell Forest's town and parish councils are relatively large, with the potential to be extremely helpful long term partners, not least in implementing both the Communities Strategy and the new operating model. Empowering and trusting town and parish councils is critical to enabling their capacity and place shaping potential: regular engagement at officer level, rather than relying on twin-hatted councillors to act as a conduit between different organisations, is an important first step to assist with this.

Relationships with the VCFS are more positive and are felt to have improved in recent years: there are examples of good partnership working in localities with the sector managing some of the new community hubs that have been developed across the borough. However, the council will need to consider how it can build further capacity in the VCFS to help deliver the new operating model (recognising that capacity is not distributed evenly across the borough), and specifically what financial and other support will be required to do this. Immediate issues the council could consider jointly with the sector include the proportionality of its commissioning and tendering processes; the need to levy charges for room hire for the VCFS to deliver council commissioned services from council facilities; and the sector's capacity to engage with multiple meetings.

In addition to key recommendation seven (strengthening relationships with town and parish councils), we also recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **Develop a compelling vision and narrative that helps promote Bracknell Forest, then proactively sell it.**
- **Map out the council's key partnerships and review terms of reference to**

ensure clarity of focus, avoid duplication and focus on outcomes.

- **Review where the Cambium Partnership sits, given the linkages to the place directorate agenda, and governance and oversight arrangements for it.**
- **Think about how to break down silos. Create a heads of service network to share learning across the organisation; give staff more regular opportunities to come together and share views as they have done during the CPC.**

5.3 Governance and culture

There is a generally constructive and inclusive political culture at Bracknell Forest focused on building consensus; member / officer relationships are also positive and senior officers and leaders work well together. However, there is a need to reset relationships between the two so that members are visibly setting the direction for officers to implement, and to reframe the narrative around a 'new' administration and 'new' chief executive.

The council has solid governance and has taken recent steps to strengthen key areas, including amending the constitution and revising its internal audit processes. The council should maintain this focus, ensuring governance mechanisms are updated ahead of the May 2027 election and building on the existing member development offer to help strengthen the work of Overview and Scrutiny and the Governance and Audit Committee. Golden triangle arrangements should be reviewed, with scope to incorporate internal audit into these meetings to help reflect the importance of this to the wider organisation.

Are there clear and robust governance arrangements?

Bracknell Forest has well established governance arrangements, with scope to strengthen these further. This is a good point for the council to review and reflect its procedures and culture, with a recent change of political leadership and the next election just a year away.

Member / officer relationships are positive at the council, with staff feeling challenged, but not inappropriately: *‘there are good working relationships with*

members: we get pressure but not overstepping the line. There are also good relationships between senior officers and members, however the peer team felt that there is an opportunity for the council to reset relationships between them to more clearly delineate roles and responsibilities, with political leadership visibly setting the direction for the organisation and officers translating this into operational delivery. Moving on from the narrative of 'new' members and a 'new' administration will support this as the administration moves into the final year of its four-year term.

The council's monitoring officer has been leading work to review elements of the council's constitution and related processes. The peer team encourages the council to ensure this a comprehensive and systematic review of the full constitution, related procedures, schemes of delegation and meeting protocols to provide assurance that these are match fit ahead of the 2027 election and what is likely – based on national trends – to be a more contested political space after it. Refresher sessions for both staff and members (including after the election) that outline the key operational workings of the council can help to embed understanding of this. As noted above, the council should ensure that the monitoring officer has sufficient capacity to focus on governance matters alongside other responsibilities.

Audit and risk

The council's paperwork indicated some recent challenges with internal audit, in terms of team capacity, finalising reports and tracking management actions arising from them. It appears that steps have been taken to address this, with a new permanent member of staff recruited in summer 2025 (although the long-standing head of internal audit will shortly retire), a new system for tracking actions, and proposed new timescales for agreeing reports which reflect other pressures on teams.

Internal audit has an important role to play as part of a wider framework to provide necessary assurance to senior members and officers. The council's CMT and Audit and Governance Committee will need to maintain close oversight of internal audit delivery and outcomes, to ensure that internal audit is focusing on key control issues and being given sufficient priority across the organisation. Including the head of internal audit as part of golden triangle meetings on a periodic basis would help to

emphasise the importance of internal audit and ensure a clear line of sight between the service and the council's most senior officers.

The council has recently changed external auditors, moving from Ernst and Young to KPMG with effect from the 2023/24 accounts. Ongoing backlogs and capacity issues in local government audit mean the council's accounts have been disclaimed since 2022/23. The external auditor's year-end report to the Governance and Audit Committee (dated January 2026) noted that the 2024/25 accounts will also be disclaimed but summarised key issues identified in their work to date on the council's accounts. Although the value for money assessment of the report identified two risks in relation to financial sustainability - budgetary management and procurement, and social care provision - there were no significant weaknesses identified in the council's arrangements and no key recommendations.

Going forward, to strengthen its assurance about the council's finances, the Governance and Audit committee should be supported to help ensure there is appropriate challenge and focus from the external auditor, notwithstanding the council's disclaimed accounts and backstop arrangements. The peer team felt that the role of the Governance and Audit Committee could be sharpened through a fuller understanding of the role and terms of reference of the committee and its scope to determine the issues it wants to examine: external training and resources, including financial training to support the Committee's discussions, are available to help with this. The peer team also recommend that the council recruits a second independent member to the Committee, in line with CIPFA best practice for audit committees.

The council's risk management process appears robust, with regular oversight of the strategic risk register by the Strategic Risk Management Group and CMT ahead of consideration by the Governance and Audit Committee. There are eight risks on the strategic risk register, with the potential impact, risk trajectory, current actions, further mitigations and owners / timelines included for each. As noted above, the peer team recommends the council consider adding the risk register to the council plan overview report to strengthen oversight.

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Annual Governance Statement

The council's Annual Governance Statement is a short summary of the control framework and mechanisms that provide assurance about the council's governance. The council could consider how different directorates contribute to the development of this important document, with scope to enhance the statement through deeper collaboration, involvement from a wider range of teams and officers (potentially through a cross-organisation assurance group) and a more detailed action plan.

Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?

Bracknell Forest's position statement noted that having a minority administration reinforced the need for 'collaborative governance, constructive cross-party engagement and consensus building on strategic priorities' and the peer team found that the council has a transparent and generally collaborative, inclusive political culture. The council has embedded briefings to all groups, including opposition parties, ahead of Cabinet meetings, with minority groups briefed by a member of CMT. Opposition groups meet monthly with the chief executive and several group leaders met regularly with the former leader. There is recognition that this level of access is not always available to opposition parties in other councils.

In line with this approach, and commendably, the council's main Overview and Scrutiny Commission has an opposition chair and vice chair. The council also supports three scrutiny panels (focusing on health and care, environment and communities and education, skills and growth) which deliver work through task and finish approaches. The peer team heard a consistent view that the scrutiny function has improved since the 2023 election, but that there is more to do to support members and enable it to operate more effectively, including drawing on a work programme aligned to the council's forward plan.

Bracknell Forest takes member development seriously. It has councillor development charter plus status and a recent councillor learning and development strategy 2025-28 overseen by a councillor development charter steering group. An induction plan was developed and implemented after the 2023 election; the council worked with the LGA to source mentors for the new Cabinet and there is good take up of LGA training

courses. A mid-year report on induction programme was produced covering 2023-2025 and the council sought member feedback on it to help inform the development of the 2027 induction programme; it is also proposing to run a local Be a Councillor campaign to encourage local people to explore becoming a councillor.

As it approaches the 2027 election, the council should maintain a focus on member development; firstly, by reviewing the support available for key committees and their members, as well as reflecting on how to support members to fulfil their roles as political leaders; and secondly, by continuing to develop an induction programme for 2027 that builds on feedback and previous experience. Ensuring councillors continue to benefit from mentoring and networking with other councillors will also be important.

Staff culture

Staff reported a supportive, inclusive culture at the council. The recent 2025 staff survey – the first since 2022/23 - highlighted strong feedback with positive results on the extent to which staff feel heard, inclusion and respect, and line manager support. The survey indicated higher levels of staff morale since the previous survey although as the survey methodology has changed since 2022/23, results are not directly comparable: the council should repeat the survey using the new methodology to start to build up comparable trend data.

The staff survey also indicated some challenges around behaviours experienced by staff with disabilities and who are BAME, however; work is underway to try to address this, including creating a confidential reporting portal to make it easier to speak up, running training and workshops on related issues and running a follow up survey in May 2026 to ensure progress is made. The council should maintain efforts to ensure that the clear intent on inclusion set at the top of the organisation is felt consistently throughout it.

There are a number of staff networks representing different groups of staff and feeding in their experience to the organisation's Equality Group, chaired by the Assistant Director Communities and Policy. A network of Equality Allies and Mental Health First Aiders are in place to provide advice and signpost staff to support. The networks currently operate differently and informally; the council could consider

strengthening these by assigning a senior manager sponsor to link into networks, and allowing limited, dedicated staff time to coordinate and manage them, as is common in other councils.

In addition to key recommendations one and six (to reset relationships and ensure appropriate challenge and oversight), we also recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **Ensure governance mechanisms (constitution, procedures, delegations etc) are match fit ahead of the 2027 election and a potentially more complex political environment.**
- **Strengthen the Annual Governance Statement by reflecting on how departments contribute and drawing together a cross-organisation Assurance Group to support this.**
- **Ensure the importance of effective internal audit is recognised across the organisation; consider including the head of internal audit in monthly golden triangle meetings on a periodic basis.**
- **Support the Overview and Scrutiny and Governance and Audit Committees to fully understand their roles, shape their work programmes and ensure appropriate assurance about the council, including from both internal and external audit.**
- **Strengthen staff networks by identifying senior sponsors and allowing limited, dedicated staff time to coordinate them.**

5.4 Financial planning and management

Bracknell Forest has been in a strong financial position to date. However, as an area of low deprivation, the fair funding changes have significantly altered the council's financial outlook and it is intending to draw down five million pounds of reserves to balance the 2026/27 budget.

The council does not yet have a plan to address the short or longer term funding gap, although plans to bring in an external transformation model and implement a new

target operating model alongside its existing change work. The council quickly needs to pull all this together into a coherent strategy for delivering the savings required, recognising that – despite its challenges – it is starting from a relatively strong position and can retain control of its position.

Alongside developing its approach, the council should ensure that measures to strengthen its financial management have been successfully embedded, that it is making better use of data to inform forecasting and financial monitoring, and that members have appropriate oversight of key financial information through regular reporting.

Does the council have a clear understanding of its financial position?

There is broad understanding within the council that it is shifting from what has been a very comfortable financial position to a more challenging one.

The council has historically been well funded, having particularly benefitted from business rates retention in recent years. Consequently, with the exception of 2023/24, Bracknell Forest has consistently delivered within its annual budget. However, as an area with low rates of deprivation, the council has fared less well from the fair funding changes than other councils, receiving a 0.2 percent increase in core spending power between 2026/27 and 2028/29 compared to 2025/26. The council's ability to set a balanced budget for 2026/27 relied on it drawing down £5m from its reserves.

Despite this more challenging funding context, it is important to recognise that the council is starting from a relatively favourable financial position that many others would envy. Bracknell Forest has lower debt and lower debt servicing than comparable councils, and both general and earmarked reserves are above the average for comparable councils (although easily exhausted). The council's People Directorate has shown its ability to manage demand, with the number of children in care brought down, and there are relatively low numbers in temporary accommodation or presenting as homeless, typically a major cost driver for many councils.

The council has an investment property portfolio that is generating rental income, but

which also offers a source of potential disposals and capital receipts; at the end of 2025, the council agreed to dispose of one of its assets and has subsequently reviewed its strategic asset management plan for the portfolio. While the Cambium Partnership has not to date delivered the level of financial returns anticipated, prudently, these had not been incorporated into the council's base budget and some level of income is being generated. Bracknell Forest also has the potential for a growth dividend linked to the delivery of new housing in the town centre and wider area.

Financial management and monitoring

The council has been managing a council-wide financial management programme as part of its corporate improvement portfolio, in response to an internal audit report and external review by PWC which identified scope to modernise financial governance and systems. The focus of the programme includes upgrading systems and new training for budget managers to strengthen resilience and improve efficiency.

The peer team recommends that the council assess progress against the programme plan to ensure planned changes are being implemented and are becoming embedded. Work to introduce the No PO No Pay programme should be expedited as this is not yet complete but an important basic principle of sound financial governance.

The council should maintain its focus on ensuring clear roles and responsibilities between budget managers and business partners, with effective support needed for budget managers to understand, monitor and manage their budgets effectively. The peer team heard that budget managers are at different levels within the organisations (with some heads of service having limited involvement in this area) and that for some budget holders, there is an element of mystery about the origins of their budgets (*'three years in, I now understand the mysterious ancient myths of how the budget came to be'*).

A linked point is the scope to make better use of data to predict future demand, forecast expenditure and set budgets scope. Ensuring there is a link through from data to budgeting should form part of the council's work to increase the use of data

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18 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ www.local.gov.uk Telephone 020 7664 3000 Email info@local.gov.uk

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Chief Executive: Joanna Killian

President: Baroness Grey-Thompson

and intelligence across the organisation.

Financial reporting to Cabinet is on a quarterly basis through the CPOR, which is also reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission. As noted, the peer team was impressed with the integrated approach to performance reporting but felt that financial reporting within this could be strengthened. Most unitary councils report capital monitoring to members on a similar rhythm to their revenue monitoring; including capital finance reporting within the CPOR would bring Bracknell Forest into line with common practice in other councils.

The peer team also recommends that the council review the content of its MTFS reports and the granularity of financial information included in the CPOR, to ensure greater clarity on key messages (such as the overall budget gap) and a focus on actions taking place to address high cost and key pressure areas, with summaries of smaller savings or budget lines. A review of comparable reports in other authorities could help strengthen the council's reporting in this area.

Does the council have a strategy and plan to address its financial challenges?

The council does not yet have a clearly articulated plan to address its immediate or medium-term financial challenges. Although it is taking steps to develop its approach, including procuring an external transformation partner, asking directorates to identify savings and developing a change programme, at the current time the council is reliant on utilising £5m of reserves to balance the 2026/27 budget, has an £18.75m budget gap over three years and will need to move quickly to develop a plan for closing the gap.

On the overall strategic approach, senior officers will need to work with political leaders to identify, present and determine options for tackling the financial challenge, recognising that difficult political decisions will need to be taken. The peer team recommends that the council's strategy to address its financial position is based on controlling its own destiny rather than placing reliance on externally determined options which may not be open to Bracknell Forest, or other councils, in future.

The council is in the process of procuring an external partner intended to identify target areas for transformation to release savings. With this work not expected to

conclude until early Autumn, the timeline for setting the 2027/28 budget, savings plans and updated MTFS will require careful management and sequencing. The council should quickly finalise the timetable for 2027/28 budget setting, taking account of its change and transformation plans and ensuring early engagement with political leaders and members is built in, particularly with an election due in May 2027.

While awaiting the findings of its transformation partner, the council will need to continue internal work to identify short term savings, not least to minimise how much it draws down on the £5m reserves set aside to balance the 2026/27 budget. Officers are aware that there are lessons to be learnt from a savings exercise in 2025 that initially asked for invest to save ideas but ultimately tasked services with identifying savings at a flat rate of ten percent. The council could consider holding focused 'budget weeks' that set aside dedicated time and bring together staff from across the organisation to focus on collaborative cross-organisational approaches to delivering savings. The combination of an election in 2027 and difficult decisions required to balance the budget and MTFS emphasise again the importance of acting early to identify and embed savings.

The council's more challenging financial context, and implementation / embedding of the financial management improvement programme, coincides with the expected retirement of senior officers in the Resources Directorate. Early succession planning will therefore need to be a focus to maintain service resilience at a critical time for the council's financial planning and management.

In addition to key recommendation three (clarifying the budget timeline and route to closing the budget gap), we also recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **Shift the mindset to recognise the council's power to change things; develop a clear plan to balance the books and be in control of your own destiny rather than rely on something that may or may not be an option.**
- **Review and strengthen finance reporting to Cabinet.**
- **Increase the consistency of financial monitoring and forecasting, making**

greater use data to support this.

- **Support the Governance and Audit Committee to fully understand the scope of its role and powers.**

5.5 Capacity for improvement

The council has several necessary building blocks in place to deliver improvement and change. It has already demonstrated the ability to deliver change (for example the retention and recruitment project) and manage demand; the organisation has capable staff and a learning culture to build on, with staff keen to make a difference and innovate.

The council is taking steps to develop its change / transformation programme but will need to bring disparate elements together and prioritise these into a coherent programme with a timetable aligned to the council's financial planning. To support transformation, the council should review how key enabling functions are arranged; it should also consider the distribution of capacity across the organisation to ensure limited resources are utilised most effectively.

Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities?

Staffing and organisation health

The council has capable staff who are dedicated to the work that they do, well regarded internally and externally, and seen as *'really hard working and committed.'* With a number of retirements from key roles imminent, it will need to focus on succession planning across the organisation and facilitating a smooth transition to new staff in key roles. The council compares favourably on corporate health indicators; staff voluntary turnover and average days sickness absence per employee per year are lower than the rate for other unitary councils and neighbouring Berkshire councils. Relationships between the council and trade union are strong: an important starting point for an organisation at the beginning of a transformation journey.

There is a good learning culture at Bracknell Forest, with staff appreciative of the learning and career development opportunities available to them, reflected in the staff

survey and the feedback to the peer team. The council's 'academy model' has mapped out structured career development pathways across services, from entry level roles to senior leadership. Staff take responsibility for learning and sharing and have launched staff networks on community engagement, climate change and digital skills, with digital navigators identified to help build skills and confidence.

With 'always learning' one of the council values, there is a sense that the organisation does live its values - *'we live our core values and they bind us together.'* Feedback about the senior management team modelling organisational values was particularly strong in the staff survey.

The council has recently launched a new achievement and development framework based around four-six weekly one to one conversations between staff and managers. The framework is being applied pragmatically (given different supervision arrangements in some teams) but is felt to have encouraged regular and open conversations. The peer team was particularly impressed with the 'My Wellbeing Passport' section of the achievement and development review, setting out specific individual needs and preferences.

Current approach to change and improvement

The council's current approach to business change and corporate improvement is split between cross council change programmes intended to improve services and generate savings, and corporate improvement programmes aimed at improving services where they are inadequate or have failed. Beyond this, a larger-scale transformation programme is now being mapped out (see next section). The council is taking part in an early cohort of Impower's Complex Transformation Academy, working with four other councils to develop its capacity for complex change, with the participants from Bracknell Forest focusing on adult social care transformation.

The council has recent organisational experience of delivering impactful business change and improvement to build on. The cross-organisation workforce retention and recruitment project tackled high agency spend and recruitment challenges by introducing tighter controls, converting agency roles to permanent positions and launching an academy model to grow talent internally. £2.8m was saved between

2023/24 and 2024/25 (against a £1m target) with the project delivering its outcomes in a single rather than three year period. The work provides a model for future project 'sprints' that can rapidly target priority areas of work and savings.

Within services, as noted, there are good examples of introducing new models and preventative working that have already delivered benefits to service users and to the organisation.

Bracknell Forest has started to introduce the use of artificial intelligence, with co-pilot rolled out to a number of staff and an AI strategy published. To date, co-pilot has primarily been used by the organisation's key report writers, as a low risk area of focus, but there has been less progress in introducing AI in areas where it is being introduced in other councils, for example adult social care and children's services. The peer team heard different views about why this not yet happened; the council should quickly review its processes for piloting and subsequently rolling out the use of AI in other services as the appetite to do so is there.

Does the council have the capacity to improve?

Bracknell Forest is a small council with around 1200 employees. Staff reflected that *'the size of the council is one of it's biggest strength but also a weakness'* with the council delivering the same services as much larger organisations despite fewer resources.

The issue of capacity came up repeatedly during the CPC. As in other councils, staff are being asked to do more with less; however, there is particular frustration about self-serve processes accounting for a significant amount of manager time, for example to service recruitment or lead procurement of less than £150,000: *'we need to use people in the right way, in the roles they have spent years training to do'* was a view widely shared within the organisation. While managers inevitably do have to take on additional responsibilities beyond their specific area of expertise, given the level and consistency of frustration, the peer team recommends that the council reviews the balance of responsibilities between corporate support services and service directorates and then ensures that necessary processes for managers are appropriately streamlined. '

The council could also consider reviewing the distribution of capacity within the organisation, which appeared to the peer team to be rather top-heavy. The peer team felt that the council has a large number of assistant director posts which are unevenly distributed between different departments: a spans and layers review may be useful in helping to identify how capacity should be arranged to ensure the delivery of priorities when there is limited resource.

The issue of flexible / hybrid working came up in several thoughtful discussions with staff during the CPC, without clear consensus on whether the council's approach should be changed. Staff appreciate the flexibility they have to work remotely, and there is recognition that without this, it would have been impossible to fill some roles. However, many suggested that there would be benefits to staff being in the office more than once a week, particularly for younger or less experienced staff; and there was appreciation that some teams already are in more regularly, meaning there is a lack of consistency across the organisation. This may be an issue the council wishes to consider with staff in future.

Future change and transformation

As noted above, the council has an established approach to change and improvement. The council's approach to change is currently evolving, with the procurement of an external partner to help shape the future approach and the early work on the new operating model developing alongside existing change work. These different plans have not yet coalesced into a single council-wide change programme that will help to deliver the savings required by the organisation: the council should focus on pulling the different strands together into a coherent programme with clear sequencing and prioritisation, recognising the potential challenges for a small organisation trying to deliver too much simultaneously, even with an external partner being identified.

The council has capable change leads working to pull a programme together, with established change governance already in place; there are monthly programme boards chaired by senior responsible officers for existing programmes, a change board at CMT and monthly briefings to relevant individual cabinet members. The council will find it helpful to consider the distribution of key enabling functions for

change – data and intelligence, IT and digital, HR and OD - as these are currently based in disparate parts of the organisation.

Alongside considering enabling functions, the council's change programme could consider a cultural strand to help embed a mindset for change across the organisation, so that everyone understands that change is everybody's business, particularly at more senior levels within the organisation. This will need to be facilitated through supporting processes that enable rather than block; feedback suggested that processes and, again, capacity are barriers to this currently, with suggestions of '*an openness to innovation but a lack of time to think*' and frustration at the perceived barriers to invest to save approaches and changing working practices.

In addition to key recommendations four and five (creating a single transformation programme and empowering staff we also recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **Review the balance of responsibilities between corporate and service teams and ensure appropriately streamlined processes.**
- **Review the distribution of capacity at different levels within the organisation.**
- **Consider how enabling functions are arranged across the organisation.**
- **Break down silos where they exist between teams and take time to engage internally and externally.**
- **Ensure succession planning is taking place in key areas of the council.**

6. Action plan and progress review

The senior political and managerial leadership of the council should review and reflect on the findings and recommendations from this CPC.

To promote the principle of transparency, it is a requirement of the CPC process that the final report of the peer team is published in-full within three months of the review being completed. In this instance, this requires the report to be published no later

than 6 June 2026.

There is a requirement for Bracknell Forest Council to develop and publish an action plan within five-months of the peer team being onsite, no later than 6 August 2026. This action plan should provide clarity on the activity, milestones, and timelines that the council will work to in responding to the team's findings.

The action plan will also be central to the peer team's re-engagement with Bracknell Forest Council through a progress review which is due to be completed and published by 6 March 2027.

The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) have published the Best Value Standards for Local Authorities. These standards expect every council to engage in a Corporate or Finance Peer Challenge at least every five-years. It is expected that Bracknell Forest would commission their next Corporate Peer Challenge no later than March 2031.

7. Contact details

In the meantime, Ellie Greenwood, Senior Regional Adviser, is the main contact between your council and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Ellie is available to discuss any further support you require and can be contacted on ellie.greenwood@local.gov.uk

Appendix A – What is CPC?

CPC is a valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officer peers undertaking a comprehensive review of key information and spending three days at the council to provide robust, strategic, and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the [improvement and assurance framework](#) for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of [Sector-led Improvement](#) (SLI) put in place by councils and the LGA to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These principles state that councils are responsible for their own performance; accountable locally, not nationally; share a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector; and rely on the LGA to provide the tools to support them. CPC is also key to councils in meeting their [Best Value duty](#). UK Government expect all councils to have a CPC at least every five years.

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five areas which form the core components of all CPCs. These are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **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? What is the relative financial resilience of the council?

5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

As part of the five core areas outlined above, every CPC has a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance, and assurance

The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are designed to support improvement, not inspection. They are not intended to provide a detailed or technical assessment of plans and proposals. Instead, the peer team uses its experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information shared with them, the things they observe, and the material they review.

To prepare, the peer team looks at a range of documents and information to understand the council and the challenges it is facing. This includes a position statement prepared by the council before the visit, which sets out the local context and highlights areas for the team to focus on. The preparation also involves reviewing an LGA Finance briefing (based on public reports from the council's website) and an LGA performance report that shows benchmarking data across a range of measures. The performance report is produced using the LGA's local area benchmarking tool, LG Inform.

The peer team then spends three or four days at the council. During this time, they gather evidence, information, and views by meeting with council staff, councillors, and external stakeholders. This helps them build a rounded picture of the council's strengths and areas for improvement.