LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

22 – 25 September 2026

Feedback report



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Chair: Councillor Eamonn O'Brien **Chief Executive (Interim):** Jenny Rowlands **President:** Baroness Grey-Thompson

1. Introduction

A team of local government peers, led by the Local Government Association (LGA) delivered a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) of Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) from 22 – 25 September 2026. This was the council's second CPC, following the previous CPC in January 2020.

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). Peers 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 Solihull MBC with feedback on the peer team's findings. It provides the council with a set of 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

Solihull MBC is a well-run council that has continued to deliver effectively since its previous Corporate Peer Challenge in 2020. The borough benefits from nationally significant economic assets and growth opportunities, including UK Central, Arden Cross and Birmingham Airport, and plays an influential role within the West Midlands Combined Authority and wider region. It is also a borough of contrasts, with some of the most affluent communities in England sitting alongside areas of North Solihull that continue to experience significant deprivation. The peer team found a stable and trusted authority with respected political and managerial leadership, a committed and capable workforce, strong relationships with partners and a clear commitment to

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improving outcomes for residents. The council has many strengths and should be proud of what it has achieved.

The council has delivered significant improvements in a number of key service areas. Children's Services received its first 'Good' Ofsted judgement in 2026, representing a huge turnaround from the 'Inadequate' judgement received in 2023. Adult Social Care also performs very strongly, receiving a 'Good' Care Quality Commission assessment in 2026, with elements assessed as 'Outstanding'. The peer team was impressed with the council's commitment to prevention and early intervention, evidenced through initiatives such as Family Hubs, Living Well in Solihull and other neighbourhood-based approaches.

Solihull MBC benefits from significant strengths as both an organisation and a place. The borough has significant regeneration and economic development opportunities, centred on Arden Cross and supported by a wider programme of investment and growth activity that provides a strong platform for the future. The borough also benefits from a diverse and resilient local economy and mature relationships with partners across the public, private and voluntary sectors. The peer team also found strong external confidence in the council's leadership and heard consistent praise for the influential role Solihull plays within the West Midlands Combined Authority and across the wider region.

Since the May 2026 elections, the council has been operating in a no overall control environment. Whilst this brings additional complexity, the peer team found well-developed member-officer relationships, and a genuine desire amongst councillors to work constructively together. There are, however, opportunities to further strengthen cross-party working, member development and governance arrangements, helping to build on the foundations already in place.

The council has highly-regarded political and managerial leadership. The Leader was described as passionate, committed and a strong advocate for Solihull and its communities. The Chief Executive is seen as highly respected and trusted by members and officers, and was recognised by external partners for visible and accessible leadership. Together, they have helped create a council that is widely viewed as collaborative, well-run and committed to delivering for residents.

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Whilst there is a clear understanding of existing priorities across the council, the peer team believes there is an opportunity to refresh and re-energise the council's long-term ambitions for Solihull. The emerging Council Plan provides an opportunity to bring together the borough's strengths, opportunities and ambitions into a compelling shared vision that can provide a clear framework for priorities and delivery. There is also an exciting opportunity for the council to adopt a more outward-looking approach, drawing more consistently on external learning, benchmarking and peer support, whilst being bolder in promoting and celebrating its achievements.

Like many councils across the sector, Solihull faces significant medium-term financial challenges. The peer team found a solid understanding of these challenges amongst both members and officers, together with a clear commitment to achieving financial sustainability. The council does, however, need to turn that commitment into reality through the development of a range of solutions that fully meet the scale of the financial challenges ahead.

The council is well placed as it has many of the attributes needed to deliver its future ambitions. Staff consistently described a supportive and collaborative culture and were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about working for the council. The peer team found a workforce that is proud to work for Solihull, committed to public service and dedicated to delivering for residents. They also found real enthusiasm for innovation, technology and new approaches to service delivery especially through the use of artificial intelligence (AI). There is, however, an opportunity to further strengthen collective senior officer leadership, helping to reduce silo working and reinforce a more joined-up approach to corporate priorities.

A recurring theme throughout the review was that Solihull has much to be proud of. The peer team found many examples of high performance, effective partnership working and delivery across a range of priorities. However, they consistently heard that the council can be modest about its achievements and does not always communicate its successes as confidently as it could. The council should therefore be bolder in celebrating and promoting its many achievements, ensuring residents, businesses, partners and stakeholders have a clearer understanding of the impact it is delivering and the significant opportunities that lie ahead.

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Overall, Solihull MBC has strong foundations, significant opportunities and a clear commitment to improvement. The ten key recommendations in this report are intended to support the council in addressing the challenges ahead and maximising the opportunities available to it.

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

Refresh and re-energise the long-term strategic ambition for Solihull, bringing together the council's priorities and opportunities into a compelling shared vision that provides a consistent framework for future choices, partnership activity and delivery.

3.2 Recommendation 2

Build on the council's financial planning, to develop a comprehensive range of options for achieving financial sustainability. There is a need to draw on the full range of your capabilities, resources and opportunities, to enable the council to make the difficult choices that are required now.

3.3 Recommendation 3

Harness the appetite for greater cross-party collaboration by creating opportunities for political group leaders to strengthen relationships and focus on shared outcomes.

3.4 Recommendation 4

Establish greater clarity and shared expectations around the respective roles of the administration and opposition in a no overall control council, enabling robust political challenge whilst maintaining clear accountability for decision making and delivery.

3.5 Recommendation 5

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Update the council's key governance arrangements, including Full Council standing orders, the portfolio holder for Children's Services, and the remit of the Audit Committee, to ensure they represent best practice, provide appropriate clarity and facilitate effective and efficient decision-making.

3.6 Recommendation 6

Strengthen the member development offer, ensuring councillors have access to a range of continuous learning, training and external support opportunities.

3.7 Recommendation 7

Broaden the corporate approach to transformation, to deliver a range of cross-cutting opportunities with grip and pace, supporting the council's financial sustainability.

3.8 Recommendation 8

Develop a clearer and more consistent corporate operating framework, including clear expectations for hybrid working, providing staff with certainty and consistency across directorates, minimising risk of silo working whilst retaining flexibility to reflect different service needs.

3.9 Recommendation 9

Foster a more consistently outward-looking culture across the council, ensuring that organisational thinking is informed by external perspectives, comparative practice and learning from elsewhere, including creating opportunities for both members and officers to benefit from peer mentoring and wider professional networks.

3.10 Recommendation 10

Be bolder in celebrating and promoting the council's achievements, ensuring residents, partners and stakeholders better understand the positive outcomes being delivered.

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

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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:

- Anne-Marie Bond, Chief Executive, Torbay Council
- Cllr Rachel Bailey, Cheshire East Council, and LGA Conservative member peer
- Cllr Martin Griffiths, Leader, North Northamptonshire Council, and LGA Reform UK member peer
- Barry Khan, Assistant Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer, North Yorkshire Council
- Philip Gregory, Director of Finance and Commercial Services, Sheffield City Council
- Mick Allen, Chief of Staff (Warrington Council), MHCLG
- Nick Searle, 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

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Solihull is home to more than 220,000 residents and is becoming increasingly diverse, with 18 per cent of the population identifying as an ethnic minority. The borough is also one of the strongest performing economies in the UK, with a GVA per head of £49,007 in 2024, around 34 per cent above the England average and 75 per cent above the West Midlands Combined Authority average. This economic strength is underpinned by nationally significant assets and growth opportunities, including Arden Cross, UK Central, Birmingham Airport and the National Exhibition Centre, and reinforces the borough's important role within the West Midlands Combined Authority and wider regional economy.

It is also a borough of contrasts, combining significant prosperity with areas of North Solihull that continue to experience significant deprivation and poorer outcomes. The difference in life expectancy between residents living in the most and least deprived communities is around 11 years, reflecting the significant variations in outcomes that exist across the borough. The council therefore has to balance significant opportunities for growth and investment with the need to improve outcomes for all communities.

Throughout the review, the peer team heard consistently strong feedback about the council's ability to work effectively with partners and deliver improvement. Partners described the council as collaborative, trusted and committed to addressing shared opportunities and challenges. Particular praise was given for the significant improvement achieved in Children's Services, high performance in Adult Social Care and the council's commitment to prevention and early intervention through initiatives such as Family Hubs, Living Well in Solihull and other neighbourhood-based approaches.

Whilst there is a good understanding of current priorities across the organisation, the peer team believes there is an opportunity through the emerging Council Plan to bring greater clarity and coherence to the council's vision for the borough.

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

The peer team found clear evidence that the council understands its communities and local context. Members, officers and partners demonstrated a good

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understanding of the borough's opportunities and challenges, including variations in outcomes across the borough, economic development opportunities and increasing demand for council services.

There is a good awareness and understanding of the council's existing priorities amongst councillors of all political groups, as well as officers and partners. The council's mature and trusted relationships with partners are a particular strength and support the delivery of local priorities. Peers found evidence of effective partnership working through regeneration activity, health and care integration and neighbourhood-based approaches in North Solihull.

The council has maintained a strong focus on prevention and early intervention. Family Hubs, Living Well in Solihull and wider neighbourhood-based approaches demonstrated a commitment to supporting residents, thereby helping to improve long-term outcomes.

The council makes effective use of resident and service-user insight to inform priorities, decision-making and service delivery. Examples include the Residents' Perception Survey, Your Voice Solihull and the Youth Voice Network. Partners and community representatives spoke positively about the council's willingness to listen and engage with residents.

The council has demonstrated a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion through its EDI Statement of Intent and EDI Strategy 2024-2027. This is supported by a range of staff networks and initiatives designed to promote inclusion across the organisation.

The council will be refreshing its Council Plan, and this provides an opportunity to set out a clearer long-term ambition for both the council and the borough, bringing together growth ambitions and organisational priorities within a single, compelling narrative. It will be important that the future Council Plan is closely aligned with the council's financial strategy, transformation programme and delivery capacity.

Delivery against priorities and comparative performance

The council has much to be proud of in terms of service delivery and outcomes. The peer team saw evidence of improvement and strong performance across a number of

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key service areas.

Particularly notable has been the progress achieved in Children's Services. In 2026, Ofsted judged Children's Services to be 'Good', representing a significant improvement from the 'Inadequate' judgement received in 2023. Achieving a 'Good' judgement for the first time, directly from 'Inadequate', is an impressive organisational achievement and reflects the council's sustained focus on improvement in this area.

Adult Social Care also performs strongly. The council received a 'Good' assessment from the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in March 2026, with elements assessed as 'Outstanding'. An overall score of 84 per cent placed Solihull fifth nationally (at the time of the judgement) and reflects the strength of the council's approach to adult social care, prevention and continuous improvement.

The council's wider approach to health and wellbeing has also attracted national recognition. The peer team found evidence of a strong and increasingly integrated approach to health, social care and prevention, reflected in its selection to participate in the National Neighbourhood Health Implementation Programme.

Peers also considered LG Inform benchmarking data, which shows that the council performs broadly in line with, and often better than, its CIPFA nearest neighbours across a range of indicators. The council performs strongly in a number of planning, housing and children's services measures and generally compares favourably against similar authorities.

Corporate performance is monitored through the council's 'Top 40' performance indicators, whilst directorates maintain more detailed service and programme-level measures. The peer team found examples of robust performance management within services, including Adult Social Care, where performance measures are closely linked to delivery of the five-year plan and CQC outcomes.

The peer team was struck, however, by the extent to which the council's achievements are not always consistently recognised internally or externally. Members, officers, partners and community representatives frequently highlighted examples of success, but many also suggested the council could be bolder in

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promoting its achievements and challenging perceptions that it is risk averse or overly cautious. The peer team believes the council would benefit from being more confident in celebrating its achievements, helping to strengthen organisational confidence and raise awareness of the outcomes being delivered for residents, communities and partners.

Is there an organisation-wide approach to continuous improvement?

The peer team found a culture that supports continuous improvement. Throughout the review, staff demonstrated a commitment to learning, innovation and delivering better outcomes for residents.

The council makes effective use of data and insight to inform decision-making, improvement and transformation. Examples include resident perception data, service-user feedback, and various performance information from across the organisation. The peer team found evidence that data and insight are influencing priorities and supporting service improvement activity across the organisation.

The peer team found a strong culture of innovation and learning across the council. Examples were shared of data, evidence and resident insight informing prevention activity, service redesign and transformation programmes, and staff demonstrated a willingness to learn from experience and explore new approaches to service delivery. The peer team did, however, identify opportunities to strengthen the council's use of external insight and comparative practice. While there are some examples of learning from other organisations, a more consistently outward-looking approach, making greater use of benchmarking, peer learning and networks, could help inform future improvement and accelerate delivery.

Overall, the peer team found a council with a strong track record of delivering outcomes, effective partnership working and a genuine commitment to improving the lives of residents. The opportunity now is to articulate a clearer vision for Solihull's future, and communicate the council's achievements with greater confidence.

In addition to key recommendations one (refresh the long-term strategic ambition), nine (outwardly-looking culture) and ten (bolder in celebrating the council's achievements), peers also recommend the council progress the following actions:

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- **Ensure the refreshed Council Plan provides a clear line of sight between the council's long-term ambition, priorities, resources and delivery plans.**
- **Continue to strengthen the use of resident and service-user insight in shaping priorities, services and future plans.**
- **Make greater use of external benchmarking, comparative practice and learning from elsewhere to inform improvement and transformation activity.**

5.2 Organisational and place leadership

The council benefits from respected and visible political and managerial leadership. Members and partners spoke positively about the accessibility of both the Leader and Chief Executive, who are seen as passionate champions for Solihull. The council is widely regarded as a stable, trusted and well-respected authority, with a strong reputation for successful delivery locally and across the wider region.

The peer team heard strong levels of confidence in the council's leadership, ambitions and strategic direction. This was particularly evident in discussions around the future opportunities associated with Arden Cross, where partners expressed confidence in the council's long-term ambitions and ability to deliver. The council also benefits from well-established partnership relationships and is viewed as a collaborative and constructive partner that works effectively with a wide range of stakeholders. The opportunity now is to build on this by taking an even more visible leadership role across the wider region, reflecting the council's strategic ambitions and contribution to growth and development beyond the borough.

Does the council provide effective organisational leadership?

The peer team observed effective organisational leadership throughout the review. The council benefits from stable political and managerial leadership, with members and partners consistently highlighting the visibility and accessibility of senior leaders.

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Members and staff expressed trust and confidence in the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT), describing a leadership team that is committed to delivering for residents and supportive of colleagues. The peer team also observed examples of senior leaders working collaboratively, including through the Corporate Delivery Board, where discussions maintained a strong focus on delivery.

Peers found constructive relationships between senior officers and members, alongside positive engagement between political and managerial leadership. Whilst confidence in officer leadership is high, there is an opportunity to further strengthen the CLT's collective role in driving corporate priorities, sharing learning and reducing silo working between directorates. This would help ensure good practice is applied more consistently across the organisation.

The peer team also heard a desire from some staff for more regular in-person engagement with senior leaders. Whilst current engagement arrangements are valued, more frequent face-to-face interaction would help further strengthen relationships and engagement across the organisation.

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

The peer team heard overwhelmingly strong feedback regarding the council's relationships with partners. The council is viewed as a trusted, collaborative and effective partner that is willing to listen, engage and work constructively with others. Business, community and public sector partners consistently described senior council leaders as accessible, approachable and committed to improving outcomes for the borough.

Effective partnership working is demonstrated across a range of areas. The peer team heard particularly encouraging feedback regarding its work in North Solihull, where partners pointed to strong community engagement, collaborative working and a shared commitment to improving outcomes for residents. Peers also heard positive feedback about the council's relationships with community, faith and voluntary sector organisations, which play an important role in supporting residents, strengthening

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community resilience and delivering preventative support. The peer team found evidence of effective partnership working through Family Hubs, Living Well in Solihull, health partnerships and broader support for vulnerable communities. Peers visited one of Solihull's Family Hubs and saw first-hand how it brings together a range of council, NHS and voluntary sector services, providing residents with coordinated access to support and helping to deliver more joined-up services for children, young people and their families.

Effective place leadership is demonstrated through the council's engagement with strategic partners and its role in shaping the future of the borough. There is widespread confidence amongst partners in the council's long-term ambitions of Arden Cross and other regeneration initiatives. Partners recognise the significance of these nationally important growth opportunities and see Solihull as being well placed to benefit from them.

The peer team heard strong external confidence in the council's strategic direction. Partners see Solihull as an important player within the region's economic growth agenda and value the role the council plays in bringing organisations together around shared ambitions. Peers heard that the council is regarded as an influential voice within the West Midlands Combined Authority and is well placed to help shape regional discussions on growth, infrastructure and investment.

However, whilst confidence in the direction of travel is high, peers also heard a consistent message regarding the importance of maintaining pace and for the council to take more of a leadership role in driving forward these key strategic opportunities. A number of partners highlighted the need to ensure momentum is maintained across key regeneration programmes so that opportunities associated with Arden Cross and other economic development activities are fully realised and continue to deliver benefits for residents and businesses.

The peer team also heard that the council could do more to articulate the long-term benefits of these programmes. Whilst stakeholders recognise the significance of regeneration opportunities, several felt there is an opportunity to strengthen the council's narrative around these projects, helping residents, businesses and partners

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better understand their long-term impact on the borough's economic prosperity and future growth.

Community partners spoke warmly about the council's commitment to local people and highlighted examples where concerns had been listened to and acted upon. Senior leaders were frequently described as willing to engage directly with communities and responsive to local issues.

Nevertheless, some partners felt there are opportunities to strengthen engagement further. These included earlier engagement with community organisations and businesses when developing initiatives, greater use of the knowledge and expertise available through town and parish councils, and more proactive communication about projects and proposals that directly affect local communities.

Overall, the peer team found a council that is highly regarded by partners, respected across the region and committed to delivering for its communities. In addition, the council benefits from effective political and managerial leadership, strong partnership working and significant strategic opportunities. Looking ahead, there is an opportunity for the council to maintain momentum around regeneration, articulate a more compelling narrative for the borough's future and further enhance its role as a visible and influential place leader.

In addition to key recommendations one (refresh the long-term strategic ambition), nine (outwardly-looking culture) and ten (bolder in celebrating the council's achievements), peers also recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **Increase opportunities for direct engagement between senior leaders and staff across the organisation.**
- **Embed a more systematic approach to organisational learning and sharing good practice across directorates.**
- **Continue to strengthen the council's role and narrative around regeneration and growth opportunities, helping residents, businesses and partners understand their long-term benefits.**

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5.3 Governance and culture

The peer team identified many strengths within the council's governance and organisational culture. Member-officer relationships are generally strong and underpinned by mutual respect, trust and a shared commitment to delivering improved outcomes for residents. Members consistently spoke highly of the support they receive from officers and valued the professionalism, responsiveness and expertise available to them. Staff described a supportive organisation and peers found a workforce that is committed, proud to work for the council and motivated to make a difference across the borough.

Following the May 2026 elections, the council moved to no overall control, marking a significant change in the council's political context. Whilst this has brought additional complexity, peers found a genuine desire across political groups to work constructively together in the interests of residents. As the council continues to operate in a no overall control environment, there is a need to build constructive relationships through more regular cross-party engagement and a shared understanding of how members can work together effectively to achieve the council's priorities including its financial position. With the council returning to elections by thirds from May 2027, the current period provides an important opportunity to strengthen the relationships, behaviours and governance arrangements that will support effective decision-making through future electoral cycles.

Are there clear and robust governance arrangements?

The peer team heard a mixture of views regarding the effectiveness of certain governance arrangements, including the operation of Full Council, aspects of the Constitution and the remit of the Audit Committee. Whilst governance arrangements are functioning, the council would benefit from reviewing these arrangements against current best practice to ensure they continue to support timely, efficient and effective decision making.

Furthermore, peers were surprised to find there is no regular meeting bringing together the council's statutory officers, often referred to as the 'Golden Triangle', comprising the Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer and Section 151 Officer. Whilst peers found evidence of constructive working relationships between these officers,

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establishing regular meetings would strengthen collective ownership of governance, risk and assurance issues, whilst ensuring these important matters are considered consistently.

The peer team also reflected on governance arrangements for Children's Services. Given the significant progress achieved, there is now an opportunity to review whether current portfolio responsibilities remain the most appropriate going forwards, specifically whether responsibility for Children's Services could be undertaken by another Cabinet member, allowing the Leader to have high level oversight on all areas of responsibility.

The peer team also found scope to further strengthen member support. Members were generally satisfied with induction arrangements and the support available from officers. However, many members felt there would be benefit in an ongoing programme of development and learning, particularly given the different demands placed on councillors operating within a no overall control environment. Peers also heard frustrations regarding the councillor casework system and associated processes, which members felt could be improved to manage their casework more effectively.

Annual Governance Statement

The Annual Governance Statement (AGS) is a particular strength. It is comprehensive, clearly structured against the CIPFA/SOLACE framework and draws upon a broad range of assurance sources including internal audit, external audit, inspection outcomes and management assurance processes. Peers were encouraged by the balanced way in which the AGS identifies both areas of strong governance and areas requiring improvement.

Audit and risk

The council's external audit arrangements provide assurance regarding governance and financial reporting arrangements, although, as is the case for many local authorities, questions remain regarding long-term financial sustainability and the delivery of future savings. Peers found that these issues are well understood within the organisation and feature appropriately within governance discussions.

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There are, however, opportunities to strengthen aspects of the council's governance framework. Peers heard varying perspectives regarding the respective roles of the administration and opposition, particularly within the context of no overall control. The team believed that greater clarity and understanding as to these distinct and separate roles, even within a no overall context, would help support robust challenge whilst maintaining clear accountability for decision making and delivery.

The council's risk management arrangements are similarly well established. The corporate risk register is comprehensive and captures the principal strategic risks facing the council. Audit Committee members demonstrate a commitment to good governance and assurance, and peers found evidence of constructive challenge being provided on key issues facing the Council.

Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?

The peer team found evidence of a culture that is increasingly open to challenge. Members described scrutiny as becoming more confident and influential following the move to no overall control and there was a strong sense that opposition members feel more able to raise issues and provide challenge than in the past. Scrutiny chairs generally reported feeling able to question decision makers and hold services to account.

The peer team also found a strong appetite amongst members to strengthen cross-party relationships. Many welcomed opportunities to build relationships across political groups and highlighted the benefits that greater informal engagement could bring. Peers also heard a consistent message that greater clarity regarding the respective roles of the administration and opposition would help support more constructive political debate and decision making. The council should therefore seek to build on this willingness by creating opportunities for group leaders to regularly meet, and for all members to strengthen relationships outside of formal committee meetings.

The peer team also heard concerns regarding the tone and conduct of some Full Council meetings. Some members felt that meetings are too lengthy and adversarial,

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with discussions sometimes focused on operational or ward-level issues rather than strategic matters. In addition, peers heard a consistent view that standing orders do not always support the efficient conduct of business. The council may therefore wish to review its standing orders to ensure they support constructive discussion.

The council's scrutiny arrangements provide an important mechanism for challenge, and peers found many examples of constructive engagement between scrutiny committees, Cabinet members and officers. However, views regarding the effectiveness of scrutiny were mixed. Some members felt scrutiny was becoming increasingly influential, whilst others felt its impact could be strengthened further. The peer team believes there is an opportunity to continue developing scrutiny arrangements, including enhanced support and training for scrutiny chairs, exploring opportunities for shared learning between committees and clearer feedback regarding the impact of scrutiny recommendations.

The Audit Committee has independent membership and peers heard of constructive challenge and active engagement on matters of governance, risk and assurance. However, peers also heard concerns as to the wide ranging remit that the Audit Committee currently has. Given the council's transformation programme and the significance of future financial challenges, the council may wish to satisfy itself that both audit and scrutiny arrangements continue to provide appropriate, proportionate and clearly defined challenge. This should include reviewing the remit of the Audit Committee to ensure its role remains focused on assurance, governance and risk in line with sector best practice.

Overall, the peer team found strong member-officer relationships, broadly effective governance arrangements and a growing culture of constructive challenge. Peers also heard a willingness from members and officers to learn and continuously improve. As the council adapts to operating under no overall control, there is an opportunity to further strengthen cross-party working, clarify political roles and expectations, and make greater use of external learning, peer support and sector-led improvement to help inform future governance development and organisational learning.

In addition to key recommendations three (greater cross-party collaboration), four

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(clarity around respective roles of the administration and opposition), five (update key governance arrangements), and six (strengthen member development offer), peers also recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **Establish regular meetings of the Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer and Section 151 Officer to strengthen collective ownership of governance, risk and assurance matters.**
- **Review the effectiveness of the councillor casework system and associated processes to improve the member experience.**
- **Strengthen support and development opportunities for scrutiny chairs and members undertaking governance and assurance roles.**
- **Review key governance arrangements to ensure they remain aligned with current best practice and support effective decision making, including:**
- **Update Full Council standing orders to support more effective debate.**
- **Review portfolio responsibility for Children's Services in light of the service's improvement journey and consider whether current arrangements remain the most appropriate going forwards.**
- **Review the remit and operation of the Audit Committee to ensure its role remains clearly focused on governance, risk and assurance.**

5.4 Financial planning and management

Like many councils across the sector, Solihull faces increasing financial pressures due to rising demand, inflationary pressures and in response to changes to local government funding. The peer team found a strong understanding of these financial challenges amongst both members and officers, together with a clear commitment to achieving long-term financial sustainability. The council has a history of meeting savings targets and benefits from established financial monitoring and governance arrangements.

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Whilst the council has taken some action to manage financial pressures, the council received £18.3m of Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) across 2024/25 and a further £30.0m in 2025/26, reflecting the scale of the financial challenge it faces. Against this background, the council's reserves position increased to £73.7m by March 2026, and it delivered a £7.2m underspend in 2025/26. However, these figures should be considered alongside the one-off support provided through EFS and the continuing financial pressures facing the organisation. Significant medium-term pressures remain, with forecast budget gaps of £20.5m in 2027/28 and £22.7m in 2028/29. Greater focus is therefore needed to identify recurring savings, accelerate transformation activity and ensure the council's ambitions translate into sustainable financial outcomes.

Nevertheless, the council has significant regeneration opportunities and assets, including Arden Cross, the UK Central Hub, the Holbeche Place development, the Kinghurst Village Centre regeneration programme, and the East Birmingham and North Solihull Growth Zone. Collectively these initiatives provide a strong platform for future growth and long-term income generation. These opportunities have the potential to support the council's long-term financial sustainability, although realising these benefits will require continued focus on delivery, pace and programme leadership.

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

The peer team found a clear and shared understanding of the council's financial position amongst both political and managerial leadership. Members and officers consistently demonstrated awareness of the financial challenges facing the council. The peer team did conclude that the council needs to have even greater focus on the entire range of actions required to respond fully to the financial challenges they face so as to eradicate the need for EFS.

The council benefits from experienced financial leadership. Financial performance and savings delivery are monitored regularly through corporate and political governance structures, ensuring members and senior officers maintain oversight of

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the council's financial position and key risks. The peer team found confidence amongst members in the quality of financial advice and reporting provided by officers, and financial considerations appear well integrated into wider corporate decision-making.

Financial risks are actively considered and monitored across the organisation. The peer team found evidence that the council understands the risks associated with increasing demand, inflation, future funding uncertainty and the delivery of future savings programmes. Financial sustainability is recognised as a key corporate risk and is subject to ongoing member and officer oversight.

The Audit Committee provides an additional layer of challenge and assurance. The peer team heard evidence of constructive scrutiny of financial sustainability, transformation activity and corporate risks, including challenge around the assumptions underpinning future savings programmes. External assurance provides further confidence regarding the council's financial management arrangements. Both CIPFA's assurance review undertaken as part of the EFS process and Grant Thornton's external audit work found no fundamental weaknesses in financial management or governance arrangements. However, both highlighted the importance of addressing the council's longer-term financial sustainability challenges.

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

The council has established a framework for its Medium-Term Financial Strategy, annual budget process and Corporate Transformation Programme. The peer team found a clear commitment from members and officers to achieving financial sustainability, however there is an imperative for the council to embrace the full range of options required to achieve the same.

Transformation is central to the council's plans for addressing future budget pressures. The Corporate Transformation Programme has been refocused around a smaller number of high-impact workstreams, including artificial intelligence, asset realisation, demand management and service redesign. Governance arrangements have been strengthened through the Corporate Delivery Board and the peer team heard positive feedback regarding the council's ambition to embrace innovation and

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modernise services, particularly through the use of AI and data to improve productivity and support delivery. The council delivered £9.0m of its £9.5m transformation savings target in 2025/26, demonstrating progress in translating plans into outcomes.

A recurring theme throughout the review, however, was the need to ensure the council converts ambition into deliverable and recurring savings. Whilst there was support for the direction of travel, the peer team heard questions regarding the pace of delivery and the maturity of some savings proposals. Progress has already been made through initiatives such as the Mutual Early Resignation Scheme, the introduction of garden waste subscriptions, asset realisation activity and the application of AI within Adult Social Care. However, several elements of the Corporate Transformation Programme remain at an earlier stage of development, with future benefits yet to be translated into fully developed and deliverable savings plans. As future budget gaps grow, the council will need greater confidence that additional savings, transformation benefits and income generation opportunities can be agreed by members and delivered at the pace and scale required.

There is an opportunity for senior officers to take a more corporate and organisation-wide approach to identifying and delivering savings opportunities, and to ensure consistent approaches are adopted across directorates where appropriate. Senior officers should consider reviewing previously rejected savings proposals in light of the current financial situation. Members should also be supported by receiving clear advice on the full range of options available to address future budget gaps, enabling informed decisions to be taken regarding priorities and resource allocation.

A further theme emerging from interviews was the presentation of financial information. Whilst the quality of financial management is generally well regarded, members would benefit from greater clarity and transparency within budget reports and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, particularly regarding the scale of future financial challenges, delivery assumptions and the actions required to close future gaps.

There is also an opportunity to strengthen collaboration with local authorities both within and beyond the West Midlands to identify opportunities for shared learning,

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service redesign and joint delivery. Given the scale of the financial challenges facing local government, this could provide additional opportunities to improve efficiency, share risk and deliver better value for money.

In addition to key recommendation two (developing a comprehensive plan for financial sustainability) and recommendation seven (broaden the corporate approach to transformation), peers also recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **Take a more assertive corporate approach to identifying and delivering savings across the organisation.**
- **Provide members with clear advice on the full range of options available to address future financial challenges.**
- **Strengthen the clarity and transparency of financial reporting and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.**
- **Strengthen collaboration and shared learning with other councils to identify opportunities for service redesign, joint delivery and greater value for money.**

5.5 Capacity for improvement

The peer team found a committed and motivated workforce that is passionate about Solihull and is proud to work for the council. Staff consistently described a supportive organisation which invests in learning and development and provides opportunities for professional growth.

The council recognises that ongoing transformation will be required to ensure long-term financial sustainability and continue improving outcomes for residents. Across the organisation there is a good understanding of the challenges ahead and a willingness to embrace new approaches.

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

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The peer team found strong evidence that the council is able to deliver improvement when there is a clear focus, strong leadership and organisational commitment. Recent progress in Children's Services, strong performance in Adult Social Care and the delivery of key partnership initiatives demonstrate the organisation's ability to respond to challenges and improve services.

The council is also demonstrating leadership through its approach to transformation and innovation. Peers found genuine enthusiasm across the organisation for the opportunities presented by AI, supported by strong staff engagement and governance arrangements. The peer team heard examples of AI already being applied within services. The council has developed a clear ambition to use technology and innovation to improve productivity, service delivery and financial sustainability, and staff were enthusiastic about the role these approaches can play in supporting future improvement.

A notable strength is the council's approach to learning and development. Staff consistently referenced opportunities for professional and personal development and described feeling supported in their roles. The peer team heard examples of the council investing in its people and creating opportunities for employees to develop new skills and progress their careers. This culture of learning and continuous improvement provides an important foundation for future organisational change.

Staff consistently described a workforce that is committed, professional and focused on improvement. Peers heard examples of officers working collaboratively to respond to challenges, including community engagement activity, emergency situations and major corporate priorities. Team leaders spoke highly of the support they receive and highlighted a culture where staff are encouraged to identify improvements and deliver better outcomes for residents.

The peer team also heard encouraging feedback regarding employee relations. Trade Union representatives described constructive relationships with the council and a willingness to engage openly on workforce matters, although this would benefit

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from being consistent across the council. As transformation activity progresses, maintaining this collaborative approach will be important in supporting staff through change.

Taken together, these factors provide confidence that the organisation is capable of bringing about the improvements it needs. The council has a workforce that is committed to improvement, leaders who recognise the need for change and a culture that supports learning and innovation.

Does the council have the capacity to improve?

The council has many of the building blocks needed to support future improvement. Staff understand the need for transformation and there is recognition that new approaches will be required to address future financial challenges. The peer team heard examples of successful service redesign and innovation, including more integrated approaches to service delivery, digital transformation and prevention-focused models that have helped the council respond to increasing demand and financial pressures.

However, peers also heard questions about the extent to which transformation activity is being driven consistently across the organisation. Whilst there are good examples of innovation within individual services, there is an opportunity to develop a more organisation-wide approach to transformation, ensuring successful initiatives are replicated where appropriate and cross-cutting opportunities are identified, prioritised and monitored corporately. Given the scale of the council's financial challenge, maintaining momentum and corporate oversight of transformation activity will be critical.

Staff feedback also suggests there are opportunities to improve the Performance Development Review (PDR) process. Whilst experiences vary across the organisation, some staff felt the process could do more to support meaningful performance conversations and recognise individual strengths. The council may wish to reflect on this feedback as part of its wider approach to workforce development.

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The peer team also heard consistent feedback regarding hybrid working arrangements. Staff value the flexibility available to them, but there was less consistency in understanding what is expected across different parts of the organisation. Some staff felt that greater clarity would reduce the perception of silo working and provide a more consistent employee experience. The council would therefore benefit from developing a clearer corporate operating framework, including clearer expectations regarding hybrid working, whilst retaining flexibility to meet different service needs.

Overall, the peer team is confident that the council has the capacity to improve. The opportunity now is to translate its strengths into a more coordinated approach to transformation, ensuring improvement activity is delivered at pace and contributes to the council's long-term sustainability.

In addition to key recommendations seven (broaden the corporate approach to transformation) and eight (develop a clearer and more consistent corporate operating framework) peers also recommend the council progress the following actions:

- **Take a more coordinated approach to transformation across the organisation.**
- **Provide greater clarity and consistency around hybrid working arrangements, including clear expectations for staff and managers.**
- **Review performance management arrangements to support continuous improvement and workforce development.**
- **Strengthen succession planning to maintain organisational capacity and resilience.**

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

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being completed. In this instance, this requires the report to be published no later than 22 December 2026.

There is a requirement for Solihull MBC to develop and publish an action plan within five months of the peer team being onsite, no later than 22 February 2027. 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 Solihull MBC through a progress review which is due to be completed and published by 22 July 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 Solihull MBC would commission their next Corporate Peer Challenge no later than September 2031.

7. Contact details

In the meantime, Helen Murray, Principal Adviser for the West Midlands region, is the main contact between your council and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Helen Murray is available to discuss any further support you require and can be contacted on

Helen Murray, LGA Principal Adviser for the West Midlands

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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?

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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.

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