

## **Progress report Wirral Improvement Board - 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2012**

Wirral Improvement Board has met monthly since February 2012. The Board agreed its role, composition and meeting frequency:

*Wirral Improvement Board is a partnership between Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council and the Local Government Association. It will provide oversight, support and challenge to Wirral's improvement and transformation journey.*

The Improvement Board's role is to:

- Provide support, guidance and challenge
- Identify and signpost appropriate good practice
- Ensure there is a single, integrated and holistic improvement plan that can be clearly understood and communicated internally and externally
- Ensure the contributions from different external agencies/bodies to Wirral's improvement journey are coordinated
- Endorse decisions which impact on political and managerial leadership arrangements, corporate governance and improvement in advance of them going through Wirral's own decision-making structures, e.g. Cabinet or Council.

### **Chair of the Improvement Board**

The Chair is an independent person and will not be party political. The Chair of the Improvement Board is Joyce Redfearn. The Independent Chair started her role at the Improvement Board meeting of the 27<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

### **Board Members**

Wirral Council – Council Leader and Deputy Leader, Leader of the Conservative Group, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, Chief Executive, Director of Finance, Director of Law and the Assistant Director of Finance (in his role as facilitator of the improvement programme).

Local Government Association – Principal Advisor North West, Associate Officer, Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat Member Peers.

Independent Chief Executive – Chief Executive of Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council.

District Auditor

Advisors – AKA Associates and the Chief Executive of North West Employers

## **Frequency of Meetings**

The Improvement Board will meet monthly for the first six months and then review. Every third meeting of the Board will be held in public to report on progress and receive any questions from the public. There has been one meeting in public to date.

## **Notes of the meeting**

The Board issues a short note after each meeting that is circulated to Wirral Elected Members, staff, public and partner organisations. These notes are attached at Appendix 1.

## **Progress to date**

The Improvement Board has created a strong partnership to support, challenge and oversee the improvement and transformation of Wirral Council. Some of this is demonstrated by:

- The Improvement Board has received cross-party support from the Council.
- The size and make-up of the external Board members means that there is wide-ranging expertise and experience about good practice. This is being shared with the Council.
- The Board will advise on any significant strategic issues ahead of the Wirral decision making to assist the improvement progress.
- A meeting protocol including use of a system of delegated decision making has been developed to show best practice in meeting management and to avoid delaying progress with Council business.
- The early focus has been on identifying and debating Council corporate governance issues. Council decisions have been better informed as a result.
- By discussing issues the Board has agreed five clear priorities. These are set out at Appendix 2 and will form the base of the Improvement Plan.
- There is now a focus on improvement planning and incorporating all the issues into a single plan.
- The Council have invited the LGA to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge Review.

The next quarter will see the work of the Improvement Board focussed on:

- Sign off a single, comprehensive improvement plan including the high level tasks arising from the recent Highways and Engineering PIR from the Audit Commission.
- Continue to action the improvement tasks including work on Leadership and on Budget that have already received some corporate focus.

- The shared work of external board members and the Member Development Working Party will be considered shortly.
- Start to monitor Council delivery of the improvement plan.
- Identify key messages and learning from the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Review and add this into the improvement plan.
- Further incorporate the Improvement Board into corporate governance decision-making debates within the Council.
- Ensure that the Council is more outward facing, actively looking for good practice and incorporating it.
- The council has signalled its wish to work with the peers from the Board on a vision of the likely future shape of Councils in the light of shifting demands for services and diminishing resources in line with the LGA work.
- The Council will continue to review its processes and procedures to ensure their effectiveness and that they support their improvement journey.
- Understanding and responding to the Adult Peer Review and the HESPE report.
- Ensuring clarity on roles and responsibilities.
- Engaging with all members of the Council.
- Holding quarterly public meetings and issuing key messages to all staff and public from each meeting.

## Appendix 1

### **What we covered at our meeting on February 3<sup>rd</sup>**

We had a constructive first meeting of the Improvement Board. We agreed the Terms of Reference of the Board and agreed to invite the council's District Auditor, Mike Thomas, to join as Board Member. We agreed to hold meetings on a monthly basis for the first six months of the Board and then review frequency after that. We agreed to hold every third meeting in public to report on progress and take any questions.

We received a report on the authority's response to date regarding the reports it had commissioned from Anna Klonowski Associates on corporate governance and adult services. We noted that it had responded positively to these reports and had taken a number of actions to address the findings. We asked for some further information on certain points.

We agreed that the authority needs a single, integrated and overarching improvement plan to focus and drive the improvement of both its corporate governance and key services over the next couple of years. The three party Group Leaders will meet before the next Board meeting and decide on a small number of key priorities on which they want this overall improvement plan to focus. This will take into account the LGA's experience from other councils of what they had to tackle to secure significant improvement in corporate governance and services.

We agreed that the Improvement Board would be the vehicle to drive the next stage improvement plan moving on from the work carried out by the Corporate Governance Committee. This Committee will therefore be disbanded to avoid overlap of roles.

It was agreed that the next meeting would focus on gaining a common understanding of the views of the regulatory bodies of Wirral's current performance (Ofsted, CQC and District Audit) and reviewing the key priorities for the Improvement Board. It will consider priorities for the improvement plan and look at the internal capacity needed to drive this work forward.

### **Meeting of the Improvement Board, 2 March 2012**

At its second meeting on 2 March 2012 considered as follows:

The Improvement Board agreed to invite Joyce Redfearn to act as Independent Chair, to take effect from April. Joyce has served for 17 years as a Chief Executive in Wigan, Gloucestershire and Monmouthshire and will retire from Wigan council at the end of March. She has played a very active part in Improvement and Efficiency in the North West and at a National level. She has served on 2 previous improvement boards for Blaenau Gwent and for Liverpool. Her role as Chair of the Board will be to providing advice, support

and challenge to Wirral and Board Members welcomed her expertise and experience.

A very useful overview from some of the main council regulators allowed the Board to gain a collective understanding of both strengths and areas for improvement for the Council.

The District Auditor presented a letter setting out the terms of his involvement with the Board. He then gave an overview of recurrent themes from his most recent Annual Audit Letter and Annual Governance report. Key themes included the need to strengthen corporate governance arrangements in respect of performance management, procurement, whistleblowing arrangements, internal audit and some specific aspects of the Council's arrangements for achieving value for money most notably asset accounting and management. There was a high level of consistency with the corporate governance messages from the AKA reports.

The Local Government Association (LGA) advisor on Adult Social Care provided feedback on behalf of the National Towards Excellence in Adult Social Care improvement programme, which includes the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and a number of other agencies and supports improvement in care services. Wirral has been one of only seven local authorities nationally to have received an 'Adequate' classification under the former CQC inspection regime and as such has attracted support and funding to improve. The key message was that the Council had taken responsibility for improving Adult Social Care services and was on a positive improvement trajectory whilst still accepting that there was much more to do. Ofsted's position was as set out in its letter of April 2011, which rated Children's Services as 'Excellent'.

The Board agreed that the council should strengthen the role of the Council's Audit and Risk Committee, include further training for Committee Members and greater consistency of membership to deepen their expertise.

The Board acknowledges how important councillor training is and requested a copy of the new Member Training Programme at the next meeting.

The Board received a report on the council's key priorities for the overarching Improvement Plan, which had cross party support. These were (expanded in Appendix 1):

- Corporate plan development
- Focus on critical service areas such as safeguarding and the local economy
- Budget and financial stability
- Corporate governance and decision-making
- Leadership, both political and managerial.

The Board felt these were a very good basis on which to move forward with the next stage of improvement planning. At the next meeting Wirral will report back on how it intends to deliver the agreed priorities for improvement and what resources it will need to put into this. The Board welcomed the additional

sum agreed as part of the budget and wanted the Council to identify sufficient corporate capacity to drive forward the overall improvement programme with momentum.

The Board asked for a progress report to the next meeting about the completion of the existing Corporate Governance Improvement Plan.

### **Meeting of the Improvement Board 30<sup>th</sup> March 2012**

This was the third meeting of the Improvement Board and the first that was in part in public. A small number of residents attended and were welcomed by the Board. The Chair gave an overview of progress to date by the Board. A resident asked a question about the difference between the Improvement Board and the Council's Corporate Governance Committee. In response, the Board outlined their role and also informed the member of the public that the Council Corporate Governance Committee had finished.

The Board agreed that Wirral Council would undertake a Corporate Peer Review in June 2012. This is an LGA delivered opportunity to scrutinise the work of the Council in relation to good governance around;

- understanding of the local context and priority setting
- financial planning and viability
- political and managerial leadership
- governance and decision-making
- organisational capacity

The Council Leader asked that the conclusions from the Review be made public.

The Board reviewed the Terms of Reference. Additions were agreed in relation to:

- Improvement Board role – 'Endorse decisions which impact on political and managerial leadership arrangements, corporate governance and improvement in advance of them going through Wirral's own decision-making structures, e.g. Cabinet or Council.'
- Duration – 'We expect the Improvement board to be in place for at least 18 months i.e. summer 2013, in order to guide and support Wirral's improvement journey.'
- Review – 'These Terms of Reference will be kept under review by the Improvement Board as things develop. A protocol for delegation of urgent matters to the Chair of the Improvement Board in consultation with the Council Chief Executive will be developed.'
- Attendees – 'Programme Manager for the Improvement Programme' and 'Other officers or Members, or indeed representatives from other external bodies may be invited to attend as appropriate.'

The Improvement Board received reports about improvement to date and improvement planning into the future. It was agreed that the Council needed

to undertake further work around what improvement planning going forward would look like.

Two reports that were already within the Council's decision-making processes were tabled for endorsement by the Board. The first related to a new Code of Corporate Governance and the second was about a review of Committee Services. The reports were endorsed and the Board provided advice and suggested improvements.

Additional reports were not accepted onto the agenda because they were tabled at the meeting rather than sufficiently well in advance.

It was agreed that the Improvement Board would receive a written report to the next meeting about the work of the Democratic Working Group and any proposed significant changes to governance arrangements.

## **Meeting of the Improvement Board 27<sup>th</sup> April 2012**

### **1. Member Development**

The Improvement Board welcomed the work of the Member Training Steering Group in developing plans for Member Training and linking these to the five agreed priorities for the Improvement Board. It acknowledged that training and development of Members is a key issue at the heart of improvement planning in Wirral. The Board agreed a small sub group to work with the Steering Group and develop the proposals further. This work will in particular consider other ways in which Members can learn e.g. through site visits to other councils and through mentoring and buddying in addition to formal training sessions. It will also consider using Members from other councils (including the LGA Member Peers) to deliver sessions as well as identifying core issues on which Members would be required to complete training especially if they have leading roles (e.g. Safeguarding). A further, detailed report will be brought back to the next meeting.

### **2. Corporate Peer Challenge**

Wirral has commissioned a Corporate Peer Challenge from the LGA and this is due to take place week commencing 9 July. This is a really positive opportunity for the authority to obtain 'critical friend' feedback from senior colleagues (Members and officers) from the local government family and help shape the key priorities for the council's improvement journey over the next two year period. It is not an inspection and has a very different ethos and approach and this is something the authority has decided to commission rather than it being imposed. The authority will publish the report of the peer challenge so it is transparent. The Peer Challenge team will be engaging widely with Members and groups of officers across the council as well as with key partner organisations.

### **3. Forward Plan**

All councils have to have a Forward Plan, which is published to show everyone which key decisions are coming up over the coming months so that anyone interested can plan ahead and ensure they can get the information they need. Wirral's Forward Plan is going to be improved and developed so it becomes a useful document for Members, staff and the public alike. The Forward Plan will in future routinely be considered by the Improvement Board.

### **4. Changing Wirral's Governance Arrangements**

Wirral is considering changing its governance arrangements and has an all party Member Democracy Working Party overseeing this work on options. The Working Party has agreed to work with the Improvement Board over the coming year to look at works well in other local authorities and to ensure that any future proposals are fully thought through and represent best practice in governance.

### **5. Improvement Planning**

The Board welcomed Michael Frater as senior interim support to the Acting Chief Executive who is bringing additional expertise and capacity to support improvement. Michael outlined the work programme for the next few weeks where he will be speaking to all elected Members and engaging with groups of staff to ensure he captures accurately the perceptions of those involved with Wirral council across the board. The Executive Team has also held an away day and is working up proposals for an improvement strategy to improve culture and ways of working. The three Group Leaders are all committed to this and will be working together with the officers over the coming months to refine this approach further.

### **Meeting of the Improvement Board 15<sup>th</sup> June 2012**

The Improvement Board met on the 15<sup>th</sup> June 2012. It was a positive meeting, attended by members of the executive management team, at which we focused on improvement planning.

Improvement work tabled included a self assessment of where the Council is and wants to be in the future along with a first draft of the Improvement Plan. This Plan will be the one plan the Council uses to identify all the important things it needs to improve. There is still a lot of work to do, by councillors and officers, to make the Improvement Plan a robust document but the Board welcomed its development.

A discussion took place about the changing role, size and governance of councils in light of significantly streamlined budgets. Councillors from Wirral agreed to debate this further with their Local Government Association counterparts. This work will aid the Council in establishing a vision for the future.

There was a debate about the lack of robust forward planning at the Council. Suggestions were made for how to simplify the process, which were welcomed. The Board asked that further work be undertaken around ownership and management of the forward planning process alongside the Council's Scheme of Delegation.

The Board welcomed the Council's decision to recruit a fulltime, successful Chief Executive from outside the Council to support them in the coming months.

**WIRRAL IMPROVEMENT PRIORITIES**

<p>1. Corporate Plan</p>	<p>To put in place an agreed Corporate Plan that sets clear priorities reflecting a good understanding of citizens and customers views through consultation, participation and localism. Underpinned by rigorous performance management and performance appraisal arrangements.</p>
<p>2. Focus on critical service areas, safeguarding and developing the local economy</p>	<p>Ensure that there is a clear organisational focus on critical service areas such as safeguarding (children and adults) and developing the local economy and ensuring that we improve the skills of local residents and stimulate the private sector to grow and create jobs.</p>
<p>3. Budget and financial stability</p>	<p>Clear longer term financial plan, linked to the Corporate Plan, setting out how the Authority will respond to reducing levels of resources including the development and enhancement of the Strategic Change Programme and the development of a clear commissioning strategy for the Authority.</p>
<p>4. Corporate governance and decision making</p>	<p>Risk, whistleblowing, audit are strong. Agreed protocol on sharing information with Members. Clear Scheme of Delegation. Culture of openness rather than secrecy.</p>
<p>5. Leadership – political and managerial</p>	<p>Trust/respect between politicians and senior management. Strong strategic leadership and oversight of delivery. Development needs for Members and management identified and addressed. Strong corporate culture and cohesiveness.</p>