

Draft Wirral Report

1. Background

- 1.1. Following Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council's application for exceptional financial support in 2021, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) commissioned two external assurance reports. These reports called for the Council to establish an Independent Assurance Panel which was accordingly put in place and commenced its role on 21 December 2021. The panel chair has a responsibility to report to the Council twice a year, on performance and progress against the agreed improvement plan.
- 1.2. Its Terms of Reference are attached at Appendix 1.0.
- 1.3. Attached at Appendix 2.0 is an outline of all the external reports and LGA Lead support to the Council over the past two years.
- 1.4. The Independent Assurance Panel for Wirral council was established by the council in December 2021. Its membership is as follows:

Panel Member	Role	Background
Carolyn Downs	Independent Chair	Chief Executive – London Borough of Brent
Richard Paver	Independent External Member (Finance)	Former Treasurer Manchester City Council and Greater Manchester Combined Authority
Quentin Baker	Independent External Member (Governance)	Director of Law and Governance – Hertfordshire County Council
Sean Hanson	Independent External Member (Assets, Contracts, and Companies)	Chief Executive – Local Partnerships
Claire Hogan	Local Government Association Regional Improvement Lead	Principal Advisor (North West) – Local Government Association
Cllr Shaun Davies	Local Government Association Peer (Labour)	LGA Peer Member (Labour), Leader of Telford and Wrekin Council
Cllr Mike Wilcox	Local Government Association Peer	LGA Peer Member (Conservative), Lichfield District Council

	(Conservative)	
Cllr Janette Williamson	Leader of the Council	Leader of Wirral Council (Labour)
Cllr Tom Anderson	Leader of the Opposition	Leader of the Conservative Group Wirral Council
Paul Satoor	Chief Executive	CEO Wirral Council

1.5. Additional meetings of Panel Members as follows:

- Chair meetings with Wirral Leader and Leader of the Opposition
- Chair and Peer Member meetings with Wirral's political groups
- A number of budget scrutiny meetings with Richard Paver and Wirral Section 151 Officer
- Meetings to review Audit Committee role and development
- Quentin Baker attendance at Members' Governance Working Group to oversee review of the Committee System
- Monthly meetings of Panel Chair, Wirral CEO and DLUHC
- Sean Hanson monthly meetings and calls with Director of Regeneration and Place
- Regular meetings between LGA peer members and group leaders, political groups and elected members

1.6. In line with the recommendation from the External Assurance Review – Governance which was completed by Ada Burns in September 2021 (to be referred to in this report as the Ada Burns review) the Panel is required to provide assurance regarding the Council's improvement progress by means of a report to meetings of the Full Council twice a year. The Panel's terms of reference can be accessed here (<http://s03vs-intrcm.core.wcent.wirral.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=4944>). This is the first report of the Panel. To note, the Council representatives on the Improvement Panel have not been involved in the development or clearance of this report.

2. Finance

2.1. The Council is taking many of the right steps to ensure that it resolves longstanding financial problems. It has now approved a balanced budget for 2022/23 which removes a structural deficit of £8m alongside other required reductions amounting to £18m in total. This has been achieved through strong political and officer buy in to an inclusive process whereby senior officers and members of all political parties have been part of a working group to agree proposals.

2.2. This is very positive as members and officers have not collaboratively engaged historically around the budget proposals. More recently there has been a much greater understanding

of the enormous financial task that needs to be addressed and some members have taken a much more active role. The budget will also provide political opportunity but the message here from the panel is that political debate cannot stall what the council needs to deliver in terms of its future budget.

- 2.3. Because of this it is of concern to the Independent Assurance Panel that despite this inclusive process, only the two largest parties voted for the proposals (subject to agreed amendments) at the meeting of the Full Council, with one other group abstaining and the others voting against. We are concerned that this has undermined the collaborative approach taken by the council and could undo much of the positive work undertaken to date. It will be essential for all groups to work together to take responsibility for securing the longer term financial sustainability for Wirral and to agree on a budget for 2023/24 onwards.
- 2.4. Additionally following the May local elections it is clear that cross party working remains very fragile. Though I am reassured by receiving a letter from all group leaders stating their commitment to working collaboratively. It will be important that mutual respect is given by all and to all to ensure this strengthens.
- 2.5. Whilst it is positive that the Council is in line with expectations with regard to the agreement for the 2022/23 budget, there is still much to do on the budget in terms of delivering the savings now agreed and the challenge of taking £18m out of the budget in one year is not to be underestimated, whilst also beginning to prepare the development of the proposals for next year's budget. It is essential that the Council's decision making processes are robust and that individual Committees now take full responsibility for delivering the budget agreed by the Full Council.
- 2.6. It is also positive that monies have been taken out of base budgets so that Committees will not be able to vire monies around to 'unpick' the decisions of Full Council. The Independent Assurance Panel will continue to closely monitor progress against the budget reductions agreed. We are reassured that governance is now in place that will give strong member and senior officer oversight to the reductions process and hold Committee Chairs and Directors to account for delivery. In particular it will be important to ensure that work is undertaken, at pace, to support the possible creation of community asset transfers and if these are not possible for the budget to be balanced regardless.
- 2.7. The work done by the Panel did identify that it was difficult to follow through the published budget figures for 2021/22 projected outturn and 2022/23 to the quoted levels of reserves at the end of both years. On further interrogation the Council have accepted that there are inconsistencies and errors which will need to be reported at final accounts stage. Importantly, however, the level of resources available to mitigate budget risk is higher than included in budget forecasts which offers reassurance if savings are not fully achieved.

18.05.22

- 2.8. The Council now needs, again at pace, to work on its medium-term financial plan which will be in place to support the newly elected council in 2023. This work will be a priority for the Assurance Panel in order to give confidence that the Council has a financially sustainable future.
- 2.9. The Panel's work with Council Finance staff has concluded that a more realistic presentation of the budget gap for 2023/24 is £14m based on a series of mid-range assumptions. However, this figure is likely to vary once the detailed budget work is undertaken not least as there will be inevitable pressures on Council costs flowing from current high levels of inflation, pressures on household budgets and the outcome of the 'Fair Funding' review if implemented by Government next year. Pressures on budgets will not abate after next year so the Council should be planning to explore delivering a greater level of savings even if some are not immediately required but are held as a first tranche for 2024/25.
- 2.10. Additionally, the panel is of the view that in general officers continue to struggle to find the balance between providing too much or not enough information to members and tend to overwhelm members with information which impacts on the quality of discussion. Work is underway to improve officers report writing and members expectations around this issue which is helpful. However, we are compelled to note that officers do not always provide consistent messaging around financial information to members, and in some circumstances provide conflicting information which creates unrealistic expectations and misunderstanding from members. An example of this was seen in the budget setting about the level of contingency required.
- 2.11. Officers need to quickly move away from simple savings proposals for members to consider and move towards a more transformational approach to saving money-in line with the political values and priorities of the Council. This practice would align the Council to the long-established good practice within the sector - recognising and working to save money whilst at the same time transforming the operating model of a service for example.
- 2.12. It is positive that Officers have already started work on the required saving so that post the May 22 elections the council can turn its focus to identifying the required savings of at least £14m. The points made above about inclusiveness apply to this process which will be overseen by the finance working group of the Policy and Resources Committee. (P&R)
- 2.13. The formal agreement of the Council in March 22 to move to all out elections, every four years from May 2023, should provide a more stable and longer-term planning environment. However, as made clear in paragraph 2.3, it will be essential that all politicians of all parties, despite the electoral process, address the seriousness of the 2023/24 budget position and that they learn from the 2022/23 budget process to ensure a balanced budget for 2023/24. Failing to address this would be a serious step back for the Council in all they have achieved to date.

3. Governance & Decision-making

3.1. In this context the key recommendations made in the Ada Burns review in summary, are as follows:

- Implement all out elections every four years.
- Assign authority to the Policy and Resources Committee to exercise leadership in respect of the budget setting process, and
- Review the Committee system to reduce the number of Committees and improve agility of decision making.
- Significantly reduce the related administrative burden arising due to the number of committees and the size of their agendas.
- Amend the scheme of delegation to officers.

3.2. The Council established a governance working group, (GWG) to provide the key forum for Councillors, advised by officers, to review the current structures in the light of the comments of Ada Burns and other sources of information such as a survey of Councillors undertaken by the LGA. The LGA and officer review of the committee system were completed in January 2022 with findings reported to the Governance Working Group. The GWG met on four occasions between December 2021 and March 2022 to discuss and develop draft proposals to be considered by the Constitution and Standards Committee (C&SC) which makes formal recommendations to Full Council regarding constitutional changes. The C&SC met on the 13 April 2022 and approved a variety of changes which collectively are intended to address the issues raised by Ada Burns. The C & SC resolved to recommend to Full Council that it agree the proposed constitutional changes at its meeting in May 2022.

3.3. Although the number of 'Policy' Committees was only reduced by one to six, this was accompanied by fourteen other changes including the removal of the Urgency Committee and the two overview and scrutiny committees (Decision Review Committee and Partnerships Committee). In addition, the existing procedures which provide for re-consideration of controversial decisions have been significantly revised to reduce the potentially disruptive effect on decision-making. It is also proposed to prohibit 'to note' reports from agendas and to distribute them outside of meetings. Proposed extension of the delegated authority to officers will further reduce the volume of matters being referred to committees and other amendments to the P&R committee terms of reference will clarify its lead role in developing and overseeing the budget and policy framework.

3.4. This should improve the speed of decision making, though the Independent Assurance Panel, will also continue to monitor progress in this respect and also of the individual committee's delivery against agreed budget savings. It is clear that most Councillors feel more engaged in the work of the Council through the operation of a committee system and

the peer review confirmed this. However, increased engagement, whilst in itself a good thing, doesn't necessarily deliver better governance and as such it is important that future oversight is given to the work of the committees to ensure that the agreed budget savings are delivered quickly and efficiently. Nevertheless, the panel is satisfied with the progress of the Council in this respect.

4. Regeneration

- 4.1. The Council has a very ambitious regeneration agenda, with multiple funding streams and emerging relationships with external partners like Homes England and Peel Holdings Ltd. There are many risks associated with the scale of the ambition and the Panel has discussed these risks at all of its meetings to date.
- 4.2. The Council has in place good governance to oversee and direct this work and relationships with developers are productive. The main risks are associated with the capacity and capability of the regeneration team and also the support required to facilitate such an ambitious programme, including experienced legal, financial and commercial advice and expertise. The Council has put in place additional internal and external support, and it is essential that the client management of the external resource is a joint endeavour between the regeneration, financial and legal teams and that in this respect the council is genuinely operating as one Council.
- 4.3. The risks related to the regeneration programme are well known to the Council but we are yet to be fully reassured that they are being adequately addressed. Accordingly, we remain concerned at the internal capacity of the Council to deliver on this agenda with sufficient pace to create momentum. The Panel believes that governance and strategic considerations, such as resolutions around the future of the Wirral Growth Company, need to be resolved quickly so the Council starts delivering, building developer, community, and council confidence.
- 4.4. Additionally the Panel did identify that the planned internal resourcing of regeneration work is based on the assumption that a proportion of the teams costs can be capitalised (this relates not only to growth in the team's resources but also circa £1.6m of its current costs). This strategy has not yet been validated by the Council's S151 officer and would need agreement with external audit as it does not represent the commonly understood position with regard to capitalising costs where no Council asset is being provided. If such a strategy is not possible this would unfavourably impact the 2021/22 revenue outturn and future years budgets and arrangements for resourcing growth in regeneration activity.
- 4.5. The Council's future financial strategy also depends on the achievement of income from regeneration schemes and the panel will want reassurance before our next report to Full Council that sufficient progress is being made on the regeneration programme.

5. Overarching Improvement Plan

5.1. An improvement plan has been agreed which is attached at Appendix two, and which has brought together the recommendations for the following reports 1. Ada Burns 2. CIPFA and 3. The LGA peer review. Clearly this will be the focus of the work of the panel as we progress. The dashboard against DLUHC recommendations is also attached as Appendix 3. At present the panel is happy with the progress to develop an improvement plan and is in line with where the Council needs to be at this point in time though this is no time for complacency and 2023/24 as stated above remains a concern.

6. Quality of Relationships

6.1. The observations of Ada Burns and comments arising with members of the Assurance Panel have indicated that the quality of relationships between Councillors and officers hasn't in all cases been one of mutual trust and respect and whilst the behaviours of the majority of Councillors is businesslike and cordial there have been occasions in recent years, and indeed in recent public meetings, when relationships between some Councillors and some officers has become strained. Where this is the case it **may** create an imbalance which adversely impacts upon the ability of officers to confidently advice without fear or favour. This is not conducive to good governance.

6.2. On a positive note, the recent LGA peer review found that both members and officers felt that the quality of their relationships were improving and that there was an increased level of trust compared to the Council's recent history. However, it is recognised that there is further work to do in this area and it is welcome to note that there is a strong appetite for ongoing Councillor and officer development in this respect to enable a more balanced and open dialogue and to learn from good practice in this respect from others in the Local Government sector. The Leader of the Council and the Leader of the Opposition are committed to ensuring that this will continue.

6.3. In 2020 the Council established a Member Support Steering Group, (MSSG), which has been meeting on a quarterly basis since its inception and which amongst other things includes the following elements its terms of reference:-

- *Actively promote, encourage and oversee member culture, development and support.*
- *Explore, research, gather insight, examine and develop and implement new innovative methods, approaches and initiatives to improve member culture, development and support.*

6.4. The MSSG has recently been working with officers on a comprehensive member development programme designed for post the May 22 elections and this is complimented by the existence of a Member induction materials and a Training Portal which enables access to a wide range of courses and materials. The programme contains a wide range of

sessions some of which are mandatory. It will be essential that attendance at mandatory training courses are monitored and reviewed regularly and the Code of Conduct for members should be a part of the mandatory training programme.

6.5. It is important that the three statutory officers (Head of Paid Service, section 151 and Monitoring Officer) work together with the political groups to ensure that the highest standards of behaviour by members and officers are maintained. Without these three officers working together seamlessly the council will not achieve its ambition to have the very best governance. At this point the panel feels that there needs to be improvement in this respect. To be very clear, it is important the lead from the Chief Executive is fully supported by both the Monitoring Officer and S151 Officer.

6.6. The induction for new Councillors includes a session on ethical standards and the Councillor Code of Conduct and although the IAP cannot, at this point, give full assurance in this respect it is intended that this emerging programme will continue to be monitored and feature more fully in the IAP's next report in six months' time. The panel is, however, reassured by the programme now in place.

7. Summary

7.1. In short, the panel applauds the progress made to date on the 2022/23 budget, the local plan, streamlining governance, the move to all out elections, the development of a comprehensive member development programme and some improvement in member and officer relationships. However, much remains to be done as highlighted in this report, on finance, regeneration, transformation and ongoing improvement. The panel will be closely monitoring progress on the items raised in this report and will expect to see significant progress by our next report in November 2022.

Appendix 1.0- Terms of Reference

Wirral Council Independent Assurance Panel

1.0 Terms of Reference

- 1.1 The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has requested that Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council (WMBC) establishes an Independent Assurance Panel (IAP) consisting of non-executive advisors that will remain in place for two-years.
- 1.2 The request came in response to a series of recommendations made in the governance and finance reports that were published 02 November 2021, as part of an external assurance review commissioned by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC).
- 1.3 This Panel will advise and scrutinise the development and implementation of the Council's Improvement Plan; providing assurance that it is both robust and deliverable.
- 1.4 The panel will monitor delivery of the plan and report to Council on performance at least twice a year.
- 1.5 The panel will provide regular updates and reports on progress to the DLUHC

2.0 Purpose

The purpose of the Panel is to:

- 2.1 Provide external advice, challenge, and expertise to WMBC in driving forward the development and delivery of their Improvement Plan.
- 2.2 Provide assurance to the Secretary of State on the development and implementation of the Council's Improvement Plan.
- 2.3 Provide regular updates and progress reports to the Council on the delivery of the Improvement Plan.

The panel will draw on a wide range of expertise to:

- 2.4 Provide regular advice, challenge, and support to the Council on the full range of their improvement activities and specifically on the delivery of the 10 recommendations included in the CIPFA Finance report and 17 recommendations included in the Governance Review.
- 2.5 Ensure financial sustainability of the Council is achieved through a financial recovery plan for years 2022/23 to 2024/25.

2.6 Seek assurance that key decisions are made cognisant of the financial implications and impact on in-year budgets and the long term MTFs.

2.7 Support and monitor progress against the recommendations and identify risks.

3.0 Format and Frequency:

3.1 The Panel will convene for the first time in December 2021 and is expected to conclude in December 2023, subject to the Panel being assured of the Council's ongoing stability.

3.2 It is anticipated The Panel will initially meet monthly (more frequently if required). Meeting frequency will be reviewed at six-months with a view to moving to quarterly, subject to appropriate progress being made.

3.3 Meetings will be held in private, and the minutes to support these meetings will not be published. Instead, the communications of the Panel will be set out through their formal update letters to the Secretary of State. The first response from the Council to the SOS will be the end of January 2022.

3.4 Meetings will be supported by a Secretariat provided by WMBC.

3.5 Meetings of the Independent Panel will be held either in person or online to allow flexibility for meetings to continue should there be limited availability of attendees, or further restrictions introduced due to COVID-19.

3.6 Written updates to the Secretary of State will be shared with all Panel Members prior to submission for issues of factual accuracy. Content will be approved by the independent Chair and will be submitted on a six-monthly basis as set out by the recommendations (indicatively April and October) with the intention of aligning to financial reporting.

4.0 Membership and Alignment:

4.1 The Membership of the IAP will comprise the following, appointed for a two-year term. Importantly, these appointments will not be as 'employees' of WMBC, but rather as independent 'post-holders'.

Panel Member	Role	Background
Carolyn Downs	Independent Chair	Chief Executive – London Borough of Brent
Richard Paver	Independent External Member (Finance)	Former Treasurer Manchester City Council and Greater Manchester Combined Authority
Quentin Baker	Independent External Member (Governance)	Director of Law and Governance – Hertfordshire County Council

Sean Hanson	Independent External Member (Assets, Contracts, and Companies)	Chief Executive – Local Partnerships
Claire Hogan	Local Government Association Regional Improvement Lead	Principal Advisor (North West) – Local Government Association
Cllr Shaun Davies	Local Government Association Peer (Labour)	LGA Peer Member (Labour), Leader of Telford and Wrekin Council
Cllr Mike Wilcox	Local Government Association Peer (Conservative)	LGA Peer Member (Conservative), Lichfield District Council
Cllr Janette Williamson	Leader of the Council	Leader of Wirral Council (Labour)
Cllr Tom Anderson	Leader of the Opposition	Leader of the Conservative Group Wirral Council
Paul Satoor	Chief Executive	CEO Wirral Council

- 4.2 Additional independent external members may be appointed to the panel in the future if required as further progress is made with the Council’s Improvement Journey.
- 4.3 The Independent Assurance Panel will work closely with the existing Committees and Forums of the Council. The relationship between the IAP and these Committees will not be reflected in the Council’s constitution, instead, the IAP will oversee and challenge the existing constituted forums of the Council.
- 4.4 As an Advisory Board, it is not proposed that the IAP would vote on decisions, and instead would provide challenge and advice in the round.

5.0 Costs and Support

- 5.1 Any costs associated with the Independent Assurance Panel will be met by Wirral MBC. This includes the officer time required to support the Panel, and the delivery of the Council’s Improvement Plan.
- 5.2 Panel members will be paid a fee for their work as appropriate; the fee will be paid on a personal basis.

18.05.22

- 5.3 Panel members will need to work flexibly as the demand of the role requires. However, Council may wish to agree in advance the number of days advice to be provided by each panel member over each 12-month period. It should also be recognised that there is likely to be more need for input at the start of this process, and days should be weighted accordingly.
- 5.4 The Panel will be supported by an effective programme office to ensure that the overall programme plan is proactively tracked, kept up to date and that issues and risks are managed on a day-to-day basis through officers.

Appendix 2.0 – Previous Findings and Support:

This note provides a prose overview of the support which the LGA has provided to Wirral Council since the publication of their External Assurance Reports (published November 2021) to assist in the production of the Panel’s first progress report as set out above. It is structured to support the introduction to the Panel’s report, with supplementary information below:

In 2020-2021, Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council (WMC) applied for exceptional finance support worth £6.5m, with a further request of £10.7m being made for 2021/22. This application to part capitalise the Council’s budget was made in the context of a revenue budget of £329 million. The Council’s latest forecast has shown that this application has since reduced by £4.3m due to additional grants and in-year underspends.

A consequence of this application was the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) commissioning two independent assurance reviews of the Council, focusing on issues of Governance and Finance. These reviews were completed by Ada Burns and CIPFA respectively and published in November 2021. These reports included several specific recommendations to the Council, as well as the appointment of an Independent Panel to advise the Council and monitor delivery over a two-year period.

The Council has responded positively to the publication of these reports, establishing the Panel to meet informally in December, and seeking support through the LGA to ensure that Panel members had the appropriate skills, expertise, and capacity to support the Council. The Council has also undertaken a review of their current governance arrangements through working in the Committee System. This work was completed by the LGA, using political peers from across the sector to engage with political groups on potential improvements to the Council’s current arrangements. These five individual focus groups were followed by a cross-party meeting, in which ten recommendations were agreed across the local groups.

The Council has also made demonstrable progress with their Local Plan, with Full Council approving the document to move to Regulation 19 on 21 March 2022. The endorsement of this Local Plan is a central feature for the Council’s improvement given that they have not had one in place since 2000.

Supporting Information: There is further information set-out below to act as reference information, and supporting documents are available on request:

1. Planning Advisory Service Review (report available on request):
2. Establishing the Improvement Panel:
3. Review of Working the Committee System (report available on request):
4. Political Engagement on Budget / Engagement on Draft Improvement Plan:
5. Corporate Peer Challenge (slides available on request):
6. Decision Making Authority Review:

1. Planning Advisory Service Reviews (July 2019 and September 2020):

- The LGA supported the Council in July 2019 by completing a Planning Service Peer Challenge. This was completed as the Council were 'at risk' of intervention from the Secretary of State for not having a Local Plan in Place (they have not had a Local Plan since 2000, and have therefore relied on Unitary Development Plan), this was described as "lamentable" in a letter the Council received from the SOS.
- Planning review highlighted historic under delivery on housing of 470 (2014-2019) against annual target of 800, as well as underperformance in the Planning Team on processing planning applications (60% of Major applications in time).
- The review included a series of recommendations, the most notable included establishing a Place Directorate, developing cross-party support for Local Plan, and develop a narrative on the importance of Growth to the Borough.
- A revisit was completed by the Planning Advisory Service in September 2020 which found significant progress has been made against these recommendations, with there being shared political commitment to a Brownfield first approach on the Local Plan.
- The Local Plan was approved at Full Council on 21 March 2022 to move towards Reg 19 consultation, with cross-party support.

2. Establishing the Improvement Panel (December 2021):

- The Council approached the LGA for support in establishing their improvement panel. This included providing an overview of the Terms of Reference which have been used by similar panels elsewhere in the sector, and dialogue with the Council regarding the skills and experience which would be most beneficial to their improvement.

The LGA also acted as a broker in identifying Peers with the appropriate skills and experience to support the Panel's work

3. Review of working in the Committee System (December 2021):

- The Council requested that the LGA support the Council to consider their Committee Structure, in line with the following recommendation included in their Assurance Reports: Members to work with the Director of Law and Governance to review the Committee system to reduce the number of Committees, assign authority to the Policy and Resources Committee in respect of financial recovery, and significantly reduce the related administrative burden
- The findings from this work were presented to the Council's Constitutional Committee in January 2022.
- This work led to cross-party consensus on a number of issues of proposed changes to the Committee System, which are locally owned by the Council to take forward, these included:
 - A shared commitment to reduce the number of committees to reduce the risk of fragmentation and support 'corporate grip'.

- Agreement for Committees to focus their work programmes and agendas on the issues identified in the External Assurance Reports.
- Empowerment of the Policy and Resources Committee to lead on issues of financial recovery to avoid this being 'undone' in other Committees.
- Agreement to dissolve the Decision Review Committee which acted as a risk to quick decision making and was a 'hangover' of the previous Cabinet model.

4. Political Engagement on the Budget and Draft Improvement Plan (February 2022):

- At the request of the Improvement Panel, there was additional Peer Engagement with political groups of the Council ahead of the 2022/23 Budget setting process. This included engagement with the Conservative and Labour Groups through Panel Members (Cllr Davies and Cllr Wilcox). This engagement took place with the Liberal Democrats through Cllr Lisa Smart (Regional Lead for Improvement) and with the Greens through Cllr Sue Shanks (Green Member for Brighton who has built a relationship with the local groups through her involvement in the work on their Committee System).
- Officers from the LGA (Claire Hogan and Matt Dodd) met with colleagues from WMBC to discuss their draft Strategic Improvement Plan following the Board's January meeting. This included providing copies of other improvement plans developed by Council's historically, and an input on the draft which has been developed to date.

5. Corporate Peer Challenge:

- The Council was scheduled to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge in January 2022. It was agreed with the LGA that this work would be more appropriate if completed in March 2022 to allow the Council to focus capacity on establishing the Improvement Panel, and to enable the Team to review an approved 2023/24 budget position.
- The CPC was completed 21-24 March, and was led by Jacqui Gedman (CEX Kirklees), and included Sir Steve Houghton, Cllr Mike Wilcox, Carol Culley (S151), Asif Ibrahim (MO), and Sharon Senior (Regeneration Peer).
- The findings from the CPC have been shared with the Council via presentation, and a report is being developed for publication following the pre-election period / Purdah.
- As preparatory work ahead of the CPC, Team Members engaged with their equivalents at the Council, but also the respective Panel Members to support the development of questions and our understanding of the Council.
- As preparatory work ahead of the CPC the LGA undertook an independent evaluation of the Council's 2022/23 budget (as passed), considering the progress made against the CIPFA recommendations.

6. Decision Making Authority:

- At the request of the Council the LGA's workforce team has been asked to consider the structures of the Council through the DMA process. This framework looks at the levels

within a Council that decisions are made to highlight issues of delegation and capacity (the approach does not consider issues of capability within roles).

- Interim findings from this review were shared with the Corporate Peer Challenge Team before arriving onsite to avoid duplication and support alignment and are due to be shared with the Council in early April.
- The DMA review focussed on those areas as which were agreed with the Chief Executive and the AD for HR&OD, notably Assets, Finance and Legal services.
- The key issues highlighted through this work include the following, and rectifying actions have been proposed (including 'Top Team development', strengthening the corporate core, and more focus on performance in culture):
 - The DMA review identified Seven layers of hierarchy in some areas of the organisation, where 5 is good practice for a local authority of this size.
 - This results in frontline staff being too far removed from the Chief Executive role with 4-five layers between them and the Chief Executive.
 - Having 7 direct reports to the Chief Executive is higher than most spans for a Metropolitan Borough Council the size of Wirral and can lead to 'silos' bottlenecks and silos, leading to slower decision-making and reduced efficiency.
 - The Council lacks a strong corporate core, and this is partly due to the 'light' portfolio of the Director of Resources and the Corporate Office sitting within The Neighbourhood Directorate.

18.05.22

Appendix 3 (attached separately)