

## **APPENDIX 3: Update on Wirral's LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC)**

### **1.0 SUMMARY**

Elected members will be aware that the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) took place in Wirral 21<sup>st</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> March 2022. At the conclusion of the visit, a summary of the initial feedback and findings were shared with elected members and other participants, and a final report is to be agreed and circulated imminently.

This note sets out an update on latest developments and next steps of the Peer Challenge process. Further engagement with elected members will take place in the coming weeks to consider the findings and agree how they can help inform the emerging Improvement Plan.

### **2.0 THE PEER CHALLENGE APPROACH**

The LGA offer an extensive national programme of peer review to local councils as a key tool in supporting sector-led improvement, and to complement and add value to a Council's own performance and improvement thinking. The Corporate Peer Challenge approach aims to allow information, experience and expertise to be shared across the sector through a two-way process. The CPC draws on the experience of relevant peers, who face similar challenges and can share their experiences. The Peer Team who led Wirral's recent review comprised:

- Jacqui Gedman – Chief Executive (Kirklees Council)
- Cllr Sir Steven Houghton – Leader (Barnsley Council)
- Cllr Mike Wilcox - Conservative Peer (Staffordshire County Council)
- Carol Culley – Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer (Manchester City Council)
- Sharon Strutt – Head of Regeneration (London Borough of Redbridge)
- Asif Ibrahim – Monitoring Officer (Rochdale Council)
- James Millington – Local Government Advisor (LGA)
- Peer Challenge Manager – Matt Dodd (LGA)

### **2.1 SCOPE OF THE PEER CHALLENGE**

Careful preparation and planning took place ahead of the visit to Wirral to ensure that the scope would add value and not duplicate any of the recent DLUHC external reviews. The scope was designed to inform and enhance the emerging Improvement Plan so the Team:

- Reviewed a range of information to ensure they were familiar with the Council, the place, the opportunities, the challenges, and our plans for the future.
- Considered reviews which have gone before (DLUHC), and engaged with the Independent Improvement Board as a point of triangulation.
- Undertook an independent review of finance and performance before arriving onsite

The Peer Team visited Wirral 21<sup>st</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> March, and during their visit they:

- Collectively spent c. 280 hours to determine their findings
- Spoke to over 154 Councillors, Officers, and Partners
- Watched over 20 hours of public meetings and previous forums and Committees
- Visited some of our regeneration sites to better understand our ambitions.

The Team explored the five core components which are looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges ie:

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

The Council also asked for some additional focus to be placed on delivering the Borough's ambitions for regeneration.

## **2.2 PEER CHALLENGE FEEDBACK**

### **General Comments**

The Peer Team made the following initial comments:

- We have met with many talented and impressive Members and staff, who are committed to delivering better outcomes for the residents of Wirral
- The Council has a huge level of ambition, particularly on issues of regeneration, and appreciates the opportunities that exist within the Borough
- There is a strong appetite across the Council for improvement, and this is recognised as a priority for the organisation
- There is a clear sense amongst Officers and Councillors that things are getting better, and that improvements have been made to address some historic issues
- The Council has made some progress through their work with the Independent Improvement Panel, but appreciates there is more to-do

### **Budget and Financial Planning**

- The passing of the Council's 2022-2023 budget is an important milestone in responding to external reports. However, the organisation needs to ensure that there is 100% commitment and prioritisation to deliver the agreed proposals.
- There is a critical need for the progress made with the 2022-2023 budget to be maintained for 2023-2024, particularly within the context of all-out elections. There is no 'breathing space'.

### **Regeneration Vision**

- There is a need to be able to tell 'the story' of Wirral, bringing together the Vision for the borough, to create a clear narrative for how regeneration benefits both people

and place. This will ensure that as the Council transforms opportunities are maximised for local residents “Regeneration of buildings is pointless without the regeneration of people”.

- Regeneration is not the solution to your base budget issues, it will bring as many challenges as opportunities.
- The delivery of the Council’s regeneration ambitions will require careful management, including the necessary revenue investment to support capacity, management of risk and corporate ‘wrap around’.

### **Governance and Leadership**

- Whilst the Governance arrangements of the Council are improving, there is a need for further capacity to support and manage the wider political processes of the organisation, including support to the Leader and Chief Executive.
- There is a need for the Council to consider how information is used to support timely and effective decision making, including the use of performance information, informal engagement with Committees, and the structure, length and clarity of official reports.
- There is a need to consider how Corporate services are best aligned and work together to effectively support Council priorities and manage organisational risk.
- The structuring of agendas can be used to support more focused debate on decisions.

### **Culture, Learning and Development**

- Whilst there has been some improvement in Member behaviours, there is more work needed to ensure that these are constructive and appropriate in all forums, and the impact that they have on the organisation is recognised.
- There is a strong appetite for ongoing member and officer development to support on these issues in the spirit of “one council, one voice”.

### **Concluding Comments**

- You need to stop looking back and look ahead and be clear about your vision.
- There is strong recognition of the role the Chief Executive has played in improving the culture and morale of the organisation.
- The Leader has engaged positively with members across the Council.
- Members generally feel the Committee system has been more engaging.
- Within the Council you have committed, talented and loyal staff who are dedicated to improving Wirral. Their health and wellbeing is paramount to the work that the Council needs to do.
- There is still much left to be done, however, early progress has been made, and there are exciting opportunities ahead if this continues.
- The Council needs to demonstrate that the improvements can continue beyond the oversight of the improvement board.