



POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Monday, 27 June 2022

REPORT TITLE:	WIRRAL COUNCIL IMPROVEMENT PLAN
REPORT OF:	CHIEF EXECUTIVE

REPORT SUMMARY

This report presents Wirral Council's Improvement Plan for endorsement by Policy and Resources Committee. The Improvement Plan, included as Appendix 1, has been developed in response to the External Assurance Review commissioned by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). The External Assurance Review was undertaken as a condition of the Council's request for exceptional financial support from the government in 2020/21 and 2021/22. The development of an Improvement Plan and its effective implementation is a condition of the government granting this support for 2021/22.

The Improvement Plan also responds to the report and recommendations arising from the Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge in March 2022. The Corporate Peer Challenge report is included as Appendix 2 to this report.

The effective implementation of the Council's Improvement Plan will ensure the Council is financially secure with clear strategic priorities, strong leadership and good governance. This will mean that the Council is in the best position to provide the place leadership to deliver the five themes of the Wirral Plan 2021-26.

The report affects all wards in the borough and is a key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Policy and Resources Committee is requested to endorse the Improvement Plan and recommend it to Council for approval.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The development and implementation of an approved Improvement Plan is a condition of the Council's exceptional financial support from the government.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 An early draft of the Improvement Plan was shared with the LGA for comment. Officers from the LGA have provided guidance on good practice on improvement planning and the Improvement Plan reflects this guidance.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 Wirral Council applied to the government for exceptional financial support in 2020/21 due to financial pressures that were exacerbated by the Covid 19 pandemic. A further request for support in 2021/22 was granted in principle subject to the outcome of an external assurance review. The review, conducted in summer 2021, focussed on the Council's governance arrangements and financial position. The two resulting reports, produced by Ada Burns and CIPFA, were published on 2 November 2021 along with a ministerial letter inviting the Council to set out how it planned to respond to the recommendations in the two reports.
- 3.2 At its meeting on 30 November 2021, the Policy and Resources Committee accepted the contents of the external assurance review reports. Since then, officers and Members have undertaken significant work to respond to the recommendations in both reports to demonstrate the Council's commitment to improvement and comply with the conditions of the government's exceptional financial support (capitalisation directive).
- 3.3 An Independent Assurance Panel was appointed by the Chief Executive in December 2021. The Panel is made up of external professionals with expertise in local government finance, law, governance and assets. The membership and Terms of Reference of the Panel can be viewed at the following link: <http://s03vs-intrcm.core.wcent.wirral.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=4944>.
- 3.4 The Panel meets monthly and operates in an advisory capacity, providing support and guidance to the Council. It also provides assurance to DLUHC with formal reporting twice a year on the progress the Council is making in response to the recommendations from the external assurance review. The Panel will have a key role overseeing the Council's delivery of the Improvement Plan to ensure the desired outcomes are achieved to the timelines specified.
- 3.5 An early version of the Improvement Plan was shared with the Panel for comment. The feedback provided highlighted the need for:
- Clear alignment with the Wirral Plan and Council's Change Programme,
 - A strong narrative of the vision for the organisation we are seeking to create,
 - Clear reference to culture change with defined success criteria,
 - Strong ownership and buy-in of Elected Members.

- 3.6 This feedback has been taken on board with the Improvement Plan being key to ensuring the organisation is financial stable, with a fit for purpose business model that enables the Council to provide the place leadership for Wirral partners to collectively deliver the Wirral Plan as the vision for Wirral the place. The Improvement Plan has been aligned with the Council's Strategic Change Programme and it set out across four distinct themes:
- Financial Stability
 - Effective Organisation
 - Effective Services
 - Resilient Communities
- 3.7 In response to one of the recommendations in the Ada Burns report, the Council commissioned the LGA to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge 21-24 March 2022. The report and recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge are included as Appendix 2 to this report.
- 3.8 The Peer Challenge was facilitated by the LGA and delivered by a panel of experienced Councillor and Officer Peers. Held over four days, the process involved focussed individual and group sessions with Members, staff (at all levels) and external partners and stakeholders. Peer Challenges are improvement focused with the scope being defined in advance by the Council working with the LGA. Wirral's Peer Challenge was scoped within the context of the DLUHC External Assurance Review and focussed on:
- Local priorities and outcomes
 - Organisational and place leadership
 - Governance and culture
 - Financial planning and management
 - Capacity for improvement
- 3.9 The usual process is for the Council to produce an action plan that directly responds to the Corporate Peer Challenge. Given this challenge process was undertaken in the context of the DLUHC External Assurance Review, the Improvement Plan includes the required activities that directly respond to the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Challenge, effectively a single plan for all Council improvement activity.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The Improvement Plan will support the Council in achieving financial stability.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 The Improvement Plan will be delivered within existing Council budgets and resources. Where dedicated project resources are required to deliver strategic

change, an approved business case following the five-case model will be developed and approved prior to resources being committed.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 Failure to approve an appropriate Improvement Plan would mean that the Council would not be meeting the conditions for exceptional financial support as set out by DLUHC. This could lead to the capitalisation directive for 2021/22 being rescinded that would lead to a budget gap and the need for an emergency budget.
- 7.2 The DLUHC External Assurance Review and LGA Corporate Peer Challenge highlighted a number of areas of risk and required improvement for the Council. The Improvement Plan provides a structured and comprehensive response to addressing those risks, effectively providing the means to remedy the issues and mitigate the risks identified.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 In developing the Improvement Plan, discussions have been held with the Council's Strategic Leadership Team. An early version of the plan was shared with the Independent Assurance Panel for comment and feedback. Discussions have also been held with officers from the Local Government Association who have provided guidance and support on good practice models for Improvement Planning. A dedicated session has been held with Group Leaders to provide the opportunity for comment and input in advance of the document being finalised.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity.
- 9.2 Whilst there are no direct equality implications arising as a result of this report, any change projects that require a business case will be subject to an equality impact assessment as part of the business case development process.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no direct environment or climate implications arising as a result of this report. However, Council improvement initiatives and change projects will be subject to climate impact considerations as part of their feasibility or business case development.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 There are no direct community wealth implications arising as a result of this report. However, the Improvement Plan theme of Resilient Communities will seek to harness community wealth outcomes through improved engagement with communities to better understand local needs. The Resilient Communities theme

also seeks to build a more transparent and consistent approach to working in partnership with the voluntary, community and faith sector.

REPORT AUTHOR: Mike Callon
(Head of Corporate Office)
telephone: 0151 691 8379
email: michaelcallon@wirral.gov.uk

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Wirral Council Improvement Plan
Appendix 2 – Wirral Council LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

BACKGROUND PAPERS

DLUHC External Assurance Review

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Policy & Resources Committee	30 November 2021