

POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 8 June 2022

REPORT TITLE:	REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT ASSURANCE PANEL
REPORT OF:	CHIEF EXECUTIVE

REPORT SUMMARY

This report presents the first update report of Wirral's Independent Assurance Panel (IAP). The Panel has been set up to oversee the Council's improvement in response to the external assurance review commissioned by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) which was published in November 2021. The External Assurance Review was undertaken as a condition of the Council's request for exceptional finance support in 2020-21 and 2021-22.

The report, included as Appendix 1, provides an independent assessment of the Council's progress against the recommendations from the external assurance review. Specifically, it refers to progress under the headings of: finance, governance and decision-making, regeneration, improvement plan and quality of relationships. Also included as Appendix 2 to this report is a dashboard that provides a commentary and RAG rating against each of the DLUHC recommendations. Appendix 3 also provides an update on latest developments in relation to the recent Corporate Peer Challenge process. Further engagement with elected members will take place in the coming weeks to consider the findings from the Peer Challenge and help inform the Council's Improvement Plan response to the external assurance review.

The report is a requirement in line with the terms of reference of the IAP. The report will also be submitted to DLUHC to provide an independent assessment on Wirral's improvement progress over the last 6 months.

The report is not a key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Policy & Resources Committee is recommended to:

- 1) note the contents of the report of the Independent Assurance Panel and the dashboard against the recommendations arising from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities external assurance review and refer them to full Council for further consideration.

- 2) Note the update in respect to the Corporate Peer Challenge and request that a detailed report be submitted to the next meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 For the Policy and Resources committee to understand the Independent Assurance Panel's external assessment of the Council improvement progress and compliance with the external assurance review recommendations.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 No other options have been considered as the Panel report is a requirement in line with its Terms of Reference.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 Following Wirral's request to government for exceptional financial support, DLUHC commissioned an external assurance review in summer 2021 as part of the conditions for granting a capitalisation directive. The review was split into governance and finance and led to the publication of two reports in November 2021.
- 3.2 One of the key recommendations from the governance review involved the Council setting up an Independent Assurance Panel to oversee the Council's improvement and compliance with the recommendations arising from the review. In December 2021 the Chief Executive, with support from the Local Government Association (LGA), appointed the Independent Assurance Panel which is made up of senior leaders from local government with expertise in local government finance, law and assets. The Panel also includes two peer members from other local authorities that work on behalf of the LGA in supporting local government improvement.
- 3.3 Following an introductory meeting in December 2021 and a series of informal meetings with senior officers of the Council, the Panel has been meeting formally once a month since January 2022.
- 3.4 The terms of reference of the Panel specify the requirement to report to the Secretary of State and Council every six months on progress implementing against an agreed Improvement Plan. The Improvement Plan is currently in draft and following engagement with Members in finalising its content, will be reported to this committee.
- 3.5 The draft Improvement Plan will also be informed by the findings of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) which took place in Wirral 21st – 24th 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. Further engagement with elected members will take place in the coming weeks to consider the CPC findings and agree how they can help inform the emerging Improvement Plan.
- 3.6 The Independent Assurance Panel report highlights the significant progress the Council has made since publication of the external assurance review in November 2021. It also notes those areas where there remain risks and a need for improvement is still required. To evidence the progress being made against the

recommendations from the external review, the Council has maintained a dashboard providing a RAG rating and commentary. This is included as Appendix 2.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 A small budget has been allocated to support the costs of the independent panel. To date costs have been kept to a minimum through the use of on-line meetings.

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 There are no staffing, ICT or asset implications arising from this report.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

7.1 There are no specific risks arising from this report.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

8.1 The Independent Assurance Panel has been appointed to act in an advisory capacity and also has an assurance role that Wirral Council is making good progress. As well as formal monthly meetings, there have been a number of separate informal meetings between Panel members and Council officers to provide guidance and support.

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 There are no direct equality implications arising from this report.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The Panel have where possible continued to meet remotely to reduce unnecessary travel.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no direct community wealth implications arising from this report.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Independent Assurance Panel Report
Appendix 2 – DLUHC Recommendations Monitoring Dashboard
Appendix 3 – Update on Corporate Peer Challenge

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Independent Assurance Panel Terms of Reference
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities External Assurance Review
Governance

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Policy & Resources Committee	30 Nov 2021