

POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 18 January 2023

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

REPORT SUMMARY

This report presents the second 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 letter, included as Appendix 1, provides an update from the Chair of the Independent Panel following three formal meetings since the last report to the Council in June 2022. The letter fulfils the request of the Council for the Panel to report to the Council on progress at least twice a year but is effectively a holding letter to allow for further work on the Council's budget, with a further, more detailed report expected following the next meeting of the Panel in January 2023.

There are no direct ward implications, and the report is not a key decision.

The report contributes to the delivery of all of the priorities of the Wirral Plan 2022-2027.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Policy & Resources Committee is recommended to note the content of the letter.

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 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 Council's Improvement Plan was approved by Council 11 July 2022.
- 3.5 Following the most recent set of meetings of the Independent Panel, the Chair of the Panel, Carolyn Downs, outlined her intention to send a holding letter, to fulfil the requirement to formally report to the Council every six months on progress. The purpose of sending a holding letter was to enable further time for the Council to work to address its financial position and give further assurances that it was able to set a balanced budget for 2023/24. The letter is appended to this report.
- 3.6 The next meeting of the Independent Assurance Panel is scheduled for Friday 13 January. Following this meeting, the next formal report of the Panel will be issued. This will be published and circulated when it is available.

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 Letter

BACKGROUND PAPERS

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

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The report is being considered by Policy and Resources Committee in accordance with the agreement with the Department for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing for reporting to the Council.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Policy & Resources Committee	30 Nov 2021 8 June 2022
Council	11 July 2022