



POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 22 March 2023

Report Title:	STRATEGIC PLANNING AND IMPROVEMENT UPDATE
Report of:	CHIEF EXECUTIVE

REPORT SUMMARY

Further to receipt of the latest report of the Independent Assurance Panel, as reported to this Committee in January, this report provides an update on the Council's continuing improvement programme. It includes the outcome of the Local Government Association's (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge re-visit conducted in November 2022. It also provides an in-year review of progress delivering against the Wirral Plan and the Council's Improvement Plan which were both agreed at Council on 11 July 2022.

The report underpins the implementation of the Wirral Plan by supporting the Council's continued improvement and financial sustainability.

This matter affects all wards. The report is not a key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

Policy and Resources Committee is recommended to support the progress made and continue its support for collaborative working in support of the Council's on-going improvement.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 In Summer 2021 an external assurance review of the Council's governance and finances was commissioned by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). This was in response to the Council's request for a capitalisation directive in support of balancing the 2020/21 and 2021/22 budgets.
- 1.2 Following the review, two external assurance reports were published in November 2021. The reports included 23 recommendations to support the conditions for the capitalisation directive and to shape the Council improvement requirements in relation to governance and financial recovery.
- 1.3 Two of these recommendations required the completion of an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (completed in March 2022) and to appoint an Independent Assurance Panel to act as a critical friend in respect of the Council's improvement. The Panel was appointed in December 2021 and has been meeting regularly since then.
- 1.4 This report updates Members of Policy and Resources Committee on the Council's improvement progress undertaken within that context.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 The Corporate Peer Challenge and the Council's Improvement Plan were specific requirements in line with the recommendations of the external assurance review. Reporting progress is good practice in line with the Council's aspiration for improvement and financial recovery. As such, no other options have been considered.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 As a result of financial challenges arising from the Covid 19 pandemic, the Council requested a capitalisation directive from the government to balance its budget in 2020/21 and 2021/22. As part of its assessment of the Council, DLUHC commissioned an external assurance review in Summer 2021 to get an independent view on the strength of the Council's financial and governance arrangements. The two external assurance reports were published in November 2021 and included 23 recommendations setting out a range of required improvement measures as conditions of the capitalisation directive being granted. Some of the key recommendations were:

- The appointment of an Independent Assurance Panel, made up of professionals with significant knowledge of local government finance, governance and improvement,
- That the Council requests a Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge,
- The development of an Improvement and Financial Recovery Plan,
- The requirements for a Council decision in support of a move to a Whole Council Scheme of Elections.

Independent Assurance Panel

- 3.2 An Independent Assurance Panel was appointed by the Chief Executive in December 2021 to act in an advisory and support role whilst also providing assurance to DLUHC on the Council's improvement progress. The Panel, chaired by Carolyn Downs (Chief Executive – London Borough of Brent) has met regularly since its appointment. Some Members of the Panel also conduct regular meetings with Council officers to offer guidance and support. The Panel formally reports every 6 months to DLUHC and the Council. The last report of the Panel was received and presented to Policy & Resources Committee on 18 January.

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

- 3.3 An LGA Corporate Peer Challenge was delivered in Spring 2022. The focus of the Corporate Peer Challenge was aligned to the Council's improvement priorities. A challenge panel, led by Jacqui Gedman (Chief Executive – Kirklees Council) spent 4 days on site from 21-24 March 2022 talking to Elected Members, staff and key partners. The outcome of the challenge process was reported to this committee on 27 June 2022 and included a series of recommendations for the Council to:
- Develop a clear and collective vision for the future of Wirral Council and the Borough.
 - Develop a golden thread which cuts across tiers of the organisation regarding this vision.
 - Review the resources, capacity and capability required to support the Council's Regeneration ambitions.
 - Realign the Council's Corporate Core to support financial transformation and wider improvement.
 - Foster a culture of rigorous and constructive challenge within the organisation.
 - Develop a corporate approach to the management of reserves.
 - Proactively engage with external audit to support financial improvements across the Council and the management of risk.
 - Work towards political consensus on shared priorities to engender cross-party support on key issues.
 - Implement proposed governance reforms to support increased effectiveness of the Committee System.
 - Consider additional capacity to support the political and managerial leadership of the Council.
 - Provide dedicated space and time for the Council's Senior Management Team, Committee Chairs, and Group Leads to come together.
 - Further the training and development provided to elected members and managers.
 - Continue to work effectively with the Wirral Improvement Panel, considering the development work that is required over the coming two years.
- 3.4 In line with usual practice, a follow up visit was arranged with Members of the Challenge Panel in November 2022, six months after the original challenge process had been completed. The report of the Peer Challenge re-visit is included as Appendix 1 to this report and provides a narrative on the Council's progress as well as those areas of risk and challenge requiring continued attention and focus. As part of the Council's preparation for the return visit, a self-assessment was drafted against the recommendations set out above. This is included as Appendix 2.

Council Improvement Plan

- 3.5 The Council's Improvement Plan, approved by Council on 11 July 2022, was developed in response to the External Assurance Review and Corporate Peer Challenge recommendations. The Plan was developed across four key themes:
- Financial Stability
 - Effective Organisation
 - Effective Services
 - Resilient Communities
- 3.6 In its report to this committee in January, the Independent Assurance Panel noted the Council's positive progress against the Improvement Plan. However, the panel also noted the need for political collaboration to ensure the approval of a balanced budget for 2023/24 and the need for continued focus on the delivery of the Medium Term Financial Strategy to ensure the Council's financial stability. The Panel has requested that a detailed progress report against the Improvement Plan is provided for its next meeting in May. This report will then be brought to the Policy & Resources Committee at its first meeting in June.

Wirral Plan

- 3.7 A refresh of the Wirral Plan 2021-26 was undertaken in Spring 2022 and this was referred by this Committee for approval by Council on 11 July 2022. The refreshed Wirral Plan retained its five core themes:
- Brighter Futures
 - Inclusive Economy
 - Sustainable Environment
 - Active and Healthy Lives
 - Safe and Pleasant Communities
- 3.8 The refreshed Wirral Plan also included a number of key priorities for 2022/23 in line with current and emerging issues and challenges. An interim progress report, highlighting the achievement against these priorities is included as Appendix 3. A year end report will be compiled and reported in Summer/Autumn as a new Wirral Plan is refreshed to align with the new Council administration following the local elections in May.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no financial implications arising as a result of this report. The Council's Improvement Plan seeks to ensure the Council is able to strengthen its financial position after a period of instability.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no legal implications arising as a result of this report.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 There are no resource implications arising as a result of this report.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

7.1 There are no new risks arising as a result of this report. Risks in relation to the successful delivery of the Wirral Plan and Improvement Plan are managed through the Council's Corporate Risk Register and Directorate Plan risk registers.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

8.1 Extensive engagement was undertaken with partners and Elected Members prior to the Wirral Plan 2021 – 26 being approved in September 2021. Political Group Leaders were consulted in advance of this document being refreshed in July 2022.

8.2 Wirral's Improvement Plan has been developed further to the engagement of political leaders and following consultation with the Independent Assurance Panel and the Local Government Association.

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 equality implications arising as a result of this report.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are no environment or climate implications arising directly as a result of this report. However, the Wirral Plan theme, Sustainable Environment, is key in determining how the Council and Wirral as a borough respond to the Climate Emergency. Successful delivery of the Wirral Plan is vital in the Council's response to the climate and biodiversity crisis.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no community wealth implications arising as a result of this report.

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

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – LGA CPC Wirral Progress Review (Final)
Appendix 2 – Position Paper Nov 2022 – LGA CPC re-visit v3
Appendix 3 – Wirral Plan Update

BACKGROUND PAPERS

External Assurance Review – Governance, Ada Burns September 2021
Local Government Finance Review – Wirral Council November 2021
Wirral Plan 2021 – 26, 2022/23 Refresh

**Wirral Improvement Plan
LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Outcome Report May 2022
Report of the Independent Assurance Panel May 2022 and January 2023**

TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by the Policy and Resources Committee in accordance with Section 1.2 of its Terms of Reference, to provide strategic direction to the operation of the Council.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Policy & Resources Committee	30 November 2021
Policy & Resources Committee	8 June 2022
Policy & Resources Committee	22 June 2022