

Process Title	Wirral Corporate Peer Challenge Re-visit: Six-month Progress Review
Date	November 2022

INTRODUCTION

The Local Government Association's original Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) of Wirral was completed in April 2022, and a revisit is scheduled for 30th November 2022, to coincide with six-months from the publication of the Council's action plan. The progress review following a CPC is an essential part of the CPC process and is in place to support the Council in implementing its action plan following the CPC. The six-month progress review will provide:

- Feedback from the peer team on the early progress made by the Council against the CPC recommendations and action plan.
- The opportunity to discuss the alignment of actions in the action plan to the recommendations and any early impact or learning from the progress made against this action plan.
- Space to discuss and design ways of capitalising or navigating any significant changes in the local operating environment. This includes relevant, new opportunities or obstacles that may have presented themselves since the team were 'on-site'.

This note sets out an overview of initial progress made in relation to the recommendations of the CPC report since it was produced in April, to help inform planning and focus, in advance of the review visit.

1.0 CURRENT CONTEXT

Wirral's response to the CPC - and the actions to address its recommendations - are set out in the Improvement Plan agreed at Council in July 2022. We know that to deliver it requires political collaboration and the collective will and effort of our staff, management team and political leaders.

The Improvement Plan set out the vision for the organisation we are seeking to create to deliver the outcomes set out in the Wirral Plan to best meet the needs of local residents. The plan details how we will secure the Council's financial stability and how we will develop an effective organisation with a clear sense of priorities backed up by strong leadership and good governance. It provides a framework and schedule for systematically re-designing our services to ensure they are fit-for-purpose, deliver value for money and secure the best outcomes for Wirral residents.

Since then, good progress has been made in supporting delivery of the Plan and drive forward improvement, particularly in relation to leadership and governance.

However, the budgetary issue is currently our most significant challenge, as it is for most Local Authorities and the public sector. The budget setting process for 2023/24 commenced much earlier than in previous years in order to put the Council in a strong position in terms of its continued improvement and financial recovery. The authority had been on track to bring forward plans for a balanced budget next year despite an expected gap of £14 million.

However, rising energy prices, soaring inflation, and national wage pressures have seriously impacted Wirral Council's budget setting for 2023-24.

During the Summer, financial monitoring highlighted a range of in-year (2022/23) financial pressures resulting from emerging external, national, and global circumstances. These financial challenges are having a significant impact on:

- Contract inflation,
- Reduced income,
- Energy price increases,

- Pay inflation.

Financial modelling, together with the unforeseen extra cost pressures mean the council now faces a very significant budget gap for 2023/24 that will need action to be taken to prepare and agree proposals for consideration, in advance of the Local Government Finance Settlement to be announced in December.

The scale of the financial challenge that the Council faces cannot be overstated. Setting a budget, especially in the context of largely uncontrollable, macro-economic pressures, emerging at an unprecedented pace, requires difficult decisions to ensure that a balanced position can be presented.

It should be noted that these financial challenges are facing the whole country and Wirral, like most other Councils, is now facing a significantly worsened assumed budget gap for 2023/24.

Like every other local authority, and so many organisations across the country, public and private sector alike, our services are now under a greater level of pressure than we have ever experienced before.

2.0 REVIEW VISIT

Against this background and significantly changing context, the six-month review and on-site visit on 30th November will consider the original recommendations of the CPC under the following themes:

2.1 Clarity of improvement proposals and cross-party engagement on progress

(a) This would include activity against the following recommendations from the original 'on-site'- work in Wirral in 2022.

- **Develop a clear and collective vision for the future of Wirral council and the borough:** The council revised the Wirral plan (2021-2026) in July 2021 setting out the priorities for the council for the coming years in a post-covid context. However, the subsequent publication of assurance reports has changed the context of the council. Therefore, there is a need for WMBC to articulate a vision and priorities that brings together the council's budget, strategic improvement plan, organisational structure, culture, regeneration ambitions, and relationship with partners into a single narrative and framework.
- **Develop a golden thread which cuts across tiers of the organisation regarding this vision:** There is need to further develop the golden thread associated with this vision into service plans, team plans, and staff appraisals (known locally as "*check ins*"). This will support with the identification of SMART outcomes, and for staff across the organisation to understand the contribution that their teams and roles can make towards them.
- **Work towards political consensus on shared priorities to engender cross-party support on key issues:** Given WMBC is 'no overall control' there is a need for shared political approaches on priority issues. Therefore, to strengthen the stability of decision-making, the council should work towards political consensus across parties on issues of strategic importance. This should include an ongoing shared understanding of the financial context of the council.

(b) Points for consideration during the visit

- How to ensure effective engagement (of members, staff and partners) in production and implementation of new 2023 four-year Plan.
- How to build on and enhance formal and informal member engagement and collaboration on key strategic issues. This will be particularly important during 2023, both pre and post-election, in the context of the new election cycle and with the likelihood of what could be a considerable number of new members post-election.

2.2 Governance, Finance, and Audit

(a) This would include activity against the following recommendations from the original 'on-site'- work in Wirral in 2022:

- **Review the resources, capacity and capability required to support the council's Regeneration ambitions:** The peer team recognise the exciting opportunities that exist within the borough through regeneration. However, WMBC need to assure itself that it has the appropriate skills and resources across the organisation to deliver on its scale of ambition. This includes particular focus on the finance support required to support delivery and manage risk on the council's behalf as a '*client function*'. It is also essential that the council maximises the opportunities to improve outcomes for residents through this work, making sure that this is not just viewed as 'physical regeneration'.
- **Realign the council's corporate core to support financial transformation and wider improvement:** A strong corporate core is essential to coordinating, managing, and monitoring, the council's financial recovery. This core is currently dispersed across a number of directorates, and the council should look to bring this resource into a centralised team as far as possible. The council needs to consider the most appropriate place for this to sit in the organisation, ensuring that it is aligned to delivering the council's strategic improvement plan and financial recovery, but does not act to dilute the attention required of statutory officers.
- **Develop a corporate approach to the management of reserves:** Reserves are currently held at a directorate level which creates challenges of oversight and limits the strategic opportunities regarding their use. The use of earmarked reserves should not be seen as an in-year contingency. The peer team feel that reserves should not be managed within directorates and should be managed corporately and maintained at the appropriate level. This centralisation of reserves is essential for sound budget management and supports their use strategically rather than reactively. This work needs to link the management of reserves to the council's medium term financial strategy and the delivery of the existing budget framework.
- **Proactively engage with external audit to support financial improvements across the council and the management of risk:** The delivery of the council's financial recovery and strategic improvement plan should address the statutory recommendations from external audit. However, it is important that the council engages beyond this to support an improved culture of financial reporting and good governance through proactive and regular dialogue on emerging issues.
- **Implement proposed governance reforms to support increased effectiveness of the committee system:** The council undertook a review of its committee system in December 2021, which included specific recommendations such as reducing the number of committees, refining scrutiny, and reviewing schemes of delegation. The improvement of delegations within the council will both support the pace of decision making but will also act to empower officers across the organisation. The council needs to implement these reforms at the earliest instance and continue to be live to the culture of good governance to support ongoing improvement.

(b) Points for consideration during the visit

- The Regeneration Delivery Plan needs to set out a clear programme of project phasing, prioritisation and deliverability.
- How to optimise the design and function of the Council Operating Model in general, and the Corporate Centre in particular, to deliver transformation and improvement.
- Continue to build and enhance financial awareness and training across the organisation.
- Good progress being made with Member development and learning, but how to improve softer cultural relationships – the new election cycle from 2023 presents fresh opportunities for this.

- How can we ensure the budget process remains on track and delivers against the outcomes of the workshops.

2.3 Transformation and Organisational Culture

(a) This would include activity against the following recommendations from the original 'on-site'- work in Wirral 2022.

- **Foster a culture of rigorous and constructive challenge within the organisation:** A key feature of successful organisations is robust internal challenge. This is essential in the development of saving proposals, regeneration propositions, and policy implementation. Wirral needs to ensure that this challenge is a central feature of the organisation's culture, whilst mitigating the risk that challenge escalates into inappropriate behaviours. This can be supported through improved movement of information across the council, and better engagement with councillors through the decision-making process (including improved reports).
- **Consider additional capacity to support the political and managerial leadership of the council:** Within the framework of no-overall control and the committee system it is essential that the leadership of the council is well supported to ensure that their capacity is protected for strategic issues and to enable the timely movement of information across political groups and committees in-line with wider sectoral norms.
- **Provide dedicated space and time for the council's senior management team, committee chairs, and group leads to come together:** It is important that the council recognises the collective teamwork required across members and officers to support improvement. To this end, the peer team would recommend that further 'top-team development' work takes place at pace to support key roles both collectively and individually.
- **Further the training and development provided to elected members and managers:** Whilst this is being delivered currently, and there are plans for this to be extended, this needs to move to new levels to include a comprehensive plan for elected members covering roles and responsibilities, being a councillor in the 21st century, and increased learning from across the sector. This should be mirrored with a comprehensive management development programme, but it is essential that these are viewed as ongoing and continuous processes.
- **Continue to work effectively with the Wirral improvement panel, considering the development work that is required over the coming two years:** Wirral have made good progress working with the Improvement and assurance panel since December 2021, and this relationship is central to the council's journey. However, it is important that over the coming two-years the council does not become dependent upon the advice and direction of the panel, and instead fully owns and understands the actions required. This is especially pertinent for ensuring that there is clarity regarding the requirements and milestones that the council must meet to ensure that the panel has confidence that they are committed to and capable of continued improvement without external oversight.

(b) Points for consideration during the visit

- How can we further improve and align the extensive Member Development activity and the emerging People Strategy, as part of a comprehensive and detailed programme of leadership development?
- What should be the focus of Strategic Away Days e.g., with Group Leaders and SLT to embed and improve the culture of transformation and improvement across the Council? A key part of this will be producing a new 4-year Plan for 2023 and preparing for all-out elections?
- As the Panel withdraws from the Council, what more can we do to ensure a meaningful commitment to improvement is maintained and built upon?

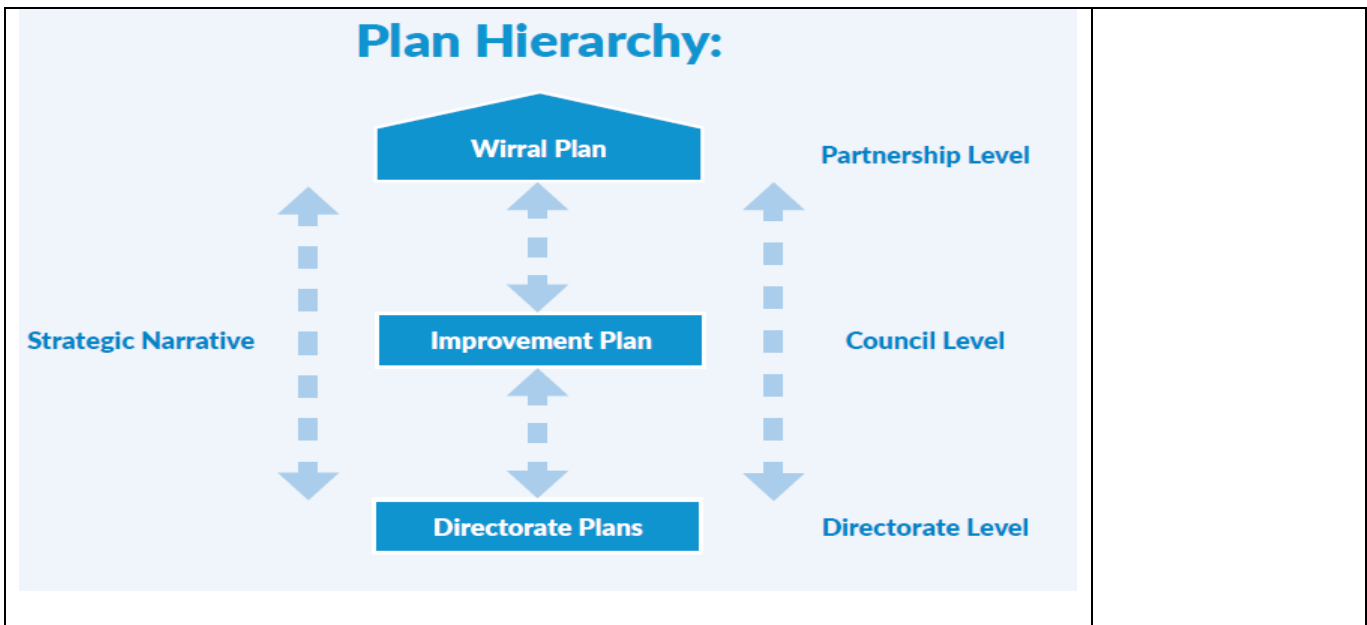
3.0 SUMMARY OF PROGRESS

Ahead of the on-site visit, the following section provides an overview of progress to date on the '13 recommendations' identified by the CPC and next steps that will be taken to further deliver against the recommendations.

Recommendation 1 – Develop a clear and collective vision for the future of Wirral Council and the Borough	
<i>There is a need for WMBC to articulate a vision and priorities that brings together the Council's budget, Strategic Improvement Plan, organisational structure, culture, regeneration ambitions, and relationship with partners into a single narrative and framework.</i>	
Progress	Next Steps
<p>In July 2022, the Council agreed the single narrative, comprising the Improvement Plan, alongside the refreshed Wirral Plan 2022/23.</p> <p>The Improvement Plan was developed in response to, and incorporates the recommendations of, the External Assurance Review Reports and the LGA Peer Challenge.</p> <p>It has been developed following engagement with council staff, Chief Officers, and all political Group Leaders. It also follows advice and guidance provided by Wirral's Independent Assurance Panel and the LGA on how best to plan and deliver on our improvement aspirations. The Improvement Plan sets out the vision for the organisation we are seeking to create to deliver the outcomes set out in the Wirral Plan to best meet the needs of local residents.</p> <p>The plan details how we will secure the Council's financial stability and how we will develop an effective organisation with a clear sense of priorities backed up by strong leadership and good governance. It provides a framework and schedule for systematically re-designing our services to ensure they are fit-for-purpose, deliver value for money and secure the best outcomes for Wirral residents.</p> <p>Priorities identified in the Wirral Improvement Plan are outlined in the diagram below.</p>	<p>Review of IP and WP progress report December 2023</p> <p>Strategic planning and engagement to produce new 4-year Plan will start Spring 2023</p>
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-top: 10px;"> <div style="width: 22%;"> <p>A Financial Stability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medium term financial plan • Savings plans and monitoring • Reserves strategy • Governance & oversight • Capital & assets </div> <div style="width: 22%;"> <p>B Effective Organisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong leadership • Committees & decision making • Strategy, policy & planning • New operation model </div> <div style="width: 22%;"> <p>C Effective Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief Officer review • Service review programme • Digital transformation </div> <div style="width: 22%;"> <p>D Resilient Communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic partnerships • VCF sector • Neighbourhood model </div> </div>	
<p>The Wirral Improvement Plan can be accessed here.</p>	

<p>Complementary to this, the Wirral Plan was refreshed in July 2022 to reflect wider contextual changes and to align with the Council’s Improvement Plan – setting out the vision and priorities for organisational change and improvement. The Wirral Plan is a key document of the Council’s policy framework, setting out the vision and priorities for Wirral as a place, and ensuring the Council is in the best shape to lead Wirral partners to achieve this vision.</p>	
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<p align="center">Recommendation 2 – Develop a golden thread which cuts across tiers of the organisation regarding this vision</p>	
<p><i>Further develop the golden thread associated with the collective vision for WMBC into Service Plans, Team Plans, and staff appraisals (known locally as “check ins”). This will support with the identification of SMART outcomes, and for staff across the organisation to understand the contribution that their teams and roles can make towards them.</i></p>	
<p>Progress</p>	<p>Next Steps</p>
<p>The Wirral Plan is a key policy document and articulates the ambition and key deliverables for the organisation. As part of the implementation of the Wirral Plan, Directorate Business Plans were produced in Spring 2022. This approach was embedded into our strategic planning and financial strategy and ensured that Wirral Plan priorities are at the heart of all corporate underpinning team and staff work plans.</p> <p>Directorate Business Plans set out key priorities, projects and deliverables for 2022-23; budget savings proposals for 2022/23 as well as the emerging proposals for service change in 2023/24.</p> <p>The Business Planning process successfully aligns and reflects several related activities including:</p> <p>Staff Engagement: Ongoing staff engagement and communications took place to shape Business Plans, related Team Plans and individual ‘check-ins’. This included briefing staff to understand Wirral Plan and Improvement Plan aims to ensure everyone in the organisation is working towards a clear set of joint priorities.</p> <p>Performance Management & Reporting: Embedding SMART objectives and timelines within Business Plans and aligning these with current processes e.g., Performance Insight Packs and Corporate Dashboard.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting performance management at DMT, SLT and OPG and enable CEX bimonthly Director’s meetings to have oversight of Directorate performance. • Refreshed Performance Management Framework for the Wirral Plan <p>Improvement Plan: Directorate Business Plans also align with Improvement Plan priorities. The diagram below demonstrates the golden thread between the collective vision for WMBC and a continued strategic narrative across the key strategic documents for WMBC: Wirral Plan, Improvement Plan and Directorate Plans.</p>	<p>As the Council moves to a Whole Council Election scheme in 2023, there is an opportunity to re-set the Wirral Plan as a four-year plan for the full term of the new administration. This work will be conducted during 2023 to enable a new 2023/27 plan to be adopted in Autumn 2023.</p> <p>A structured schedule of engagement and strategic planning will set out how the 2023 Plan and all underpinning Delivery Plans will be co-produced with members and staff.</p>



Recommendation 3 – Review the resources, capacity and capability required to support the Council’s Regeneration ambitions	
<p><i>WMBC need to assure itself that it has the appropriate skills and resources across the organisation to deliver on its scale of ambition. This includes particular focus on the finance support required to support delivery and manage risk on the Council’s behalf as a ‘client function’. It is also essential that the Council maximises the opportunities to improve outcomes for residents through this work, making sure that this is not just viewed as ‘physical regeneration’.</i></p>	
Progress	Next Steps
<p>The resources, capacity and capability required to deliver the Council’s Regeneration ambitions has been assessed and regular reports are taken to the Wirral Independent Assurance Panel.</p> <p>A dedicated on-site session took place in August 2022, when the Panel considered a comprehensive update on the delivery of the Council’s Regeneration Programme. This included a phasing plan in respect of project delivery; work to date on identifying the most appropriate delivery model for the programme; plus an update on the Regeneration Finance Strategy, with detail on the current resourcing position whilst articulating the work that is underway to deliver a comprehensive finance plan.</p> <p>A Regeneration PMO was established in 2021, together with the allocation of resources to enable a structure to be put in place to deliver the programme. Initial focus for the PMO has been on supporting the delivery of the regeneration programme to meet agreed outcomes and timescales, in line with funding requirements, and alongside a clear risk management approach.</p> <p>A Delivery Plan is currently under development to set out the project phasing and prioritisation of the regeneration programme. The Plan will include an organisation chart and some information about the senior team who are tasked with delivery. The Plan will sit alongside the Regeneration Finance Strategy. The Regeneration Delivery Team, working alongside the Regeneration PMO, is focussed on 5 main programmes (Birkenhead Waterfront, Central Birkenhead,</p>	<p>Delivery Plan will be progressed and finalised by the end of the calendar year.</p> <p>Regeneration Oversight group to scrutinise delivery of the programme.</p> <p>The Business Case for the proposed model of delivery will continue to be shared with key Members and stakeholders prior to its consideration at the Economy, Regeneration and Housing Committee in October 2022 and</p>

<p>Dock Branch Neighbourhood, Hind Street and Wirral Waters), which are a priority because of funding deadlines, and will be set out in a Delivery Plan.</p> <p>Additional external capacity has now been put in place to accelerate the development of the Regeneration Finance Strategy. The Regeneration Finance Strategy sets out the process through which the Council manages the resourcing and financing of individual programmes, such that a robust approach is applied, ensuring sustainability, and that an overarching financial plan can be maintained. The Regeneration Finance Strategy also sets out the current capital programme (an accompanying Capital Investment Strategy will be developed), and the resourcing and financing arrangements, demonstrating the viability of the programme in the next two years, as well as highlighting where funding is still to be secured to deliver the remainder of the programme. The Financing Strategy and Plan will align with the Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2022/23 – 2026/27.</p> <p>To further manage risk effectively, internal governance was strengthened through the establishment of a Regeneration Programme Board, reporting through to the Investment and Change Board. A Regeneration Oversight Group chaired by the Chief Executive has also been established to provide high level scrutiny of the delivery of the regeneration programme and to ensure that corporate input and support is provided to enable that delivery as part of the Improvement Plan priorities.</p> <p>Given the viability challenges facing the regeneration of the LeftBank the Council has critically attracted external funding from public sector sources (Future High Streets, Town Deal, Levelling Up, as well as from LCRC and Homes England) to support private sector investment. In addition, a LeftBank Programme Board has been set up to coordinate funding and ensure delivery against the timescales associated with these funding sources.</p> <p>At the same time the Government awarded Wirral Council funding through its New Development Corporation Competition Programme (NDCCP) thereby enabling work to take place to identify the most appropriate delivery model for this programme. The development of a business case has been progressed collectively with DLUHC with a focus on identifying what works best for the locality. A fundamental principle has been that any delivery model should reflect and inform the Council’s Improvement Plan and be part of that improvement journey – a One Place One Plan approach.</p> <p>It is recognised that in order to progress with the full regeneration programme at the proposed pace that there is likely to be a gap in funding. The submission of the Delivery Partnership proposals to Government will indicate whether additional funding can be secured, and the programme continue at pace or, if this is not the case, then the regeneration phasing plan will need to reflect the progress that can be made with the available resources.</p> <p>The Council is continuing to improve outcomes for residents through regeneration ensuring they benefit from sustainable transport networks, improved access to employment and training opportunities, better housing/living environments, and access to the latest technology through full fibre digital network roll out across the borough. The Regeneration Service is also putting Community Wealth at the heart of activities, supporting the</p>	<p>submission to Government in early 2023</p> <p>The Finance Strategy will continue to be progressed as a key priority with its progress overseen by the Regeneration Oversight group.</p> <p>Delivery of actions outlined in the Wirral Economic Strategy, 2021 – 2026.</p>
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<p>Council’s ambition (as outlined more broadly in the Community Wealth Strategy), to ensure that more of the wealth that is both held and generated in Wirral is retained and controlled locally and flows into the hands of local residents. This will be achieved through examples such as: using planning agreements as part of our developments at Left Bank to secure social value through employment and skills agreements; developing innovative methods to increase meaningful community engagement in project/masterplan designs; and working with our Public Health Team and VCF sector to increase the range and scope of volunteering opportunities.</p>	
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**Recommendation 4 –
Realign the Council’s Corporate Core to support financial transformation and wider improvement**

A strong corporate core is essential to coordinating, managing, and monitoring, the Council’s financial recovery. This core is currently dispersed across a number of Directorates, and the Council should look to bring this resource into a centralised Team as far as possible. The Council needs to consider the most appropriate place for this to sit in the organisation, ensuring that it is aligned to delivering the Council’s Strategic Improvement Plan and financial recovery, but does not act to dilute the attention required of statutory officers.

Progress	Next Steps
<p>In response to the Independent Panel directive; CPC recommendations; and as a key part of the Budget setting process, a strategic and comprehensive review all Corporate Services is currently underway. The Enabling Services Review is a key programme in the Council’s Strategic Change Portfolio. Enabling Services are classed as any service that provides a support function and are sometimes also called support services, corporate services or back office services.</p> <p>As part of the 2023/24 budget setting process, a saving of £3m was agreed over two years, split £2.3m in 2023/24 and £0.7m in 2024/25. The split considers the time lag from the agreement at Full Council to cashable savings being realised. It is recognised that as the Council reduces, the enabling services need to reduce in line and where we can make savings from reducing these types of functions, we can somewhat, protect front line services.</p> <p>The aim of this piece of work is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drive out savings by identifying the most efficient and effective way to structure and organise work of a similar nature across the Council. • Provide assurance that spend on enabling services is proportionate to the Council’s overall budget and workforce size through external benchmarking. <p>The review will continue during 2023 to redesign strengthening the enabling functions of the Council, namely, developing a strong corporate core promoting professional practice, and efficient/effective processes as recommended by the CPC.</p>	<p>Further work during 2023 to progress this</p>

**Recommendation 5 –
Foster a culture of rigorous and constructive challenge within the organisation**

Wirral needs to ensure that internal challenge is a central feature of the organisation’s culture, whilst mitigating the risk that challenge escalates into inappropriate behaviours. This can be supported through improved movement of information across the Council, and better engagement with Councillors through the decision-making process (including improved reports).

Progress	Next Steps
<p>Following the CPC in April 2022, extensive development has been taking place to embed a strategic approach to challenge across the organisation. This included a review of formal reporting templates, with external legal validation sought. New decision-making pathways were also developed to ensure better understanding of governance requirements across the Council Directorates and engagement with Councillors throughout the decision-making process. From Dec 2021 to Feb 2022 a review of the Committee System was undertaken by the Governance Working Group with support from the Independent Panel which culminated in the adoptions of a revised Constitution In May 2022.</p> <p>A series of dedicated workshops with an external training and development lead has taken place during 2022. This has included an intensive focus on budget and finance decision making.</p> <p>Internal challenge is also a central feature of the organisation and opportunities for challenge have been embedded throughout the report writing process. This has included the creation of a Committee Co-ordination and Oversight Group (including representation from Governance, Risk, Legal and Finance) to quality assure all key decision reports, prior to sign off by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). All reports must be circulated for review on the refreshed Mod.Gov to enable Officers from Governance, Legal, Finance, Audit, HR, Comms etc. to contribute regardless of whether they are a key or non-key decision. Report authors are encouraged to engage with colleagues in the report formulation stage as much as possible to increase the quality and co-production of reports. Training is also provided on the intranet in respect of the writing of reports (including specific guidance on the management of risk).</p> <p>With regards to further support for Members, all Committees have a clear programme of Chair and Group Spokesperson’s meetings, as well as enhanced agenda management. The Chair of Audit & Risk Management (ARM) Committee wrote to all Policy and Service Committee Chairs in August making them aware of their risk management responsibilities and the risks associated with corporate plans and decision making. Following the last ARM Committee another letter is to be sent asking for an update on actions or plans, in particular the holding of a risk workshop.</p> <p>To further improve information sharing across the Council, a new information bulletin has been created and designed specifically for all Members and is circulated on a weekly basis (every Friday) to provide Members with an overview of key updates.</p> <p>A revised New Member Induction Programme was also developed and</p>	<p>Member Development Strategy 2023 - 27 - members skills audit and training plan.</p> <p>Another letter to be sent to all Policy and Service Committee Chairs to ask for updates on risk actions or plans, as well as on holding a risk workshop.</p> <p>A schedule of strategic learning and development will begin in Spring 2023, ahead of the ‘all-out’ elections.</p> <p>This will be followed by an intense induction programme for what could be a considerable number of new members in May 2023.</p>

<p>implemented in May 22. A survey of new Members was undertaken and received extremely positive feedback. New training opportunities has been enacted for all Members is also available, including Chair’s training, finance, corporate parenting, and social media. The Member Support Steering Group continues to meet quarterly. They recently approved the Member Wellbeing Policy.</p>	
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<p align="center">Recommendation 6 – Develop a corporate approach to the management of reserves</p>	
<p><i>The Peer Team feel that reserves should not be managed within Directorates and should be managed corporately and maintained at the appropriate level. This centralisation of reserves is essential for sound budget management and supports their use strategically rather than reactively. This work needs to link the management of reserves to the Council’s medium term financial strategy and the delivery of the existing budget framework.</i></p>	
<p>Progress</p>	<p>Next Steps</p>
<p>Earmarked and general reserves have corporate oversight inclusive of direct control by the S151 officer.</p> <p>Earmarked reserves are categorised in line with relevant operational areas, i.e., Directorate specific or corporate/organisation-wide activity. Forecast use of reserves is monitored through the routine budget monitoring process that is in place, which is reported to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and Policy & Resources Committee (P&R). P&R has responsibility for ensuring that the entire budget remains in balance, including providing mitigating actions to bring the budget back in line from any adverse variance position that may be forecast, which may take the form of providing direction to other Service Committees. Policy and Resources Committee is also responsible for advising Full Council on organisation-wide financial activity, inclusive of reserves.</p> <p>All reserves movements are controlled via an approval process undertaken by the S151 officer at financial year-end, subsequently recommended to full Council for approval, which follows from the in-year monitoring of proposed reserves movements that allows for early intervention to proposals should it be necessary.</p> <p>Under Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003, the Authority’s Chief Financial Officer is required to report on the robustness of the estimates made for the purposes of the Council’s Budget calculations and the adequacy of the General Fund balances and reserves. The Council must have regard to this report when making decisions in respect to the budget. It is also good practice for the Authority to have a policy on the level of its general reserve and to ensure that it is monitored and maintained. This is fulfilled on annual basis through reports to Council as part of budget setting activity.</p> <p>As part of the Council’s approved Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), a Reserves Strategy is in place to provide corporate oversight to matters, deliver a framework to operate within and set a risk assessed minimum level requirement for general reserves.</p>	<p>Continue with the detailed oversight and transparent reporting of proposed reserves activity.</p> <p>Fulfil the requirements set out in the Council’s MTFS in respect of Reserves.</p>

**Recommendation 7 –
Proactively engage with external audit to support financial improvements across the Council and the management of risk**

It is important that the Council engages beyond recommendations from External Audit to support an improved culture of financial reporting and good governance through proactive and regular dialogue on emerging issues.

Progress	Next Steps
<p>The Council has a professional relationship and open engagement with the External Audit on all levels of finance and governance.</p> <p>There are regular meetings with the Chief Executive and the Finance department to discuss current performance, changes in legislation, budgets and emerging issues and what the Council is doing to address them.</p> <p>The Council engages directly with External Audit on a number of issues and is proactive in providing early intervention proposals, for example in relation to the Council’s policy approach to capitalisation of salaries, whereby the Council’s intentions were laid out for External Audit’s comment and agreement, which was obtained; similarly work was undertaken to engage and seek agreement from External Audit on a proposed approach to the national issue of infrastructure and changes made to the Council’s approach ahead of the annual audit process.</p> <p>During the annual audit process there are weekly meetings to ensure we work in an effective way to address and resolve matters quickly.</p> <p>Following the Value for Money (VfM) audit for 20/21 a number of lessons learnt have been identified and we are working closely with the auditors to address these prior to any reports being submitted.</p> <p>An example of improved engagement and outcomes from audit activity, is to ensure that we have clear notes/minutes when interviews are being conducted as part of the VfM work. This avoids any uncertainty about facts and will reduce any misunderstanding and improve the finding reports from the external auditors.</p> <p>During the 20/21 audit process we worked closely with the auditors to resolve a number of areas of concern regarding the guarantees for the regeneration programme, this entailed officers providing detailed evidence of the risks and assessing them and working with the auditors to establish how the risk should be presented both in the accounts and to members. Following this a number of recommendations through the Value for Money audit were made and we worked closely with the auditors on our responses and agreed recommendations which are taken to members annually.</p> <p>A new External Auditor was appointed during 2021, and this has given the Council an opportunity to review and improve engagement. The Value For Money Audit 21/22 is well underway. The ARM Committee has improved learning and development and a strong focus on effective scrutiny and improvement. Memberships of the Committee now included two Independent Members.</p>	<p>Continue to work closely with the external auditors and raise concerns as they arise at a senior level on the Council’s performance and necessary steps to improve the Council’s finances.</p> <p>Further develop the relationship to improve the financial accounts delivery process and make year-end/audit review processes more efficient.</p> <p>To work with the auditors to ensure infrastructure assets are accounted for correctly. A paper has been issued to them, but we will work to ensure compliance to any statutory changes.</p>

Recommendation 8 –

Work towards political consensus on shared priorities to engender cross-party support on key issues

Given WMBC is 'no overall control' there is a need for shared political approaches on priority issues. Therefore, to strengthen the stability of decision-making, the Council should work towards political consensus across parties on issues of strategic importance. This should include an ongoing shared understanding of the financial context of the Council.

Progress	Next Steps
<p>A series of meetings have been established to support the need for shared political approaches on priority issues. This includes fortnightly Leader and Group Leader meetings to continue efforts to achieve political consensus across parties on items of strategic importance. A virtual Office of key Corporate Officers was created in April 2022 and they provide weekly policy updates to the Leader and Deputy Leader and act as a key link between the Leader of the Council and the Senior Leadership Team.</p> <p>All Member training sessions were held focussing on Finance & Budget which also included Bite Size Finance training (on the Member Portal and FLO) to increase Members knowledge and understanding in this area and to enable them to make more informed decisions.</p> <p>In light of the significant challenges relating to the Council's finances and the importance of budget monitoring and delivering a budget strategy for 2023/24, Policy and Resources Committee agreed in July 22 that the work programme of budget development planned to be undertaken by the Finance Sub-committee as a working group, should be undertaken by Group Leaders meeting as a working group. The interim Director of Finance has developed a Forward Plan for the Group Leaders Working Group in relation to budget management to support them in working towards political consensus around the budget.</p> <p>With regards to budget setting for 2023/24, the process commenced much earlier than in previous years in order to put the Council in a strong position in terms of its continued improvement and financial recovery, set against the backdrop of the key principles from the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy. Directors were asked by the Chief Executive in May 22 to work up and present to the Strategic Leadership Team viable budget policy options in order to meet the then forecast budget gap. Proposals (Tranche 1) were brought forward against defined Directorate savings targets and shared with Policy and Service Committees through a series of budget workshops in Summer. A package of Tranche 2 savings will be brought forward, and a further round of budget workshops will be scheduled with Policy Committees during October/ November. The outcomes from all budget workshops and discussions held at Policy & Service Committee meetings will be presented to Policy & Resources Committee in the New Year as part of the ongoing budget setting process.</p>	<p>Member Development Strategy 2023 - 27 - Members Skills Audit and Training Plan.</p> <p>Tranche 2 savings to be considered during budget workshops in October/November and reviewed in conjunction with Tranche 1 policy options, before consideration at P&R Committee in the New Year as part of the budget setting process</p>

Recommendation 9 – Implement proposed governance reforms to support increased effectiveness of the Committee System	
<i>The Council needs to implement governance reforms at the earliest instance and continue to be live to the culture of good governance to support ongoing improvement.</i>	
Progress	Next Steps
<p>A full review of the Committee System was undertaken between November 2021 – February 2022.</p> <p>The review resulted in the number of ‘Policy’ Committees being reduced from seven to six, as well as fourteen other changes including the removal of the Urgency Committee and the two Overview and Scrutiny Committees (Decision Review Committee and Partnerships Committee).</p> <p>In addition, the existing procedures which provide for re-consideration of controversial decisions have been significantly revised to reduce the potentially disruptive effect on decision-making. It was also proposed to prohibit ‘to note’ reports from agendas and to distribute them outside of meetings.</p> <p>Proposed extension of the delegated authority to officers will further reduce the volume of matters being referred to Committees and other amendments to the Policy and Resources Committee Terms of Reference will clarify its lead role in developing and overseeing the budget and policy framework.</p> <p>A new Constitution was approved in May 2022 to take account of these changes.</p>	<p>Governance Working Group made up of Members of the Constitution & Standards Committee meet on a regular basis to monitor changes made to the Constitution and to undertake reviews on specific issues – a live example being the Council Meeting Procedure Rules</p>

Recommendation 10 – Consider additional capacity to support the political and managerial leadership of the Council	
<i>It is essential that the leadership of the Council is well supported to ensure that their capacity is protected for strategic issues and to enable the timely movement of information across political groups and committees in-line with wider sectoral norms.</i>	
Progress	Next Steps
<p>Strategic support is available to the leadership of the Council through a number of mechanisms including a Virtual Leader’s Office and weekly Leader and Deputies meetings to share pertinent information in a timely manner.</p> <p>An effective and improved programme of Member Support includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of Committee Co-ordination & Oversight Group and refresh of the report template. External validation of both the report sign-off process and template was sourced. Operational since April 2022. • Team Around the Leader arrangements initiated in May 22. Head of Democratic Services/Corporate Office/ Comms and Policy support briefing session with the Leader and Deputy on a Thursday morning to provide high level policy updates and horizon scanning. • Comprehensive review of member support. Move away from the Group Office Manager approach. Formal consultation is underway on proposed new model. The model will provide dedicated support to the Leader of the Council and the Leader of the second largest group (and their deputies). To be supported by a pooled arrangement which will provide comprehensive 5 days a week cover for all members of the Council. 	<p>New model – Redesign of Member Support in place by Feb 2023.</p>

Group leaders have been fully engaged and appraised of the new model. Anticipated implementation date is Feb 1st 2023 – allows time for assimilation and necessary recruitment to new posts.

- **Office-member training:** “Working with Members in a Committee System”: Covers Political sensitivity/ report writing/ presenting at Committees, delivered bi monthly . Sessions already held in July and September
- **Member Learning & Development**
New Member Induction programme successfully implemented in May/June 22.
Survey of new members undertaken with extremely positive feedback.
New training opportunities for all members – e.g. Chair’s training/ Finance/ Corporate Parenting and Social Media.
- The Member Support Steering Group continues to meet quarterly. They recently approved the Member Wellbeing Policy.
- **Member Learning and Development Strategy 23-27:** First draft presented to the Working Group for consideration in October. Informed by:
 - Member & Skills Audit/survey
 - Survey of New Members
 - Learning from other Local Authorities
 - Colleagues in OD have fully participated in project Working Group
 - LGA acted as a critical friend and will continue to do so as drafting continues
- The final strategy will be presented to Constitution & Standards Committee in Feb 2023 for approval. This will coincide with the implementation of the new working arrangements for Member Support and will allow for a period of preparedness for implementation of the strategy following the May 23 election.
- LGA mentoring opportunities have also been offered to all Policy Committee Chairs, as well as dedicated diary management support to enable Members in these roles to have the capacity and skills required to fulfil their responsibilities as Chair.
- Service redesign of Member Support is being conducted, with a new model in place for 1st Feb 23 – allows for three months of preparation for outcomes of Whole Council Elections in May.

Recommendation 11 –

Provide dedicated space and time for the council’s Senior Management Team, Committee Chairs, and Group Leads to come together

The Peer Team would recommend that further ‘top-team development’ work takes place at pace to support key roles both collectively and individually.

Progress

The extensive member development activity referenced above and below in section 12, is also complemented by the emerging People Strategy and a detailed programme of leadership development.

During 2022, a series of Strategic Away Days have taken place with Group Leaders and SLT to shape and sign off several key developments including the Wirral Plan and Improvement Plan. These joint strategic sessions are currently focused on the ongoing Budget-setting process. Further Away Days are scheduled for Spring to include a focus on producing a new 4-year Plan for 2023 and preparing for all-out elections.

A strong focus on strategic leadership development with our workforce has also been underway.

Focused on #BeTheDifference to help achieve our Wirral Plan vision - to create equity for people and place and opportunities for all to secure the best possible future for our residents, communities and businesses. Whatever role we have, we’re all here to make these a reality, giving us a clear direction and a shared sense of purpose. We also know this can only be achieved through our people, so we’ve spent the last four months listening to and involving our people in development of our people strategy and leadership behaviour framework to ensure we understand the organisational conditions needed to help people thrive.

Our People Strategy simply sets out our values in action. It’s built on our pride, ambition and commitment, which is just how we do things around here. This strategy has been developed through conversations with our workforce, through a series of focus groups, organisation wide events and staff survey. We focus on six key strands, which our leaders, managers and colleagues across the organisation have described as being important to them, helping them to be effective and high performing in their roles.

- Meaningful Work
- Great Growth Opportunities
- Inclusive Work Environment
- Visible and Supportive Leadership
- Great People Management
- Innovation

Our People Strategy will shortly be taken through our formal approval process with the aim for it to be agreed in Summer 2023.

Our Leadership Behaviour Framework has also been co-designed with our workforce over the Summer of 2022 and sets out the expectations we have of our leaders at all levels. Leading by example, displaying and living our values and promoting trust and autonomy helps people feel a sense of purpose, belonging, connection and valued. Focusing on:

Next Steps

People Strategy and Leadership Behaviour Framework to be developed

Schedule of Strategic Away Days 2023

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our values and culture • The leadership behaviours – Leading self, leading others, leading outcomes and leading in our organisational context. • Leadership and management skills development <p>Our leadership behaviour framework will also shortly be taken through our formal approval process with the aim for it to be agreed in December this year.</p>	
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Recommendation 12 – Further the training and development provided to elected members and managers	
<p><i>This needs to move to new levels to include a comprehensive plan for elected members covering roles and responsibilities, being a councillor in the 21st century, and increased learning from across the sector. This should be mirrored with a comprehensive management development programme, but it is essential that these are viewed as ongoing and continuous processes.</i></p>	
Progress	Next Steps
<p>A refreshed New Member Induction Programme was implemented in May 22.</p> <p>Lessons learnt from the Programme will contribute to the development of a Member Learning & Development Strategy 2023 – 27. The strategy will be developed based on Member surveys, which will be conducted to identify needs and skills analysis. Support will be provided by Wirral’s Organisational Development Team through the Strategy Working Group, as well as external support from the LGA who will act as a critical friend and will continue to do so as drafting of the strategy continues. Oversight of development also will be provided by the Member Support Steering Group, with the final Strategy ready to be presented to the Constitution & Standards Committee for approval in February 2023. This will coincide with the implementation of the new working arrangements for Member Support and will allow for a period of preparedness for implementation of the strategy following the May 23 election.</p> <p>Training opportunities for all Members have also been extended to include dedicated finance sessions, chairing skills, corporate parenting, and social media.</p> <p>All newly appointed managers are also being supported to undertake a range of bite-size learning opportunities designed to help them meet the expectations that we have of our leaders. In addition to the core Manager and Leadership Essential Programme, we will also support our leaders to undertake an accredited leadership programmes which let them build on their experience, learn about emerging approaches, and further develop your leadership practice.</p> <p>Dedicated member development and induction programmes will be developed in Spring 2023 to ensure sufficient preparation and support ahead of the ‘all-out’ elections.</p> <p>As part of the leadership essentials programme there will be a key link to enabling leaders and managers to understand their role within the council political context and how they can work with and support elected members in their decision-making process whilst maintaining neutrality.</p> <p>Through our online learning system, our manager micros and manager network</p>	<p>Development of a Member Learning & Development Strategy 2023-27. Final Strategy to be approved in Spring 2023 supported by an implementation plan to be managed by the Head of Democratic & Member Services</p>

<p>we have introduced a comprehensive leadership development offer which helps our leaders to have the skills, knowledge, and confidence to effectively lead highly engaged, motivated teams who are empowered to deliver service improvement and motivation.</p>	
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<p align="center">Recommendation 13 – Continue to work effectively with the Wirral Improvement Panel, considering the development work that is required over the coming two years</p>	
<p><i>It is important that over the coming two-years the Council does not become dependent upon the advice and direction of the Panel, and instead fully owns and understands the actions required. This is especially pertinent for ensuring that there is clarity regarding the requirements and milestones that the Council must meet to ensure that the Panel has confidence that they are committed to and capable of continued improvement without external oversight.</i></p>	
<p>Progress</p>	<p>Next Steps</p>
<p>Wirral’s Improvement Plan was agreed at Council in July 2022. This follows advice and guidance provided by Wirral’s Independent Assurance Panel on how best to plan and deliver on our improvement aspirations.</p> <p>Regular updates and progress reports in relation to actions set out within the Plan have been considered by the Panel, in addition to detailed financial updates as part of Budget setting processes.</p> <p>The Plan was developed following engagement with council staff, chief officers, and all political group leaders.</p> <p>The Panel acknowledge the progress being made in delivering improvement, and given this, noted that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities were already discussing the point at which they would withdraw involvement during 2023.</p>	<p>Continue to deliver the Improvement Plan through the Council’s Strategic Change and Improvement Programme which ensures the Plan is owned and driven by the Council and delivered to the required timeframe and quality requirements.</p> <p>Manage the withdrawal of the Panel whilst still driving forward our Improvement Plan during 2023</p>