



POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 17 January 2024

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

REPORT SUMMARY

This report presents the third update from 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 since the previous report in January 2023. The letter fulfils the request of the Council for the Panel to report to the Council on progress at least twice a year and sets out the expectations of the Council in providing sufficient assurance to the Panel to enable it to plan its exit strategy in Spring 2024.

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

The report contributes to the delivery of all themes of the Council Plan: Wirral Working Together 2023-2027, particularly the Efficient, Effective and Accessible Council theme.

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
- 3.3 The Panel 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. The Panel has been meeting formally since January 2022 usually on a bi-monthly basis with informal meetings in between as required.
- 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 The letter from the Chair of the Panel (included as Appendix 1) highlights the progress made by the Council in relation to development of the new Council Plan and emerging Medium Term-Financial Strategy. The letter also notes progress in relation to budget setting for 2024/25 and forecast for the next 2 years, highlighting the need to identify additional savings in future years where required.
- 3.6 The letter goes on to highlight the need to better align the Council Plan with the MTFS in terms of matching resources to stated priorities as well as the need for the Council Plan to have a robust performance management framework (PMF). As reported to this committee in November 2023, it is the intention of officers to engage with all Policy Committees early in the New Year to agree which indicators and measures are to be included in the PMF. The draft PMF will be reported to Policy and Resources committee in for approval in March for implementation from 1 April.

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

Council Plan: Wirral Working Together 2023-27
Wirral Council Improvement Plan
Independent Assurance Panel Terms of Reference
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities External Assurance Review
Governance and Finance Reports

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
	18 Jan 2023
Council	11 July 2022