

Case Study

Wirral Council's sector-led improvement journey

Further to critical reports and accepting their recommendations, Wirral Council sought sector-led improvement support from the LGA in 2012 to address weaknesses raised and other issues in a proactive and sustainable way. Eighteen months after Wirral developed and implemented their action plan with the LGA, the Improvement Board that provided advice and oversight of Wirral's improvement journey reported that sector-led improvement had "transformed" the Council to one that was "stable, well-led, open and far more inclusive."

The challenge

In 2012, Wirral Council sought support from the LGA following critical reports that had highlighted weaknesses in its corporate governance. At the same time, four senior officers had been suspended and the chief executive had left the authority.

Among the criticisms were that Wirral had a "silo culture" with a lack of corporate and strategic thinking, an internal focus, poor member-officer relationships and a lack of openness and transparency. Financial planning was a concern, with a projected £17 million funding gap and debts that had been poorly managed. However, there were also recognised areas of excellence to build on, notably children and young people's services and a positive approach to the local economy.

Wirral accepted the recommendations in all the reports and began to consider how to address them with the help of external support. There was pressure for Government intervention, but Wirral developed a proposal for a sector-led process of improvement with the LGA. This set out two broad phases, to address immediate issues and longer-term outcomes, with the effectiveness and impact monitored and evaluated along the way.

A package of improvement support

As a first step, Wirral and the LGA worked together to set up an Improvement Board with an independent chair, peer members and officers and an external auditor, to provide advice and oversight. The Board's terms of reference were to:

- provide support and guidance
- identify and signpost appropriate good practice
- provide 'critical friend' challenge
- ensure the contributions from external agencies were coordinated
- ensure the improvement plan was clearly understood and effectively communicated, internally and externally
- endorse decisions that impacted on political and managerial leadership arrangements, corporate governance and improvement before they went through the Council's decision-making processes.

The Council restructured its senior leadership team, appointing a new Chief Executive, Graham Burgess, and three new strategic directors. A Chief Executive's Strategy Group led on the improvement process, with member briefing and decision-making sessions implemented to strengthen political and managerial leadership. Leaders Board meetings were instituted to ensure cross-party political engagement with the process.

Burgess says: "We recognised that the healthiest way of making and embedding changes would be to open ourselves up to challenge by inviting partners in the local government community to help us work on our own solution. This gave us the opportunity to solve our own problems."

The package of support also included member peers from other councils working with each political group; managerial support through a strategic adviser; a corporate peer challenge; a programme of member development days and support from a procurement expert. All of this identified issues and challenges that Wirral took the lead in addressing, with sector assistance.

Developing an action plan

The next step was a root-and-branch review of corporate governance. An improvement plan was developed, focusing on five priorities:

- leadership: political and managerial
- corporate governance and decision-making
- corporate plan
- budget and financial stability
- critical service areas: safeguarding and developing the economy.

In each priority area, Wirral and the LGA identified a range of key actions for councillors and officers – almost 40 actions in all. A comprehensive summary of them can be seen in the Wirral Improvement Board Review*.

As an example, under 'leadership', the actions included devising a new corporate vision and operating model for the Council; using best practice from other authorities to engender a more outward-looking focus; developing new member briefing and decision-making processes; progressing member training and moving to a neighbourhood delivery model for services.

Wirral's officers and elected members threw themselves into the challenge. Progress against all the action points was monitored by the Improvement Board. Joyce Redfearn, Independent Chair of the Board, has paid tribute to the work of Councillor Phil Davies (Wirral's Leader since March 2012) in this process along with its political group leaders, the portfolio holder for governance and improvement and the senior management team.

Redfearn said: "One of the real joys has been to see Wirral learning from others, challenging themselves in peer review and growing in confidence about their strengths and ability to contribute, particularly in Merseyside. It has also been good to see them build their basics anew, reshape the approach to the budget and refresh their governance."

Transforming the Council

The Board's final report, 18 months on, noted that sector-led improvement had "transformed" the Council, which now seemed "stable, well-led, open and far more inclusive." Clear structures and lines of authority were in place, governance and accountability were clearer and deadlines were being met. The proof is in a long list of outcomes delivered against Wirral's improvement plan in a relatively short period of time.

A sign of the Council's strengthened financial management was the under-spend for the 2013/14 final budget position. This compared favourably with the forecast overspend of £17 million reported to the Cabinet in September 2012 and the final reported overspend in 2012/13 of £4.7 million.

The Improvement Board noted: "The scale of the changes in Wirral can be seen from its progress in shaping a long-term vision for the future, putting systems in place and getting to grips with the financial situation. The strong leadership approach and the clear sense of direction have enabled Wirral to become an outward-facing organisation which learns from others and networks well."

Sustaining the improvement

In November 2013, the Board said that as significant progress had been made, oversight was no longer needed and Wirral was capable of continuing its transformation. The LGA would continue to play a role, and the Board provided a set of 'next steps' for the Council. A recent peer challenge reinforced that it is now focused on delivering good quality services for residents.

While it is difficult for any council to go through this process, Wirral's rapid improvement journey is widely acknowledged to be a success story. It now has a realistic ambition to become an example of excellence in service delivery and innovation in process and procedure.

Burgess says there was huge value in having informed guidance from experienced peers. "Improvements were long overdue and we have faced up to some major challenges. Like all local authorities, we will make mistakes in the future. However, we will be open and transparent in acknowledging, and acting on, those areas for improvement."

Gill Taylor, the LGA's Principal Adviser for the North West, was on the Wirral Improvement Board. She commented: "Along with my fellow Board members, I can say that Wirral has made enormous progress on its improvement, with much to celebrate. The authority is now ahead of the curve in the crucial financial challenges it faces, with the acknowledgement that, along with all authorities, it still faces very difficult decisions. We would like to offer our congratulations and have also let Wirral know that we are available, both as individuals and through our respective organisations, to offer any further support that may be required in future."

* www.wirral.gov.uk/my-services/council-and-democracy/wirral-improvement-board/november-2013

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