



Planning Improvement Peer Challenge

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council

25-27 June 2019



1.0 Executive Summary

1.1 This report summarises the findings of a planning improvement peer challenge, organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) in co-operation with the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and carried out by its trained peers. The aims of the peer challenge were to review the operation of the Planning Service in the context of the need for growth and in the absence of a Local Plan. The Council also asked the peer team to look at the efficiency and performance of development management and the operation of the Planning Committee.

1.2 Wirral is strategically very well connected to the rest of the North West with excellent port, air, road, and rail connections. Despite an abundance of available land, economic growth and confidence in the area is generally low and progress has been piecemeal. While the Liverpool City water front has been rejuvenated in the last decades, the Wirral's waterfront and inner harbour area remains largely under developed.

1.3 However huge opportunities exist to develop an internationally recognised waterfront on the Wirral side of the River Mersey and with it the better homes, jobs, retail, leisure and environmental opportunities. Foremost among the opportunities to create a legacy of urban revitalisation and place shaping is Wirral Waters, which is the largest regeneration project in the UK. It is a strategic priority for the Council and the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (CA) with a joint vision of the land owners Peel Land and Property (Peel L & P), to create a pioneering, mixed use, highly sustainable waterside development.

1.4 Other developers and partners want to invest and help grow the housing, economic and skills base of the Wirral. Many have a clear affinity or live in the area and partners such as Homes England are willing to invest in the area, especially following the designation of the Housing Zone. The Council is now starting to use its land assets and covenant strength to help de risk projects given problems with land and development values. A new joint venture Growth Company with MUSE (one of the country's leading companies in mixed-use development and urban regeneration) was established in 2019 which it is intended will be a catalyst for regeneration at Birkenhead town centre and Moreton. The Council is using its land assets to place within the Company and has put 11 priority and 30 other sites into the partnership in order to support growth and investment. This shows recognition that it is not just one big project or regeneration 'silver - bullet' that is going to transform the area. It will be the growth of, and the connections between, multiple quality projects that helps achieves this.

1.5 The Council's vision, the Wirral Plan, was published in June 2015. It sets out a series of 20 pledges which the Council and its partners will work to achieve by 2020, focusing on three key themes: protecting the most vulnerable, driving economic growth and improving the local environment. The Council's 'Integrated Regeneration Strategy for Birkenhead and Wirral Waters proposes a coordinated approach to regeneration in light of the proposals of Wirral Waters and other key projects. The Council recognises the major challenges it faces in ensuring the successful regeneration of the former Birkenhead and Wallasey Docks, Birkenhead town centre and surrounding communities which have suffered significant industrial decline and market failure over the last three to four decades. The task of leading local communities and shaping partnership working is demanding given the scale of the challenges in the Wirral.

1.6 In order to address these challenges, the Council needs to own and articulate the clearest of long-term visions to guide a co-ordinated public and private response. This needs to be supported by an up to date Local Plan backed by a proactive, customer focused Planning Service with a corporately backed multi-disciplinary partnership approach to regeneration and urban renaissance.

1.7 The lack of a Local Plan for 19 years is, in the words of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), 'lamentable' and has brought into the question the strength of corporate leadership. The lack of a Local Plan along with recent performance in the speed of determination of major planning applications threatened to place the Council in special measures and designation along with the intervention measures taken to date on the Local Plan failure. This has weakened confidence in the planning system. The Council is also falling behind in the delivery of enough homes to meet local need and has failed to meet the threshold set out in the Government's Housing Delivery Test (HDT) leading to the application of a 20 per cent buffer and the production and submission of an action plan to MHCLG to consider actions being taken to boost housing delivery.

1.8 Significant step change is required in political coherence, corporate ownership and Corporate Director level leadership of the regeneration and planning services if the corporate ambitions of the Council are to be fulfilled. Development and regeneration partners want to see stronger more constructive political leadership which overtly supports the need to consistently deliver on a long-term vision that will take decades, not years, to deliver. Partners want the Council to bring its planning, regeneration, housing and other 'place based' services into one coherent Directorate to avoid silo working and slow decision making. And to be able to have a 'single conversation' with a Corporate Director level officer with the type of regeneration and development experience suitable for the UK's largest regeneration scheme. The team strongly agrees and its recommendations aim to strengthen management leadership and focus in relation to planning, housing and regeneration.

1.9 It was encouraging to note that the new political leadership and group leaders and interim Chief Executive showed good recognition of many of the issues that the team raised during the peer review. Indeed, some of the issues such as the speed of decision making and development of a clear Local Plan timetable have progressed well over recent months. Corporately, significant additional resources of £1.2m have been allocated to the Planning Service to increase capacity in development management, planning policy and enforcement.

1.10 This recognition of the need to change needs to quickly translate into stronger political leadership to set a strong spatial vision through the Local Plan and get the Plan adopted in the agreed tight timescale. Corporate management needs to ensure that place shaping and making is supported, not frustrated, by silo working and that vitally important partnership working is more coherent and better supported. Without this deeper and on-going commitment, existing and future generations of residents of Wirral will not enjoy the quality of life improvements required and corporate pledges and commitments will not be met.

2.0 Recommendations

1. Implement an integrated Place Directorate as a matter of urgency to drive delivery of the vision for Wirral set out in the Strategic Regeneration Framework and to drive emerging growth targets in the Local Plan. Take urgent steps to appoint a “Strategic Director of Place” position. Ensure that the Directorate possess the necessary skills, competence and confidence to deliver on the long-term vision in partnership with the private sector and other public sector agencies.
2. Urgently adopt a Local Plan, with a clear spatial vision and continue to ensure sufficient resources are allocated to taking it through to adoption, and develop stronger internal processes to secure deeper cross-party ownership to the commitments it contains on housing, employment and infrastructure. The political leadership should ensure they create a conducive political environment necessary to ensure the Local Plan is agreed and delivered by Council.
3. Develop a stronger corporate narrative around the necessity of growth for Wirral and the benefits this will bring to local communities and the pivotal role of the Local Plan in shaping this, supported by a resourced and shared Communications Strategy.
4. Investigate the use of independent facilitation of the Leader’s Local Plan Working Group and wider membership of the Council, to foster ownership and collaboration in order to broaden support and ownership of the Local Plan. The alternative is to accept democratic planning powers may be removed from Wirral Council by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.
5. Urgently develop a housing supply position through a housing trajectory and produce a HDT action plan (by Aug 2019). This must be embedded in the Local Plan to provide further certainty and should be a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) monitored by the Senior Leadership Team and Cabinet.
6. Explore the benefits for creating a dedicated Housing Delivery Team, integrated within the planning function, to proactively drive forward delivery of the Local Plan housing sites.
7. Finalise at pace, arrangements for a new ‘Strategic’ Planning Committee to provide the clarity needed to focus on delivering major projects that will support delivery of the growth ambitions in the Local Plan to help meet the Housing Delivery Test and provide sufficient homes to meet local needs.
8. Explore ways to establish opportunities for informal (non-decision making) pre planning briefing for members of the planning committee and ward councillors.
9. Review the Scheme of Delegation, in line with the wider review of governance underway, in order to ensure this supports efficient and effective decision-making and the growth ambitions of Wirral.
10. Ensure appropriate governance arrangements take a risk aware approach in relation to legal and procurement processes to ensure the delivery of future growth projects.

11. Ensure high level representation and clarity of any financial 'ask' to the CA, Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and I partners such as Homes England, including building strategic alliances with partners.
12. Review ways to re-establish commitment for the need of design excellence in new public and private schemes including use of Design Reviews and ensuring that the Council has urban design and conservation skills and capacity to support Planning Committee decision making.
13. Modernise the planning function to meet challenges of customer focus, faster pace, IT, agile working, and speed of decisions such as 'discharge of conditions' and 'reserved matters' applications post planning approval.
14. Embed a performance management culture within the planning function including lessons from benchmarking.

3.0 Background and Scope of the Peer Challenge

3.1 This report summarises the findings of a planning improvement peer challenge, organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) in cooperation with the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and carried out by its trained peers. Peer challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. They are improvement orientated and are tailored to meet the individual council's needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's performance and improvement. They help planning services review what they are trying to achieve; how they are going about it; what they are achieving; and what they need to improve.

3.2 The aims of the peer challenge were to review the operation of the Planning Service in the context of the need for growth and in the absence of a Local Plan. The Council asked the peer team to look at the efficiency and performance of Development Management and the operation of the Planning Committee.

In summary the Council asked the team specifically to focus on:

- Progress and timetable for adoption of Local Plan?
- Capacity of Planning Service to encourage, manage and support the implementation of growth and associated journey of planning applications?
- Is the Planning Service 'open for growth' with a good customer focus?
- Corporate political and managerial leadership understanding and support to Planning service and adoption of Local Plan to deliver Wirral Pledges?
- Council and Planning Service partnership work with the CA to drive forward growth on eastern side and especially at Wirral Waters?
- Efficiency, effectiveness and resilience of the Development Management service and its work with Policy Planning and Regeneration in the context of low HDT figures and weak 5-year housing land supply figures.
- Operation of the Planning Committee and comment on areas that might assist in driving improvement, including proposals to create two Planning Committees to separate out major applications.

In delivering this focus the peer team explored the Planning Improvement Peer Challenge core components of;

- Vision and leadership - how the authority demonstrates leadership to integrate planning within corporate working to support delivery of corporate objectives;
- Management - the effective use of skills and resources to achieve value for money;
- Community engagement – how the authority understands its community leadership role and community aspirations, and uses planning to help deliver them;
- Partnership engagement – how the authority works with partners to balance priorities and resources to deliver agreed priorities; and
- Achieving outcomes - how the authority is delivering sustainable development outcomes for their area.

3.4 Peers were:

- Paul Barnard – Service Director, Strategic Planning & Infrastructure Plymouth City Council;
- Bryony Rudkin, Labour Group peer, Deputy Leader Ipswich Borough Council;
- Sean Anstee, Conservative Group Peer, Former Leader and Member of Trafford Council;
- Nicola Sworowski, Local Government Association/Planning Advisory Service; and
- Robert Hathaway - Peer Challenge Manager, LGA associate.

3.5 Where possible, PAS and the LGA support councils with the implementation of the recommendations as part of the council's improvement programme. A range of support is available from the LGA at <http://www.local.gov.uk>. It is recommended that Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council discuss ongoing PAS support with Stephen Barker, Improvement Manager, Stephen.Barker@local.gov.uk and corporate support with Claire Hogan, Principal Adviser, Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk

3.6 As part of the peer challenge impact assessment and evaluation, PAS and the LGA will contact the council in in 6-12 months to see how the recommendations are being implemented and the beneficial impact experienced.

3.7 The team appreciated the welcome and hospitality provided by Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council and partners and the openness of their discussions. The team would like to thank everybody they met during the process for their time and contribution.

4.0 Detailed Feedback

4.1 Vision and Leadership

4.1.1 The Council's key priorities are stated in its Corporate Plan 'The Wirral Plan – A 2020 Vision'. The 2020 Vision states that the Council aims to be 'the best council in the country' and to 'provide leadership to our communities to get the best results for Wirral'. Based on clear statistical evidence, the Corporate Plan sets out a series of 20 high level 'Pledges' that cover the themes of 'People, Business and Environment'. These set out the Council's ambitions that include ensuring that 'people with disabilities live independently', there are 'greater job opportunities in Wirral', 'Wirral residents live healthier lives' and the Council facilities 'Good quality housing that meets the needs of residents'. These Pledges aim to tackle some of the inequalities that exist between the leafier 'west' of the Borough characterised by better housing, health and life expectancy and the urban 'east' that has largely been in economic decline with significant housing market failure over the last 40 years.

4.1.2 The team concur with the words of MHCLG that progress on adopting a Local Plan has historically been 'lamentable'. Wirral has no up to date Local Plan and thereby has to rely on a 19-year old Unitary Development Plan. This is simply a long-term failure of corporate management and political leadership on the Local Plan that has seriously affected the ability of the Council and the wider public and private sector to meet community and corporate priorities for new homes, jobs and improved infrastructure. Vitally it does not provide landowners, developers, funding partners and wider CA partners with the certainty required to deliver much needed investment and delivery on the ground. The lack of a Local Plan also does not provide a golden thread between quality of life improvements listed for its citizens in its 2020 Pledges and its planning system in either policy or its development management decision making. It was not obvious to the team that the past behaviours, characteristics and processes that have historically beset Wirral Council, and led to the 'lamentable' situation with the Local Plan, have as yet, been fully resolved.

4.1.3 However, it was encouraging that there was a clear recognition among the Council's new political leadership and senior leadership team (SLT) of the importance of rapidly advancing the Local Plan in order to avoid Government intervention and retain local democratic leadership in planning policy in Wirral. The team were told that it was no longer acceptable for councillors to 'kick the Local Plan can' further down the road in an attempt to avoid taking hard decisions. It was clear that the MHCLG intervention letters had an impact on the Council and have prompted some urgent action at the most senior levels in the Council. It is clear that both at Leader and Cabinet level and at interim Chief Executive and SLT level, the Council is at last focused and serious about producing an up to date Local Plan

4.1.4 Political commitment to the priority of developing a Local Plan and delivering growth is shown by the new Leader giving portfolio holder responsibility to the Deputy Leader with Cabinet responsibility for this activity alone. The team were impressed with the leadership shown by the Deputy Leader to the Local Plan and to working cross-party to steer the plan through to adoption. This provides the clear political focus required for success. It will be vital that the newly formed Leaders Local Plan Member Advisory Group (formed of the leaders of the five political groups in the Council), works together well and is clear and agreed on its roles and responsibilities as the Local Plan develops. The Council, with

support from the LGA, will need to ensure that the new portfolio holder is well supported to help her discharge her leadership function in this area in terms of any training or support.

4.1.5 Members of the team attended the new Leaders Local Plan Member Advisory Group and building trust and confidence between party leaders and their groups is not going to happen overnight. However, it was clear that there was the opportunity for relationships to be reset and political coherence achieved in the longer-term interests of the communities in the Wirral. The team sensed that the portfolio holder has the necessary drive, commitment and respect of other party group leaders to take the production of the Local Plan forward. One recommendation in assisting this new Leaders Group would be to use independent facilitation in order to support developing more cohesive and outcome-based conversations about place-based regeneration and ambitions for the communities of the Wirral.

4.1.6 Following the results of the May 2019 election, when the council moved into 'no overall control', the coming months will be hugely important for the new political leadership in considering corporately how best to achieve political resilience and establish an environment where good informed decision making can be made. One initiative that the portfolio holder described to help build trust and confidence among all councillors was confidential one to ones with ward councillors which the team agreed would be a helpful approach.

4.1.7 Not only does trust and confidence need to be built up at a political level but also political leaders told the team that they required more confidence in the emerging evidence base that supports the development of spatial options in the Local Plan. For example, councillors felt that they needed far stronger engagement about the evidence base and greater assurance and certainty on issues such as urban capacity in the brownfield areas, protection of green and coastal spaces, design quality and access for walking and cycling linking to the existing extensive public rights of way network accessing the coast and wider countryside areas. It will therefore be necessary to create a manageable way whereby the emerging evidence base can be shared and any concerns about the impact for longer term growth and management can be discussed; without detracting from the timetable for delivery of the Local Plan

4.1.8 It was also encouraging to learn that both the SLT and senior political leaders acknowledged that development of the Local Plan and place-based regeneration required a whole council corporate approach and that it should not be viewed in isolation as just a planning service issue. This again historically has been a major area of weakness in the Council. External scrutiny of the Local Plan intervention action plan has provided the Council with greater confidence of the submission of a sound plan within the set timetable. The action plan, with named Cabinet and lead officer priorities, corporate programme management support, setting up of programme boards, Local Members Advisory Group, additional staff and consultancy resources (see Section 4.2) demonstrates far clearer focus and commitment to driving progress on getting a Local Plan adopted. Political and managerial leadership will need to continuously monitor the resources requirements to deliver the Local Plan to the agreed timescales given the inherently challenging timetable set by the Council.

4.1.9 The team were told that in Wirral any discussion on the Local Plan has become highly politicised with an almost obsessive interest and focus on the Green Belt. The Local Plan, being seen by councillors, the press, interest groups and some of the public as synonymous with the issue of the Green Belt, is not helpful. It demonstrates poor

corporate leadership and joint working and poor management of strategic communications within the Council. An example of this is that one councillor told the team that 'we are constrained by our history' and it will be necessary for far stronger management of strategic communications with party leader group buy in regarding de politicising the planning agenda in the interests of the whole Council and future generations. To address this issue the new political leadership team is meeting with the strategic communications team twice weekly which provides the potential for clearer Council wide messages around the Local Plan.

4.1.10 What is required is for the Local Plan to set the Council's spatial vision for Wirral and then for the Council to set its social, economic and environmental land use interventions to achieve relevant corporate ambitions and objectives. This requires ward councillors acting in the best interests of the whole Borough and demands strong political leadership from all the leaders of the parties on the Council, especially in the present situation of no overall political control. Given the need for a long-term minimum 15-year vision this needs to transcend local political differences.

4.1.11 Both councillors and officers from the Council were clear that the consequence of potential Government intervention would be the possible loss of control over the Local Plan and it was acknowledged that this must not be allowed to happen. Planning decisions about the future of Wirral must be retained in the hands of local councillors. Planning is an inherently democratic process and is fundamental to the Borough's future.

4.1.12. The Local Plan annual housing need will be challenging to councillors as over 800 houses per annum are required to meet local need over the Plan period to 2035 while historically over the last five years an average of only 470 houses have been developed in Wirral. There is also little corporate political experience of having to deal strategically with housing growth, as at the time of the last Local Plan (the UDP in 2000), other surrounding councils such as Liverpool were willing to take any necessary housing growth and in fact the previous Regional Spatial Strategy policy was to focus growth towards Liverpool and Manchester for the North West and not on places such as the Wirral.

4.1.13 Political and managerial leadership needs to ensure that party political leaders and councillors understand the challenging policy decisions that must be taken and are able to effectively undertake their roles as leaders of place. To help achieve this the team recommend that there is a clearer political and corporate narrative to accompany the Local Plan around ambitions for 'place' such as quality well designed homes, thriving safe communities, healthy walking and cycling routes and green space, infrastructure such as public realm, schools, health facilities, all demonstrating how a strong spatial strategy can help facilitate provision of better facilities to improve life chances for local people.

4.1.14 To be clear as well, this is not just about building houses but about a wide range of quality of life considerations and strategic priorities. It is about creating better places and the Council as the democratically elected community leaders of the Borough delivering on its 'place shaping role'. Opportunities exist to help shape healthier lifestyles. For example, the statutory Joint Strategic Needs Assessment show that residents in the east of the borough are on average likely to die 10 years earlier than those in the west, while child poverty and limiting long term illnesses are on average higher in Wirral than other parts of England. The provision of affordable housing, further education provision and skills centres and accessible and safe walking and cycling routes, provision of accessible green spaces and pocket parks can be assisted through the master planning of allocated Local Plan sites. It can also be secured through proactive planning on Section 106 negotiations.

Missing out on these opportunities will have significant wider long-term implications for the communities of Wirral.

4.1.15 Tackling decades of industrial and economic decline based around the loss of Birkenhead and Wallasey docklands and inter related market failures in housing and town centre retailing, demands master planning and urban regeneration on a larger scale than Kings Cross and Battersea Power Station in London. 'Wirral Waters', developed by Peel L & P sets out a vision for 1.4 sq. km of new residential, commercial, leisure etc floorspace in 2 sq. km of reclaimed industrial land alongside the River Mersey and surrounding Birkenhead, Wallasey and smaller communities. Granted outline planning consent in 2012 the vision for the 30-year project is seen as a once in a lifetime opportunity to bring about the transformational, sustainable regeneration of Inner Wirral and the Liverpool City Region creating 20,000 new jobs and 14,000 new homes. This vision acts as a major Strategic Regeneration Framework (2010) with the Council listed as a key partner with the creation of an international city waterfront destination at East Float and a leisure and retail destination at Bidston Dock.

4.1.16 The Council's 'Integrated Regeneration Strategy for Birkenhead and Wirral Waters' proposes a coordinated approach to regeneration in light of the proposals of Wirral Waters and other key projects. This focuses on the need to fundamentally rethink the Birkenhead Town Centre retail offer and hinterland in the light of significant economic, environmental and social challenges.

4.1.17 The scale of the challenge is daunting. It therefore demands the highest standards in partnership working between the private and public sectors, community leadership in master planning and delivering quality places for people to live, work and visit and joint confidence and trust between key partners to demonstrate resilience at times of challenge and opposition.

4.1.18 The Council is working hard to support regeneration activities, especially in the east of the Borough and has supported public sector intervention and grant bids in Wirral Waters and Birkenhead and has set up a 50/50 joint venture Growth Company with MUSE Developments to stimulate redevelopment (see para 4.4.6).

4.1.19 However, the team found a strong partner perception that Wirral is a 'highly politicised' area in which to do business and is difficult and slow to engage and work with. Some development partners told the team that they lacked confidence in the Council's political and managerial leadership to fully share and embrace the strategic vision for Birkenhead and Wirral Waters with an overly simplistic view of regeneration and urban renaissance. This characterised itself in ways such as a lack of buy in to the 'projects', buy in to 'place shaping' and a buy in to 'quality'. Sadly, it was often unfavourably compared with other more creative and energetic councils in the CA and North West of England generally.

4.1.20 This lack of a shared and consistently communicated vision owned by political leaders and cascaded through the whole organisation was seen by partners as a weakness. The team understand that a lack of perceived progress led to negative coverage in the press about relationships between the former Leader of the Council and its partner Peel L & P in relation to Wirral Waters. This, plus ongoing issues surrounding the development of a golf resort and executive housing at Hoylake has intensified issues around the defence of the Green Belt, although there are other contractual and financial issues involved in this development as well.

4.1.21 It was clear that councillors want to see progress during the term of their office. However as demonstrated by other major regeneration projects such as Salford Quay and Kings Cross, successful urban renaissance takes time. This links to our concerns throughout the report on agreeing and holding to a long-term strategic land use vision. However, the team think there is a window of opportunity for the new leadership to change this narrative and even develop some quick win projects which will begin to change how the area is viewed by investors as a place to do business.

4.1.22 New political leadership and 10 new councillors and new portfolio holders and new senior managerial leadership, offers an opportunity to reset relationships with private sector partners. The team trust that the new leadership will explore creative opportunities to achieve this. Given the vital importance of Wirral Waters to achieving corporate goals of better housing, jobs, environment and healthy lifestyles, the team were told that a restatement of overt commitment and support from political and managerial leadership would help improve partnership working. The Council could also seek to learn from recent successful past experience of large scale partnership projects such as at New East Manchester where a joint public/private Task Group became a 'coalition of the willing' supported by a clear Framework Plan with thematic groups accountable to a Task Group Board which was checked and challenged delivery partners such as Homes England.

4.2 Management

4.2.1 The Planning Service has improved its performance in the speed of determination of planning applications from a low point in 2018 when it faced the threat of designation due to missing key Government targets. In that year the Planning Service failed to meet the target for deciding 60 per cent of 'major' applications in eight or thirteen weeks and failed to decide 80 per cent of its 'minor' and 'other' categories. Slow speed impacts on planning customers and delays implementation on the ground which negatively impacts on investment and growth.

4.2.2 The team were told that the main reason for this was staff sickness and stress, some of which was due to much higher workloads than normally experienced in the Planning Service. High new workloads, large backlogs and reduced resources also impacted negatively on the management and resolution of enforcement complaints to the Service. This led to significant complaints from the public and councillors over long delays in responding to and tackling complaints.

4.2.3 The Council's response has been to significantly increase resources with the appointment of four new development management staff and to restructure the development management service with the creation of an enforcement team. The allocation of additional resources shows increasing corporate commitment and focus on the Planning Service. On the basis of an action plan and better performance, MHCLG have advised that currently the service is not under threat of designation.

4.2.4 In the first two quarters of 2019, speed in determination of applications improved across all types of applications. On non-major applications performance improved from 60 per cent (Q5) to 79 per cent (Q6). The cumulative two-year measure for assessing speed of performance is currently 68 per cent and the Service estimates that continued delivery at the current level will see the Government target of 80 per cent met. Over the same period major applications have improved from 69 per cent to 85 per cent. The two-year cumulative figure is 52 per cent against a target of 60 per cent. Again, the Planning Service is confident of meeting this target. However, it will be important for management to

continue to performance manage speed of determination to ensure that improvement continues and that the Planning Service does not slip back into a situation of potential designation for poor performance.

4.2.5 Additional resources in the enforcement team have also enabled the backlog of cases to be reduced from around 400 to 80. However the enforcement team recognises that it still struggles to address long standing issues such as the need to holistically look at issues in the Grade 1 listed Hamilton Square that need addressing (see also para 4.5.9).

4.2.6 The Planning Service has a track record in opening itself up to external review and support which shows a level of self-awareness. Supported by PAS, there is now a clearer recognition and focus on better efficiency and effectiveness in detailed areas in development management including site notices, information on the web site, dedicated resources to certain types of application and shorter reports on delegated applications. This work helps support a move to more modernised practices.

4.2.7 Planning Service staff told the peer team that its own team morale has significantly improved as a result of additional resources and more manageable workloads. Team meetings, suspended during the period of sickness, were now reinstated and staff better supported to undertake their roles.

4.2.8 Turning to areas of improvement, development and regeneration partners were not convinced that there was a strong proactive approach to planning and growth. They commented that compared against other planning services their sense was that the service was a little old fashioned and slow. The peer team were clear that there is opportunity to modernise the whole planning function to deliver the exiting growth agenda in Wirral.

4.2.9 Developers were concerned about slow decisions and were not aware of recent progress. The team were told that pre application advice often consisted of a repetition of national and local planning policies rather than a bespoke full development team approach that added significant value and helped the developer/investor de risk the project. The team found very limited use of Planning Performance Agreements at the Council. These are now mainstream ways of supporting applicants with agreed timescales and resources to support the journey of a planning application from pre application through to completion and onto delivery.

4.2.10 Developers highlighted that validation can take three weeks which is far slower than the best performing authorities who have processes in place to ensure that registration takes days. Often this demands focussed technical resources and clear management discipline to clear backlogs. Clearly the longer a validly made application remains stuck in the process chain, the less time the case officer has to assess the merits of the application, thereby putting pressure on the whole system. The team also found an over reliance on paper-based systems and some staff told the team that they found agile working difficult with limited new technology. The peer team recognise that the service is examining its IT offer in partnership with other departments such as Environmental Health and it will be important to ensure that the specification covers areas of known weakness.

4.2.11 The Planning Service did not appear to have made use of the high quality dedicated corporate performance and intelligence research available to it. In order to drive improvement and emulate the best in class, it is important for the Planning Service to learn from benchmarking data and other intelligence from comparator groups. Given the recent demands on the service, especially during 2018, the team recognise that focus and prioritisation would have been on what were seen as more pressing issues. However

senior management attention needs to be focused on strategic issues such as these and not on operational detail which can be appropriately left to others.

4.2.12 The team's assessment of current managerial structures and reporting lines across areas of planning, regeneration and housing is that these are totally fragmented with unclear lines of accountability and responsibility. It seems that this is a result of corporate restructuring that placed a heavy emphasis on a commissioning /delivery spilt in management. Partners, and indeed internal officers the team spoke to, were sometimes confused as to responsibility and accountability where regeneration and planning issues intertwined. Other areas concerned strategic housing delivery where most staff and councillors the team spoke to were unclear where organisational and managerial responsibility lay. In fact, everyone thought housing delivery was the responsibility of a different department. It is no wonder that proactive initiatives to unlock stalled sites and drive the delivery of much needed housing has been missed. Allied to this is a fundamental concern about the fragmented nature of services that are required to work closely together to deliver an integrated 'Place' based focus to the work of the Council. This was the biggest concern of partners and many staff the team spoke to who considered this was the number one improvement that the Council needed to make.

4.2.13 Given that the urban renaissance of the east of Wirral is the largest place-based regeneration scheme in England, it appears to the team to be vital that the establishment of a Place Directorate is examined as part of a senior management structure review. Responsibility for driving the Place based agenda needs to be at full Corporate Director level with the person having the necessary skills, competencies and confidence to work with councillors, community and stakeholder groups, the private sector and public agencies. The Place Directorate would need to bring together and align services such as asset management, strategic planning and development management, regeneration strategic housing delivery, highways and environment. A credible appointment is vital in order to restore some confidence to key partners and investors in the North West region.

4.2.14 As discussed in section 4.1, the Local Plan is now a key corporate priority. From February 2019 there has clearly been significant accelerated progress on the Local Plan process through dedicated consultant oversight working to the previous responsible Corporate Director who is now the interim Chief Executive. There is also growing evidence that services such as childrens and adults are becoming more engaged in the Local Plan process and see the benefits of stronger involvement in longer term land use planning to meet their service objectives, for example providing school places and health care facilities.

4.2.15 The allocation of an additional £1.2 million for the development of the Local Plan demonstrates clear corporate commitment to more robust scrutiny and support. These additional resources have been used to employ QC legal advice to examine the emerging evidence base and to provide expert intelligence on the anticipated timescale leading to submission of a draft Local Plan for examination.

4.2.16 Local Plan production is now supported by a corporate programme management approach led by a new Programme Manager and the new delivery model includes a fortnightly Programme Board meeting and a weekly Technical Board meeting. The Local Plan team has been strengthened through the appointment of 5 new staff taking the total in the team to 13 (10 Planners) The additional budget is also designed to cover the work of consultants who are supporting developing documents such as the Strategic Housing Market Assessment and Strategic Housing Land Assessment along with infrastructure, viability and environmental reports.

4.2.17 In April 2019, the Council submitted its action plan to MHCLG. The timetable plans for the collection of all necessary evidence and analysis and presentation of spatial options by January 2020 to allow formal consultation under Regulation 18 of the relevant 2012 Local Planning Regulations. In summer 2020 the Council plans to consult on the draft Local Plan (Regulation 19) and submit the Local Plan for Examination in November 2020 with anticipated adoption in late 2021. The Council assured the team that the Local Plan was currently on track. To date there has been no formal response from MHCLG in response to the submitted Action Plan and full intervention is still a possibility. The Council continues to meet monthly with MHCLG to discuss progress on the Local Plan.

4.2.18 The team were assured by managers, officers and stakeholders that the resources currently in place are sufficient to meet what the challenging timetable. However, as stressed in 4.1 it is vital that resources and progress continue to be monitored during the current critical phase of completing major studies such as the Viability Study, Transport Assessment, Green Belt review and City Region Statement of Common Ground. There are also critical phases to come in 2020 and especially the overlap period between Regulation 18 and 19 that appears very short and out of line with the experience of most other local planning authorities.

4.3 Community Engagement

4.3.1 The Council has a good focus on engaging with the public through the operation of its Constitution and Planning Codes of Conduct. It offers public speaking opportunities to objectors and supporters in relevant circumstances and public engagement is enhanced through the use of web casting. Democratic services support the production of Planning Committee reports and manage the interface with the public who want to attend and speak at Planning Committee, which is held monthly at Wallasey Town Hall.

4.3.2 Members of the peer team were present at the June 2019 Planning Committee which was well attended by members of the public who were welcomed and advised on the procedures and shown to the Committee room. The new Chair of the Planning Committee helpfully explained to members of the public its role and especially the issue of making decisions in accord with planning considerations and the issue of planning weight and balance in decision making. Planning officer reports were well written and clear with a good focus on the assessment elements that provides a good 'cue' to the Chair and members on those planning considerations which they can weigh in the planning balance when making decisions. Trust and confidence between Committee members and case officers appeared to be good and both legal and highway officers were in attendance in support of the Committee's decisions.

4.3.3 The Council decides in the region of 1,200-1,400 planning applications every year. The Council's scheme of delegation is clear and results in the committee deciding less than 6 per cent of the planning applications (typically 80-90 applications) in any one year. In line with the scheme of delegation within the Council's Constitution, any councillor can request that any matter comes before the Committee if the officer proposes a contrary recommendation. Ward councillors are required to indicate what planning reasons or material considerations they feel support the need for the application to be decided by Committee.

4.3.4 Having attended the June 2019 Planning Committee and watched a number of previous web casts it is clear that the Committee is spending a significant amount of time

effectively on 'neighbour dispute' type applications on often small householder developments and single dwellings. The team felt that there is considerable room for improvement to tighten this process in order to move the Planning Committee's ability to be more strategic in its outlook and processes. This is going to be vital if the Committee is going to be fit for purpose going forward in support of the growth agenda which is likely to lead to significantly larger residential and commercial applications.

4.3.5 There were, at the time of writing, plans being considered by the Council to possibly splitting the Committee into two parts or forming two committees. In overall terms the team consider that potentially a reconstituted smaller Strategic Planning Committee could be set up that becomes far more strategic in its outlook. This needs to focus its energy and expertise on primarily those 'major major' planning decisions that are the most important for ensuring the long-term prosperity and success for all of its communities. Opportunities that the team suggest are examined to achieve a more strategic orientated Committee include:

- changing the name of the Planning Committee to Strategic Planning Committee;
- reviewing the Scheme of Delegation in relation to how planning applications are referred to the Committee and introduce appropriate 'hurdles' (such as review by the Chair in association with Planning Managers to ensure that Committee's time is focused on the most important applications for the Borough);
- reducing the number of members on committee to concentrate decision making on fewer better trained members thereby increasing expertise and reducing potential ward member conflict. Some strongly performing local planning authorities have Committees with 9 or sometimes less members;
- developing a training plan for Committee members that allows for high quality induction and refresher events including effective decision making based on planning policy and material considerations; and
- introducing Committee member briefings on major or controversial applications at developmental or pre application stage to address issues at an early stage and avoid protracted discussion at committee meetings.

4.3.6 The team would recommend an element of caution in moving too quickly to a secondary Committee or Sub Committee to deal with smaller applications. The team recognise that this is a model used in some other Councils but this clearly increases overall 'costs' in the system to councillors, staff and supporting services. If, however this would be a necessary consequence to achieving political support across the Council for the change then the 'prize' of a well chaired, streamlined strategically focused Committee with highly trained and highly competent members may be worth it. As stated earlier, this is particularly the case given the far higher volume of 'major major' applications that the Committee will have to assess as the Growth Company, Peel and others submit applications both in advance and especially after the adoption of the Local Plan.

4.3.7 Since his appointment in May 2019, the new Chair of the Planning Committee has moved quickly to tighten procedures in relation to the deferment of decisions at Planning Committee for site visits. Previously Committee members could call for site visits at the actual Committee where the application was to be decided and where often members of the public and applicants /agents had gathered to speak or listen to the debate. Now Committee members have to request a site visit during the 21-day consultation period

meaning that site visits take place in advance of the due date at Committee. The team support this new initiative wholeheartedly as the previous practice was inefficient in terms of speed of decision but perhaps more importantly, far more frustrating for applicants and members of the public. This change therefore supports more effective community engagement. There are admittedly some teething issues involved in the new date chosen for site visits, which is on a different day to previously used, but the new Chair advised that he will monitor and revisit if necessary.

4.3.8 In a further attempt to aid community engagement the new Chair also advised the team that he is considering allowing statutory and non-statutory consultees to speak at Committee. The team urge caution on this issue given concerns about the current length of meetings and given that the views of consultees are already fully covered in the case officer's report.

4.3.9 The team does however support the Chair's moves to review the situation where it appears that a practice has developed whereby objectors to planning applications, forgo their right to speak, and instead their ward councillor speaks on their behalf. Based on the current Constitution and Scheme of Delegation this then means that the applicant/agent cannot address the Committee. This seems inequitable and the team support the Chair's ambition to review this practice.

4.3.10 As indicated above the team see greater opportunities for Planning Committee members and ward councillors to be more strongly engaged in emerging large-scale applications. This is especially the case given the type of applications connected with the scale of development required to regenerate the Borough. While the team would not be prescriptive, the Council could consider establishing an informal pre planning briefings for members of the Planning Committee and relevant ward councillors. Ideally these could take place before planning applications are submitted allowing all members of the committee and relevant ward councillors to engage with planning and other technical officers in a timely manner. Such a pre planning briefing has the clear potential to encourage councillors and officers to discuss issues and likely recommendations in a more informal setting. This will aid councillor's understanding prior to the formal committee debate later on in the process. It will also aid officers in understanding what issues they may need to provide more information on.

4.3.11 The team found a generally weak understanding of how the Local Plan would help deliver the Council priorities. It did not appear to the team that Committee members see the importance of Committee decisions on major applications in delivering on Corporate Plan, Local Plan or Housing and Regeneration Plan priorities. Committee members seemed to view their role as deciding individual planning applications. This was evidenced by for example little, if any, discussion at Committee on issues such as the five-year housing land supply or HDT.

4.3.12 The Council has been in a virtual planning policy vacuum for a long time. Local Plan policies are completely out of date in the area with reliance on a Unitary Development Plan approved in 2000. To fill this void, officers and Committee members are often using the 2019 National Planning Policy Framework which provides generalised planning policy advice for the whole of England. This is an unsatisfactory position and does not give residents, voluntary and community groups, businesses or investors any degree of certainty in relation to the future pattern of land use for the Wirral. Clearly this position cannot be fully addressed until the Local Plan policies are developed and given different degrees of weight as the Local Plan passes through its Regulation 18 and 19 stages though full weight will not apply until a Plan is examined and found sound.

4.3.13 High quality community engagement will be vital in the development of the Local Plan. Guided by the Statement of Community Involvement the Council needs to ensure that its approach is user friendly and inclusive. The team recommend that care and attention is given to taking the advice of the Local Plan advisory group as to the types of inclusive approaches that could be used. There are also a large number of modern approaches that Wirral can learn from including using social media, reaching hard to reach groups and making commenting on the Local Plan as simple and easy as possible.

4.4 Partnerships

4.4.1 The Council and partners can point to significant effort in securing partnership agreements, funding and intervention that provides clear potential for longer term success. The Council obtained support from Peel L & P in its successful bid to Government who in 2011 designated the area as an Enterprise Zone (EZ). This designation is significant as since 2017 the Wirral Waters Investment Fund (WWIF) has enabled business rate growth in the EZ to be retained and reinvested and the Council and partners estimate that this fund can lead to £47m investment stretching to 2037. The EZ designation was also helpful in the evidence base to persuade Government to designate Housing Zone status for Wirral Waters. This has directly led to the allocation of £6m of Housing Infrastructure Funding (HIF) to fund further remediation and public realm works.

4.4.2 The WWIF shared business plan between the Council and Peel offers significant potential to bring forward residential, commercial, industrial and infrastructure developments. This plan identifies the priority of themes such as development viability support, land remediation and servicing, infrastructure investment and environmental improvements that are vital to create conditions better suited to market intervention.

4.4.3 Based on the trajectory of planned developments at Wirral Waters, the team were told that the area is reaching an important tipping point with the scale of delivery likely to significantly accelerate in the next five years. In December 2018 the Council granted planning consent for Wirral Waters One (500 units) which is a £90m scheme where the Council will take a head lease in the scheme. With 20 per cent affordable housing the scheme will work towards the plan for East Float as a new community. Also, in East Float, HIF funding is being used in a scheme for Belong, a specialist dementia care scheme. Again, the Council has granted planning permission and the scheme will deliver 109 new homes in total.

4.4.4 The Council is benefiting from being part of the CA. Examples of potential CA Strategic Investment Funding (SIF) include a Grade A office building at Wirral Waters and a Maritime Knowledge Hub at East Float at the iconic Hydraulic Tower. It will be important for the Council to articulate the priorities and 'ask' of the CA and indeed the LEP given other competing regional bids for resources.

4.4.5 The same applies to the Council's partnership and 'ask' of Homes England as well. Given the scale of the challenge and the potential economic regenerative importance for supporting the North West economy, strong relationships and clear priorities for regional support need to be set. The team feel it is important for the new political leadership and SLT to ensure that there is a strong focus and commitment from Leader and Cabinet councillors and the interim Chief Executive and Corporate Director level to these partnerships.

4.4.6 The team were impressed with the range and quality of regeneration and development partners that were working with the Council. These offer significant expertise

and experience of success elsewhere in the region and come to Wirral with a strong track record. A good example of working with high quality experienced partners is the new 50 - 50 Joint Venture Partnership with MUSE developments to create the Wirral Growth Company. Here the Council is using its land assets to place within the Company and has put 11 priority and 30 other sites into the partnership in order to support growth and investment. In December 2019 the Council anticipates receiving planning applications for 30,000 sq. m of Grade A office accommodation at Birkenhead and retail and residential applications at Moreton. The Planning Service has taken on three additional members of staff in development management to focus on successfully taking these applications through to completion.

4.4.7 Another example of high-quality partners willing to invest in Wirral is the Urban Splash/Peel Joint Venture Northbank East and West. This proposes 347 one to three storey houses and apartments at the water's edge. This requires public sector support in the form of HIF and Homes England.

4.4.8 However, despite these successes and opportunities, the team found a recognition in both the Council and among regeneration partners that there were significant opportunities to improve the strength and depth of partnership working. At least one development partner told the team that they felt they were operating with 'one arm tied behind their back'. Other partners felt partnership opportunities were not being maximised and in particular that the Council needed to modernise its approach to partnership working and be more 'fleet of foot'. Wirral it was often said, was a difficult area to do business and was compared very unfavourably to the attitude and competence of other councils within the CA area.

4.4.9 Many development partners that the team spoke to felt that it was difficult to have a single strategic conversation with the Council and that current partnership arrangements needed to be reviewed to meet the challenges of the scale and complexity of the urban renaissance required. Many referred to the Council as a collection of services working in silos and not one characterised by well managed and collegiate working.

4.4.10 At a political level partners told the team that they need better opportunities to allow for a proper and honest collaboration with councillors with regular open dialogue. It could well be that initially some 'safe space' is required to reset relationships and be clear on the vision and priorities. This would also clearly help in joint approaches to the LCA, LEP and agencies such as Homes England.

4.4.11 Earlier in section 4.2 the team recommended the need for the Council to move towards a Place Based Directorate to enable more streamlined strategic negotiations. This would help facilitate stronger more focused negotiations with greater potential for a multi-disciplinary team delivering a holistic approach.

4.4.12 Development partners also referred to a regular churn of senior managers in the Council which did not assist in developing longer term relationships. The team also see greater opportunities for the Council to use a more account management approach to investors and developers to improve relationship management and accountability.

4.4.13 The Council has reviewed the governance arrangements since approving the East Float outline planning application in 2012. Strategic meetings at Board and Senior Leadership level are supported by a Wirral Waters co-ordinating group. However, the Council recognises weaknesses in the lack of a strong Infrastructure Planning sub group and partners told the team that this element is so important for stimulating investment and increasing confidence that this strengthening is vital and urgent.

4.4.14 Partners commented that the Wirral Waters sub groups such as Transport/Housing and Communities/Economy and Design, Environment, Infrastructure and Sustainability did not always optimise the strength of joint working by learning from each other. For example, opportunities exist for the groups to more consistently mimic positive characteristics displayed in others. Partners considered that the more successful groups had the involvement of third-party public-sector organisations to check/challenge different approaches and the attendance of 'can do' officers who have some decision-making authority. The team were also surprised to learn of the lack of a Development Management/Planning Group for East Float and given the scale and importance of this project it is unclear how the planning issues are consistently co-ordinated and managed in a multi project manner.

4.4.15 Some partners questioned whether the Council has the necessary commercial and regeneration experience, skills and capacity given the scale and deep-rooted market failure in the east side of the Borough. Partners spoke of a concern that some officers lacked confidence and appeared inexperienced in dealing with more modern approaches to land assembly, legal agreements, procurement and viability. Partners also questioned whether councillors and officers were approaching joint working with the right mindset or whether they were entrenched in an old school model of relationship between the public/private sector? Some partners also referred to a creeping trend of officers expecting them to manage the councillor interface on some development projects and this suggests either a lack of political acumen or confidence by officers in their relationship with councillors or a lack of good joint working with them.

4.4.16 The team consider that the Council needs to test whether it has the necessary skills, resources and capacity required to move partnership working to the next level. This is necessary given the scale of the challenge required and the increasing intricacy involved in complex transactions needed to help drive housing and employment delivery and explore land development opportunities. And the importance of dealing with difficult urban and contaminated sites is likely to increase if the Council decides on a strategy of urban intensification on the east side as part of its Local Plan spatial strategy.

4.4.17 The team received strong messages from partners in relation to concerns about the role of the Council's legal and procurement services in facilitating land and development agreements. Many partners pointed to what they referred to as an overly slow and risk averse attitude to negotiating and finalising legal agreements. Partners considered that effectively quite major regeneration schemes were being delayed unnecessarily or certainly without a clear explanation as to what the procurement problem was. And where the Council was using external legal support, they felt that arrangements could be tightened to avoid confusion and misinterpretation that led to further delays. For its part the Council felt that given the recent appointment of far more experienced commercial solicitors, that they were more challenging in their scrutiny of legal agreements in the interests of probity and the public purse. The team did not have time to examine this issue in detail but it is important for the Council and its development partners to explore this in more detail to both manage expectations and come to clear agreements regarding timescales.

4.4.18 The team identified opportunities for the Planning Service to improve communication and partnership working between it and developers/agents through the reestablishment of a Developers/Agents forum. Many local planning authorities successfully operate these and they provide good forums to receive feedback to improve learning and development and to also advise on important local and national changes in the planning system. Sponsorship and attendance at some of these forums by the portfolio holder for Planning and Housing could also help raise its profile and again assist the

Cabinet in getting a feel for the way the Planning Service is viewed externally and where the opportunities to improve lie.

4.5 Outcomes

4.5.1 At Wirral Waters, joint work between the landowner, Peel L & P, and the Council, has led to some initial remediation measures together with early infrastructure works at Wirral Waters. Examples include remediating 24 hectares from industrial contamination, investing in infrastructure such as energy, drainage, a new road bridge, some public realm and planting of 1500 trees. The Northbank cycleway/pedestrian route recently completed is identified by Merseytravel as an exemplar, setting the benchmark for the City Region.

4.5.2 Investing in infrastructure is vital in order to help create the confidence and improve visibility and market confidence in the area. In particular the Wirral Waters vision relies on creating nodes of activity and therefore high-quality infrastructure/transport schemes producing 'civilised' and 'human level scale' streets and meeting places is vital to creating excellent highways and public realm areas which were essential in changing public perception and market confidence.

4.5.3 Two major completed schemes at Wirral Waters have set the tone for design quality and have created local jobs and provide excellent accommodation for students moving onto further education. Wirral Met College is the first building to be completed in Wirral Waters and demonstrates good commitment to meeting identified needs in the local community of skills and training. The project has won two Royal Institute of British Architects Awards and a Civic Trust award. Kingsgate is a large office project delivered by a local company and currently employs over 400 jobs with a capacity to go to 1,200 jobs.

4.5.4 Other successful examples of new projects include the development of Orsted (Dong Energy) in 2017 – which overcame several major planning hurdles to this £6m investment including in river permissions with the Marine Management Organisation. The project also brought forward new public realm on the promenade. The Hamilton Hub development provided new student accommodation within the Conservation Area next to Hamilton Square. This supports the economic regeneration of this part of Birkenhead.

4.5.5 Private and public sector investment at New Brighton provides good evidence of how sea side resort areas can be supported and encouraged to rebrand themselves and change. Following tidal flooding the Council rebuilt the sea defences and promenade and the Floral Pavilion. Increasing investor confidence in the area is leading to the creation of new food and drink outlets in the resort with a strong sense of place emerging as outlets with large bold painted murals open up.

4.5.6 The team feel that the importance of design excellence in the urban renaissance in Wirral is vital if the area is to meet the vision set out in the Strategic Regeneration Framework and the Wirral Waters Vision and Masterplan submitted with the planning application. Accredited by the Commission for Architecture and Built Environment (CABE) through its design review process the vision aspires to be the 'Left Bank' of the River Mersey. It was encouraging to note that Peel takes all of its projects through 'Places Matter' Design Review process (a regional 'CABE') as it sees this as giving the Council confidence about design quality in the area.

4.5.7 It will be important for all projects, not just Peel L & P's to offer high standards of building design, landscape design and an emphasis on high quality connecting corridors of movement. In this regard the team noted councillor's ambitions not to repeat the mistakes of the past where at least some considered that a kind of 'anything goes' mentality existed.

This they said led to situations where the Council may have been happy just to see any investment and development in its eastern area, irrespective of quality or social implications. In our view a restated senior political and managerial commitment to design quality from the Council would be beneficial and the Council may wish to consider ensuring that it has architectural/urban design skills to support councillors and planning officers as part of its own capacity to help raise standards, especially during the pre-application and application stages of planning applications.

4.5.8 In order to create successful places, it is important to ensure that the best examples of local heritage and conservation are preserved and enhanced. The Planning Service recognises it has more to do to protect the nationally important Georgian Hamilton Square from further alteration and breaches of listed building and planning control. Here the Planning Service could consider whether it may be necessary to employ short term contract staff or work with other councils in the CA to obtain resources to tackle the issue to avoid further erosion. Conservation groups were also concerned at the current lack of specialist conservation skills, due to maternity leave. Given the large number of Conservation Areas (26) including the nationally important Hamilton Square and Port Sunlight and 1900 listed buildings the availability of quality advice to owners, planning customers, councillors and planning is vital. Again, it is important for the Planning Service to explore ways of ensuring it has the capacity to achieve this.

4.5.9 The Council recognises that its housing delivery is well below the 'Local Housing Need' and is failing the Government's HDT. Current delivery against target is only at 73 per cent with the Borough delivering 1530 houses between 2015-18 against a Government target over the same period of 2093 dwellings. This performance is the second worst in the Liverpool City Region and falls significantly below Liverpool and Halton (both 193 per cent) and Knowsley (182 per cent).

4.5.10 On average, Wirral's housing delivery over the last five years has around 470 per year but its own local need figure in the emerging Local Plan via the Strategic Housing Market Assessment is estimated at between 875 - 1235 per year. Even the Government's standardised method target of 803 houses per year is still 60 per cent above the number of houses that the Wirral recently delivered. Housing land supply also falls below the Government guideline of 5 years, with available developable land only amounting to 3.4 years.

4.5.11 Unless house building levels rise significantly, current and future generations will not have access to the range and choice of houses enjoyed in other parts of the City Region and other parts of England. And if Wirral continues to miss thresholds for housing delivery it is required to bring forward 20 per cent of its housing delivery from later in the plan period and provide MHCLG with an action plan showing steps taken on each housing site to ensure delivery. This action is already in place due to the poor delivery and the HDT target only gets tougher to meet going forward. This allows developers greater opportunities to promote sites in line with sustainable development principles outside a plan led approach. This would effectively mean by-passing local democratic decision-making on planning applications. Councillors therefore need to be fully accountable and need to retain decision making. In order to monitor and manage housing delivery the team recommend that the Council adopts the housing delivery test as key performance indicator.

4.5.12 The team see the need for the Council to explore the creation of a dedicated Housing Delivery Team, integrated within the planning function, to proactively drive forward delivery of the Local Plan housing sites. Corporate ownership of the emerging housing trajectory being developed as part of the Local Plan is also required. Creating an active delivery plan which involves a corporate approach which would help build

confidence and lay a sound building block for the Local Plan. It is also important that both the portfolio holder for the Local Plan and Planning and Housing plus both service managers for Planning and Housing have clear ownership of the trajectory to embed strategic housing and the ambitions and opportunities for registered providers into the process.

4.5.13 The team would encourage the Council to start examining other early opportunities for improved delivery to get in front of the adoption of the Local Plan to prepare for its implementation. One example of a council focused on delivery is Plymouth who have embedded housing growth targets in its Plan for Homes initiative (triple winner of RTP1 Silver Jubilee Cup). Councils tackling similar issues include Ashford, Guildford and Rushcliffe and Harrogate. The team have shared examples of interventions to stimulate delivery with the Council. Importantly, given viability issues on the strategic sites that will be allocated on the eastern side of the Borough, it will be important to create bespoke management and leadership solutions in relation to progressing each of the strategic sites. The Council will need to make sure it has the relevant project management skills to help support the private sector deliver the housing 'pipeline'. Such an approach will also assist in supporting the alignment of resources on strategic sites

5.0 Further Support

5.1 A range of support from the LGA and PAS is available at <http://www.local.gov.uk> and via the [PAS website https://www.local.gov.uk/pas](https://www.local.gov.uk/pas). Costs may vary.

5.2 Planning Advisory Service (PAS) & LGA Support Offers:

PAS Planning Committee Training & Materials

PAS will work with the authority to deliver to deliver specific training requirements for the new planning committee.

PAS has general materials available on available from the PAS website:

- Development Management - Decision making, committees and probity
- Making Defensible Planning Decisions
- Developer Payments - Community Infrastructure Levy, s106 agreements and Viability
- Getting engaged in pre-application discussions
- Design training for councillors

<https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/pas-support/pas-subscribers/councillor-briefings/councillor-briefing-planning-committees>

PAS worked with Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO) to produce some materials for committee clerks. This covers an introduction to planning, decision making, motions and amendments, dealing with the public, interests and probity matters.

<https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/pas-topics/planning-committee/materials-committee-clerks>

Local Plan Pre-Submission Support

PAS can continue to offer advice and support to the council as it progresses a local plan through production, public consultation, submission and adoption.

Housing Delivery Test – Action Planning Support

PAS are delivering support to all local authorities, like Wirral, that have been "caught" by the recent housing delivery test who now have 6 months in which to make an Action Plan. The council can sign up to access the support at the link below.

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/LKQYLS8>

PAS have published some of the sample Housing Delivery Test Action Plans made with the help of a group of pilot councils.

<https://local.gov.uk/pas/pas-topics/monitoring/preparing-effective-action-plan>

Other Local Authority Planning Committee Information

Plymouth planning committee webcasts

<https://plymouth.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcasts>

<https://plymouth.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcasts/enctag/Planning>

Plymouth planning committee public information

<https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/planninganddevelopment/planningapplications/whathappensafteryoumakeplanningapplication>

<https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/planningcommittee>

Oldham planning application process information

http://www.oldham.gov.uk/info/200399/apply_for_planning_permission/748/about_the_application_process

Havant developer consultation forums

<http://www.havant.gov.uk/development-consultation-forums>

5.3 For more information about planning advice and support, please contact Stephen Barker stephen.barker@local.gov.uk

LGA Support

5.4 The LGA has a range of practical support available. The range of tools and support available have been shaped by what councils have told LGA that they need and would be most helpful to them. This includes support of a corporate nature such as political leadership programmes, peer challenge, LG Inform (our benchmarking service) and more tailored bespoke programmes.

5.5 Claire Hogan, Principal Adviser is the LGA's focal point for discussion about your improvement needs and ongoing support and can be contacted at Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk

5.6 PAS and the LGA will follow up about the support that they can provide to the council to help address the recommendations highlighted in this report. A further 'light touch' visit will be made in 6-12 months to see how the recommendations are being implemented and the beneficial impact experienced.



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