

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Wyre Council

18 – 20 June 2024

Feedback report



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# 1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance and governance information and then spending three days at Wyre Council to provide robust, strategic and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of Sector-led Improvement (SLI) put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are: responsible for their own performance, accountable locally not nationally and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

CPC assists councils in meeting part of their Best Value duty, with the UK Government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years.

Peers remain at the heart of the peer challenge process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

This report outlines the key findings of the peer team and the recommendations that the council are required to action.

## 2. Executive summary

Wyre Council prides itself on its strong financial stewardship and in delivering good value for money services that meet the needs of communities. The latest residents survey (2022) shows 78 per cent of respondents were satisfied with their local area; just a very small dip from previous survey results in 2018 at 80 per cent. <sup>1</sup>LG Inform data shows the council compares favourably to its nearest statistical neighbours across a range of indicators (see section 5.1).

Officers, partners, and councillors are positive about the new Chief Executive, her Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and the changes she, alongside the political leadership, are bringing to the council. There is a positive working relationship between the council's Leader and Chief Executive. Officers and councillors who met

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<sup>1</sup> [LG Inform](#) is the Local Area Benchmarking tool from the Local Government Association

with the peer team are proud of the council and passionate about making a difference in local communities. The council is also well respected by partners who met with the peer team from across the public, private and public sector.

The Leader (elected as Leader in December 2022) and Chief Executive (appointed in April 2023) have overseen the development of the new Council Plan (2024-2028). The Council Plan provides a clear framework for councillors, officers, partners and residents on the council's priorities. Peers recognise that this Plan, agreed in November 2023, is relatively new, but found mixed levels of understanding of it. The council should continue to engage with officers, councillors, and partners on this. The peer team recommend that the council uses this engagement to clearly articulate the new vision and priorities for the borough as set out in the Plan which will help ensure a widespread understanding amongst councillors, officers, residents, and partners. This will also act as a catalyst to developing conversations about how best to harness partnership capacity, insights and skills behind the agreed vision and priorities.

Earlier in 2024 the Chief Executive restructured the Senior Leadership Team with a view to ensuring the right capacity and skills are in place to deliver against agreed priorities. Peers were pleased to hear how changes have strengthened the 'golden triangle' of governance within the council's overall governance framework. This refers to the way in which the Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer and Director of Finance (section 151 officer) work together. The changes have also involved moving the place based economic development function into the new Transformation Directorate (with the exception of planning). This is aimed at building capacity to support project delivery on key economic development initiatives and projects.

The peer team recommend that the Chief Executive undertakes an evaluation of this restructure (after it has had time to embed) to ensure capacity and skills are where they need to be and identify any on-going learning. It will also be important to ensure that the structural changes made are enabling the council to maintain traction and delivery on key place based economic development projects.

The council is at the early stages of developing a new transformation programme. Whilst the peer team recognised that it is in its infancy, it is important that the council is clear on the drivers for transformation and how the multiple workstreams of activity

(outlined in more detail in section 5.5) will fit together, be sequenced and prioritised. Officers and councillors are hopeful about the potential benefits of transformation but told the peer team that they need greater clarity on what transformation means for them, council services and residents. There is a need to prioritise and sequence activity in the transformation programme and ensure capacity and focus is in the right place.

The council is generally viewed by partners and officers as stable, well managed and cautious. The council's position statement describes how it has sought to balance a *"private sector head/public sector heart dynamic with Wyre's relatively low risk appetite"*. Peers recommend that the council review this relatively low risk appetite. The council's approach to financial management over a number of years has put it in a strong position to harness opportunities for the borough and deliver key economic priorities. The council has a healthy level of reserves, currently underspends against its budget, has no external borrowing and has low levels of commercial investment. As a result, it has limited exposure to internal financial risk, and this places it in a strong position to mitigate against the risks associated with uncertainty about future funding levels which could lead to a reduction in reserve levels.

The peer team believe there are opportunities for the council to consider how its current healthy financial position (relative to its partners), and the potential to deliver further efficiencies through its transformation programme, could be used to build up internal capacity where needed, help fund delivery of priorities within the Council Plan, and unlock projects that require initial seed funding to move forward or more sustained funding to overcome barriers to delivery. As outlined in section 5.4 of this report, any release of funding would have to be on the basis of robust business cases with a clear assessment of cost, risk, financial and non-financial benefits, and appropriate project governance.

The council is embarking on a strategic property asset review. The peer team believe it is important to accelerate this review to increase the understanding of how assets contribute to delivery of priorities within the Council Plan and the extent to which more cost-effective use could be made of assets through either income generation or asset rationalisation.

The council produces a range of published financial reports including the annual

budget report, a Medium-Term Financial Plan update twice a year, and capital monitoring and treasury management reports. However, there is limited evidence of in-year revenue budget performance information being shared on a regular basis with councillors. The peer team urges the council to introduce published quarterly revenue and capital budget monitoring reports to Cabinet at pace. Peers also encourage members of the Cabinet and the Corporate Management Team to monitor the financial health of the council on a regular basis between published reports. Similarly, peers also recommend that the council's quarterly performance reports against the new Council Plan should be shared with Cabinet as part of published reports (as well as continuing to share these at Overview and Scrutiny meetings as they are currently). This will help to increase senior councillor oversight and visibility of council performance, including financial performance, against agreed priorities.

The peer team was impressed with the council's leadership and delivery on a number of key flagship priority projects. These include the impressive Wyre Beach Management Coastal Defence Scheme, the development of a new commercial fish processing facility in Fleetwood (Project Neptune) and improvements at Fleetwood Market. Partners also fed back positively to the peer team on a range of health and community safety prevention projects which are led by the council. After recently taking on the chairing arrangements for the Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre Economic Prosperity Board, the council recognise the opportunities this presents to continue to work with partners to drive economic development across the Fylde Coast.

It is recommended that the council develops a clear plan to strengthen communication about its achievements to further enhance its external reputation. Wyre has a positive story to tell and there are opportunities to take a more proactive approach to challenge negative misconceptions. The peer team heard from some officers that that this is a particular challenge on social media where negative stories and comments about the council sometimes remain unchallenged and opportunities to celebrate success are missed. This is not necessarily about responding to every social media comment, but more about not losing the positive story and narrative the council has to tell.

During the CPC, the peer team heard how, outside of Full Council meetings, cross-party relationships are generally constructive. During Full Council meetings behaviours can sometimes (not always) be more challenging. The peer team

encourages the council to look at this and consider if it has the potential to impact negatively on the council's reputation and good conduct of business. It is positive that the council have recently implemented refresher training for councillors on the code of conduct designed to encourage good conduct and safeguard the public's trust in Wyre Council. This on-going training is important.

There are 21 parish and town councils in the borough. The peer team heard how the council work with parishes, including attendance at area parish and town council meetings, through events and community initiatives (including work in relation to flood defences) and also through a dedicated section on the council's website. Whilst peers did not have enough time to look at these arrangements in more detail, we believe that there are opportunities to strengthen how the council works together with town and parish councils in support of the council's priorities.

### 3. Recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

#### **3.1 Articulate the council's vision and priorities for the borough and bring councillors, officers, residents and partners on your journey**

We found that there are mixed levels of understanding of the council's vision and priorities amongst those who we met. You should continue to engage with officers, councillors, residents and partners on this.

#### **3.2 Increase the frequency and visibility of financial and performance reporting by providing published quarterly budget and performance reports as part of formal meetings of the Cabinet**

This will help to increase senior councillor oversight of performance against both the agreed budget and Council Plan. We'd also encourage members of the Cabinet and the Corporate Management Team to monitor the financial health of the council on a regular basis between published reports.

#### **3.3 Consider how you could develop your medium-term financial planning approach in light of your strong financial position. Consider the ability**

### **this gives you to mitigate risk associated with uncertainty about future funding levels**

We believe that the council could adapt its medium-term financial planning approach to one that is more forward looking and less risk averse. This should help identify opportunities to better use your relatively strong financial position in support of delivery of your priorities and desired outcomes for communities.

### **3.4 Implement a clear strategy to maximise the potential of your assets**

The peer team heard how the council is embarking on a strategic property asset review. It is important to accelerate this review to increase the understanding of how assets contribute to delivery of priorities within the Council Plan and the extent to which more cost-effective use could be made of assets through either income generation or asset rationalisation.

### **3.5 Ensure internal decision-making processes enable the council to respond swiftly when seeking to take advantage of new opportunities**

The council's financial strength provides an opportunity to unlock priority projects that require initial seed funding, grow the council's influence amongst partners and provide the potential for income generation. As part of this, the council could consider reviewing the terms of reference for the Property Investment fund and increasing its value, subject to clear governance arrangements and conditions determining its use.

### **3.6 Prioritise, sequence and resource the transformation programme to support the council in achieving the commitments set out in the Council Plan**

Whilst it is still early days, it is important to be clear on the drivers for the programme. It is also important to be clear on how the multiple different workstreams of activity (outlined in more detail in section 5.5) will fit together, be sequenced and prioritised.

### **3.7 Develop a clear plan to strengthen how you communicate your achievements to enhance your external reputation**

The council has a positive story to tell about its achievements to date and its future plans. There are greater opportunities to take a more proactive approach to celebrating successes and challenging negative misconceptions, particularly in social



media, about the council.

### **3.8 Set a timeframe to evaluate the Senior Leadership Team re-structure to ensure it is meeting its aim of ensuring sufficient strategic capacity to lead across all service areas**

This evaluation should consider how the stated aims of the re-structure have been met as well as to harness any learning, thereby helping to ensure capacity is in the right place.

### **3.9 Review opportunities for closer working, service delivery and place shaping with parish and town councils.**

Whilst the peer team did not have enough time to look at your arrangements in detail, we believe there are further opportunities to work more closely with parishes in support of your priorities.

## **4. Summary of peer challenge approach**

### **4.1 The peer team**

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected by the LGA on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Bill Cullen, Chief Executive, Hinkley and Bosworth Council
- Peter Fleming OBE, former Leader, Sevenoaks Council
- Councillor Jewel Miah, Leader, Charnwood Borough Council and County Councillor at Leicestershire County Council
- Peter Stachniewski, Finance Consultant, Local Government Association
- Gabrielle Mancini, Service Director, Transformation, West Berkshire Council
- Andy Wood, Service Lead, Growth, Development and Prosperity, East Devon District Council
- Ellie Greenwood, Shadow Peer and Senior Regional Adviser, Local Government Association

- Cindy Lowthian, Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association (LGA)

## 4.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges? What is the relative financial resilience of the council like?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

As part of the five core elements outlined above, every Corporate Peer Challenge includes a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance and assurance.

With reference to theme two (organisational and place leadership) it was agreed that there would be a particular focus on economic development.

With reference to theme three (capacity for improvement) it was agreed that there would be a particular focus on the council's transformation plans.

### 4.3 The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. This included a position statement prepared by the council in advance of the peer team's time on site. This provided a clear steer to the peer team on the local context at Wyre Council and what the peer team should focus on. It also included a comprehensive LGA Finance briefing (prepared using public reports from the council's website) and a LGA performance report outlining benchmarking data for the council across a range of metrics. The latter was produced using the LGA's local area benchmarking tool called LG Inform.

The peer team then spent three days onsite at Wyre Council, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 20 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than seventy people including a range of council officers together with councillors and external stakeholders.
- Observed a meeting of the Council's Audit and Standards Committee (11 June 2024)
- Listened to recordings of two council meetings (7 March and 18 April 2024)

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and councillors.

## 5. Feedback

### 5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

Wyre is a coastal district which lies in the north of what, collectively with Fylde and Blackpool, is known as the Fylde Coast sub-region. The council's position statement shows how Wyre is characterised by a 'distinct geographical polarity', with the main

urban areas situated in the west of the borough, and a large expanse of rural area to the east.

The council's position statement highlights the demographic makeup of the borough. Whilst several areas in Fleetwood are amongst the most deprived 10 per cent in England, much of the borough ranks in the least deprived areas. Some areas, such as Garstang and parts of Poulton-le Fylde, Thornton and Cleveleys rank in the least deprived 10 per cent.

The council's vision for Wyre is to be '*a place where everyone can prosper*' and have '*access to jobs and share the benefits of economic growth; live in thriving, safe, more environmentally sustainable, and welcoming communities; and be healthier and independent for longer*'. This vision, underpinned by four priorities, is contained within the new Council Plan (2024 – 2028), agreed in November 2023. The Leader (elected as Leader in December 2022) and Chief Executive (appointed in April 2023) have overseen the development of the new Council Plan.

The new Council Plan was informed by the most recent bi-annual Life in Wyre resident survey (2022) and a paper setting out the 'big issues' for the borough. Both Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team participated in workshops on the new Plan and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered it at their meeting in October 2023. Engagement with officers has included 'listening day' sessions and regular communications via the council's intranet. Peers were pleased to see how an independent review of the council's compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty, conducted by a neighbouring council, reported that the equality analysis undertaken on the Council Plan was one of the best they had seen in the council.

The new Council Plan provides a framework for officers, councillors and partners on the council's priorities. Peers recognise it is still early days but found mixed levels of understanding of the new Council Plan and its priorities amongst officers, councillors, and partners. Given the importance of this Plan, the council should continue to engage and communicate with officers, councillors and partners on this.

This ongoing engagement should be used to better articulate the vision for the council and borough with officers, residents and partners. It should help to bring greater clarity of understanding of the council's priorities and the associated strategies/projects underpinning them. This will also act as a catalyst to developing

conversations about how best to harness partnership capacity, insights and skills behind the agreed vision and priorities.

Peers saw evidence of the council's leadership and delivery on a number of key priority projects. These include the Wyre Beach Management Coastal Defence Scheme, the development of a new commercial fish processing facility in Fleetwood (Project Neptune) and improvements at Fleetwood Market (see section 5.2).

Partners fed back positively on a range of prevention projects which are led by the council. Examples of projects shared with the peer team include Wyre's holiday and food activity programme, the council's events programme, and the launch, in June 2024, of a new physical activity and sports initiative 'Get Wyre moving more'.

Partners noted the council's willingness to lead initiatives and chair and coordinate partnerships. Strategically, the council is well placed through its representation on the Lancashire place partnership (part of the Integrated Care Partnership) and leadership of the local health and wellbeing partnership.

The council is generally viewed by partners and officers as stable, well managed and cautious. The peer team heard the council described as a '*well run, well established, steady as you go council*' and a council that is with a '*low appetite for risk*'.

Looking ahead, the council have identified being a more 'innovative and customer focussed council' as a key priority within the new Council Plan. This includes plans to develop a new transformation strategy. Building growth and prosperity is also a key priority.

The peer team recommend that the council review its current approach to risk to see if there are opportunities to better harness its relatively strong financial position in support of these priorities. Section 5.4 of this report explores this in more detail. It shows how the council is in a strong financial position as a result of the way it has managed its financial resources in the past. There are opportunities for the council to think about how its healthy financial position could be used in support of the council's priorities. This includes opportunities to build capacity in key areas which have the potential to drive out further efficiency savings as part of the council's transformation programme.

Peers were pleased to learn that the council participated in an independent Equality Assessment exercise which was conducted by a neighbouring council between

March and May 2024. This review outlined areas of strength including a nought per cent gender equality gap, robust workforce equality policies/procedures and evidence of improved compliance with the general equality duty related to decision making (following the roll out of training over the past 18 months). An action plan has been developed covering areas for improvement which include the need to publish clear Equality Objectives, ensure consistent application of a standardised template for Equality Analysis of key decisions, mandatory equality and diversity training and introduction of equality monitoring systems. The council should continue the good work it has begun to implement these recommendations.

### **5.1.1 Performance**

The peer team considered Wyre Council's Local Government Association 'LG Inform Headline Report' which outlines key performance data and how this compares to the council's Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) nearest statistical neighbours.

The council's performance is better than the average across a range of financial indicators which evidences the council's relatively strong financial position (see section 5.4). This includes reserves as a percentage of service spend, core spending power per dwelling and debt levels as a percentage of core spending power (2022/2023). The council are slightly above average for council tax and business collection rates (2023/2024). They are the best (amongst CIPFA neighbours) for the time taken to process housing benefit and other change events (2022/2023).

The council also has around average performance with CIPFA statistical neighbours in relation to households on the housing waiting list (2022/2023) and households in temporary accommodation (2023/2024 Q4) and processing of major planning applications<sup>2</sup>. They are just below average for the processing of minor planning applications (24 months ending Q1, 2024).

The latest Ombudsman's Annual Review letter for Wyre (year ending 31 March 2023) shows a relatively low number of investigations – with two undertaken during this period. Both reviews were upheld, but it is positive that the council has successfully

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<sup>2</sup> Majors are classified as developments of more than 10 homes, greater than 1,000 sq m of floorspace or involving a site area in excess of 0.5 hectares

implemented the required recommendations made by the ombudsman.

Peers were pleased to see that a new performance management framework, aligned to the new Council Plan has been developed. The council's first quarterly monitoring report, published as part of this framework, was shared with the council's Overview and Scrutiny committee in June 2024. This covers the period January to March 2024.

It is recommended that future quarterly reports are shared as part of published papers for Cabinet meetings alongside financial monitoring reports (see section 5.4). This should help build senior councillor oversight of performance against the Council Plan.

The council's performance framework reports performance against 25 measurable performance indicators alongside twenty corporate projects. The June report shows that most of the twenty corporate projects are on track or about to start. Three are experiencing issues and peers were pleased to see that the report outlines the action being taken to address these. Of the 25 performance measures three are rated as amber (off track but within 10 per cent tolerance) and one is off track and outside of 10% tolerance. Again, actions have been put in place to address these.

The peer team were struck by the quality of the clean and green environment across the borough. Creating a 'cleaner, greener and more sustainable place' is a key priority within the Council Plan. The council's work in this area is evidenced as follows:

- Awarded four seaside awards (out of a total of eleven in the Northwest)
- Awarded five Green Flag awards
- Reported a decrease in fly tipping reports in 2022/2023 (from the previous year).
- Ranked 111th out of 325 local authorities in England for making best use of their heritage potential.
- The latest residents survey (2022) shows satisfaction with council services was highest for waste and recycling (84%), promenade and beach maintenance (79%) and parks, playgrounds and green spaces (72%).

However, data does show an increase in dog fouling reports, and this is reflected in the residents' survey - (as it is with many other councils) – with dog fouling having the greatest number of respondents who were dissatisfied.

The council is in the process of developing service plans aligned to the new Council Plan and examples were shared with the peer team. Whilst the peer team acknowledge that both the Council Plan and Performance Framework are relatively new, it is important that the council continues to work towards ensuring a strong performance management culture across the council.

## **5.2 Organisational and place leadership**

Officers, partners, and councillors are positive about the Chief Executive, her Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and the changes she, alongside the political leadership, is bringing to the council. These changes include a restructure of the SLT earlier this year designed to ensure the capacity and skills are in place to deliver against agreed priorities. We heard how the Chief Executive, together with the political leadership, is beginning to shape a council that is seen as *“more outward looking, ambitious and innovative”*. Some officers told the peer team that *“the whole senior leadership team are brilliant”*.

The SLT restructure has included the formation of a new transformation directorate which is overseen by a new Transformation Director. It is positive that the council have invested in this new post. Officers and councillors are hopeful about the potential benefits of transformation. They acknowledge that the director has only just been appointed but told us that they now need greater clarity on what transformation means for them, council services and residents. Section 5.5 of this report provides more detail on this.

There is a positive working relationship between the Chief Executive and Leader. This was evident in the meetings that we observed, and the feedback received from stakeholders. The political leadership, including Cabinet members, are well respected by partners. Relationships between councillors and officers are also generally constructive and positive. Officers are well respected and a consistent message from many of those who spoke with the peer team is that officers at the council are willing *“to go above and beyond”* for residents.

The peer team visited key economic development projects and spoke to a wide range of the council’s business, statutory and community sector partners. There are great examples of projects, led by the council, which are shaping the borough. Examples include the government funded Wyre Beach Management Coastal



Defence Scheme. This impressive scheme is now into its second £40m phase (building on work in Cleveleys during 2023) with Wyre Council as the lead partner.

Another example is Project Neptune', an £8m partnership project led by the council. It has involved the development of a new commercial fish processing facility in Fleetwood including 11 new units for food businesses. The latter has been funded through central government funding, Lancashire County Council's Lancashire Economic Recovery and Growth Fund and capital investment from the council. We also learned about the development of town centre frameworks, overseen by partnership boards, in each of Wyre's four towns. The aim is to drive regeneration and investment for each town and its surrounding area. Partners told us that the council is seen as successful at leveraging external funding to support local activity. Building on this, there may be opportunities to work with businesses to explore initiatives such as Business Improvement Districts (BIDs).

The Leader, as with other Leaders across Lancashire, has been in discussions regarding the formation of the proposed Lancashire County Combined Authority and devolution. In particular, the role of district councils relating to scrutiny arrangements and other committees. The statutory orders to establish the Lancashire Combined Authority were not laid in parliament before the General Election was called, and as such the next steps at the time of writing are unclear. However, it is clear that the council recognise the importance of ensuring their voice is heard in future discussions.

Similarly, the council are a valued partner on the Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre Economic Prosperity Board. This brings councillors and officers together to drive economic development across the Fylde Coast. The charring arrangements for the Board change every three years, with Wyre Council recently taking on this role.

Taking on the charring arrangements for the Board creates an opportunity to work with partners to clearly articulate the council's vision, priorities and ambitions as set out in the new Council Plan. Then to work jointly with partners on the future vision, strategy and priority projects to shape the economic development across the Fylde Coast. In doing this, the council will need to clearly articulate its ambitions for key opportunity sites e.g., Fleetwood Port and Docks, Hillhouse Enterprise Zone, and Leisure Centres. There is potential to explore some quicker wins e.g. joint initiatives

linked to beach quality and coastal management, as well as potential opportunities relating to housing, transport and employment.

As outlined earlier in this report, the council's willingness to review its approach to risk and its impact on delivery of priorities and opportunities is important here. There are opportunities for the council to think about how its cash balances might be used to help unlock priority projects that may stall because of absence of seed funding or more sustained funding to overcome barriers to delivery. There is greater scope to empower the wider officers' cohort to translate ideas into action. As part of, the council could consider reviewing the terms of reference for the Property Investment fund and increasing its value, subject to clear governance arrangements and conditions determining its use.

The restructure of the Senior Leadership Team has involved the transfer of Economic Development, Visitor Economy and Theatre functions from the council's Communities directorate into the new Transformation and Change Directorate (planning remains within the Communities directorate). The aim is to strengthen capacity within these areas in support of the council's priorities. These areas are also seen as critical to the council's transformation and change programme.

It will be important to ensure that there is a strategic, cross-council approach and corporate buy-in to place making across all service areas as part of this re-structure. Earlier in this report, we recommended that the Chief Executive undertakes an evaluation of this restructure (after it has had time to embed). It will be important to ensure that the changes made are enabling the council to maintain traction and delivery on key place based economic development projects. It will also be important to ensure that strong links are maintained between the council's economic development function and planning functions.

Peers believe there is an opportunity to better articulate the story of the council's vision and priorities by communicating with residents more effectively on successes and achievements. The council has a positive story to tell about its achievements and its future plans. There are many positive examples of where the council communicates well such as promotion of the council events programme. Officers told us that there are greater opportunities to take a more proactive approach to challenge misconceptions, particularly in social media, about the council. As outlined

above, this is not necessarily about responding to every social media comment, but more about not losing the positive story and narrative the council has to tell.

Wyre Council is in the process of developing a new Local Plan to 2040 (current Plan is from 2011 to 2031). The Local Plan timetable sets out a timeline for the adoption of the new Local Plan in late summer 2026. It will be important for the council to maintain momentum and capacity behind the delivery of the emerging local plan to achieve this timeline for adoption.

### **5.3 Governance and culture**

The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) restructure, undertaken earlier this year, has created a new post of 'Assistant Director of Governance and Legal' which is also the designated Monitoring Officer (MO) role. Prior to this, the MO role was a tier four position reporting to the Head of Governance. It is positive that this newly created post will be a member of the council's Corporate Management Team. Day to day, they will report to the Director of Finance and Governance, but there will be a 'dotted line' directly into the Chief Executive. As outlined earlier in this report, this has helped to strengthen the 'golden triangle' between the statutory officers (head of paid service, S151 and the MO) within the council's overall governance framework.

During our time at Wyre, we heard how, outside of Full Council meetings, cross-party relationships are constructive. During Full Council meetings (not all meetings) behaviours have sometimes been more challenging. Peers accept that Full Council (across the local government sector) is a place where political disagreements and conflict arise. But given what we have heard, we would encourage the council to look at this and consider if it has the potential to impact negatively on the council's reputation and good conduct of business. It is positive that refresher training has recently been delivered for councillors on the code of conduct designed to encourage good conduct and safeguard the public's trust in Wyre. This on-going training is important.

The council has in place a good councillor development programme. Since May 2023, 52 training courses have been delivered and participation numbers have been high. Both officers and councillors spoke positively about the roll out of Councillor Briefings which are held ahead of full council meetings and brief councillors on a range of topics.

The council has one Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is chaired by a councillor from the ruling group. While some councils offer this to the opposition to chair, peers acknowledge that ultimately it is up to each authority to decide on the charring arrangements.

In the main scrutiny is viewed positively and seen as adding value to policy making. There are good examples of thematic task group work including an Anti-Social Behaviour review and a Citizens Advice Task Group. An Overview and Scrutiny Climate Change sub-committee has also been established.

Peers were told that it is unusual for there to be a 'call-in' at Wyre, with just one 'call-in' over the past year (this refers to the right of councillors to "call in" for examination an executive decision that has been made but not yet implemented). It is positive that an informal review of the process and criteria applied is being carried out to ensure any lessons are learned in terms of process and approach.

During our time at Wyre, we met with members of Internal Audit, Chair of the Audit and Standards Committee and the council's external auditor. We also observed a meeting of the Audit and Standard Committee. It is clear to us that all are working hard to ensure the council's framework of governance, risk management and control is effective.

In accordance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS), a recent external peer review, undertaken by a neighbouring council, reported that the internal audit team demonstrated 'full compliance' with required standards. The Chief Internal Auditor's Annual Report (23/24) gave a 'reasonable assurance' opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the council's governance, risk management, and control processes. The only significant issue reported is a delay to the formal sign off of the 2021/22 and 2022/23 accounts as a result of national delays with external auditors (outside of the control of the council). The position statement shows how Wyre has met its deadlines 'consistently'.

Peers were pleased to note how the Audit and Standards Committee includes one external Independent Member and the council are looking to recruit a second member. Comprehensive risk management process and procedures were also evident. A recent external peer review from a neighbouring council reported 'substantial assurance' on risk management processes. This review also highlighted

how key project and partnership risks are identified and monitored and the Audit team are represented on associated working groups e.g., Wyre's Beach Management Scheme.

The council has a record of external audit endorsement in Value for Money commentaries. Owing to the national delays with external audits, a value for money commentary has yet to be provided for 2021/22 or 2022/23. However, the council's position statement shows that no issues have been raised to date and the outstanding commentaries are expected later this year.

Section 5.1 of this report references the work the council has undertaken to develop a performance management framework aligned to the new Council Plan. Quarterly performance reports are currently considered by the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and Overview and Scrutiny – not Cabinet. Similarly, the Cabinet does not currently receive quarterly budget monitoring reports. To increase senior councillor oversight of the council's performance against the Council Plan and agreed budget, we recommend that quarterly performance and capital and revenue budget monitoring reports are published and shared formally with the Cabinet.

Officers are clearly proud to work for Wyre Council, with some describing the council's culture as 'supportive'. Staff are clearly proud of the work they do across Wyre's rural, urban, and coastal communities. The team heard that *'everyone works well together. Others said 'it is a happy place to work' and that 'you can go to any department, and someone will help you'*. The latest officer survey also showed that 84 percent of people feel the council is a good organisation to work for.

The council have recently agreed a new values and behaviours framework and work is taking place to embed these across the council through listening events with officers, one to ones with officers/managers and regular core briefings. The programme of listening days is held regularly and have involved both the Leader and Chief Executive. They are well received by officers and should continue.

Peers heard from officers who welcome the drive to make the council more innovative. As outlined earlier in this report, some officers told us that the council has a risk averse culture, and this sometimes can lead to missed opportunities. There is greater scope for the Senior Leadership Team to empower the wider officers' cohort to translate their ideas into action and lead innovation and become 'civic

entrepreneurs'. This should also involve maintaining a pipeline of potential projects (in conceptual and feasibility terms) to the point where they are ready to put forward for future funding opportunities when they arise.

#### **5.4 Financial planning and management**

The council is in a strong financial position as a result of the way it has managed its financial resources in the past. The council's overall revenue reserves are around double net revenue expenditure which places it in the upper quartile for district councils. Total revenue reserves were £36.5m at March 2024. Of this total, unallocated reserves were £16.8m at March 2024, well above the minimum required level set by the council of £1.0m.

Part of the reason the council has been able to build up reserves is that its in-year budget position is very strong. In the last financial year, 2023/24, the council budgeted to break even with no addition to reserves during the year. In practice the council was able to add £2.2m to its unallocated balance. In addition, spend that had been planned from earmarked reserves was reprofiled and £0.9m added to earmarked reserves during the year.

The peer team accept that councils face considerable uncertainty about future funding levels. However, the council's current level of reserves and underlying in-year budget surpluses put it in a strong position to adapt to changes in funding levels. The council's current medium term financial strategy assumes a modest level of transitional funding, with all retained business rate income being removed from 2025/26 onwards and resulting budget gaps in 2025/26 of £2.3m rising to £4.0m by 2028/29. As a result, the unallocated balance is forecast to reduce from £16.8m at March 2024 to £1.2m by March 2029. The council accepts that this is a cautious forecast based on a relatively worst-case scenario.

The council could adapt its medium term financial planning approach to one that is more forward looking and less risk averse by: (a) a reduced emphasis on looking backwards at past reductions in funding/efficiencies delivered; (b) a focus on financial issues within the council's control – delivery of future efficiencies through the transformation programme, optimisation of income, and management of potential budget pressures; (c) clarity about how the council will use its financial strength to achieve priorities in the Council Plan; and (d) acknowledgement of risks associated

with possible reductions in funding and a strategy for managing these if they occur.

In addition to its healthy level of reserves, the council currently has no external borrowing, has limited levels of commercial investments, has no council owned companies and, as a non-metropolitan district council, is not exposed to demand pressures in adult and children's social care. This means that it is not exposed to the level of internal financial risks that some other councils are exposed to.

The introduction of a less risk averse approach to the way that the council uses its financial resources does not mean compromising its approach to risk management (see section 5.3). In practice, the council will need to strengthen its risk management by introducing more robust and visible approaches to budget setting and monitoring via quarterly updates to Cabinet, a rigorous approach to prioritising allocation of funding to services and project, and strengthened accountability mechanisms for ensuring delivery of outcomes within budget. It will also require anticipating and planning for major events that might impact on the council's budget, including the reletting of contracts for key council services such as leisure and waste services.

The council is proud of the fact that it has become debt free, and we understand why that is the case. However, the council has significant cash and investment balances as a result of its strong financial position and we believe there are opportunities for it to think about reviewing the terms of reference of the Property Investment Fund and increasing its value, funded in the first instance by internal council borrowing. This could be used to help unlock priority projects that are stalled and to take advantage of investment opportunities within the borough. Any release of funding would have to be on the basis of agreed governance structures (including officers and councillors) and robust business cases, with a clear assessment of risks and how they would be managed and a full understanding of cost that will be incurred and the financial and non-financial benefits that will be realised.

Peers heard from officers about some internal capacity challenges to deliver on its ambitions. We've noted (section 5.5) that, to support the council's transformation ambitions, it will be important to continue to invest in corporate and project management capacity. Delivery of a more ambitious regeneration programme would also require strengthening of project management capacity in that area. In addition, proposals we have made in this section of our report for strengthened budget

monitoring, budget management and business case processes would mean the council will need to ensure there is capacity within the finance team. The council's financial plans will have to identify resources needed to build up this capacity to deliver and how they will be funded.

The council's success in delivering efficiencies in previous years has contributed to its strong financial position. But we believe there are opportunities for the council to deliver further efficiencies by modernising the way it works. The council recognises this which is why it has embarked on a transformation programme. This includes opportunities associated with digitalisation and the new digital strategy. The Peer team also heard how the council is embarking on a strategic property asset review. It is important to accelerate this review to increase the understanding of how assets contribute to delivery of priorities within the Council Plan and the extent to which more cost-effective use could be made of assets through either income generation or asset rationalisation.


A less risk averse approach to managing the council's finances will involve a significant cultural change in the council. Senior councillors and the Corporate Management Team will need to own any change in approach. Finance will need to be 'everybody's business', not just the responsibility of finance professionals. The LGA runs a range of programmes to support councils develop their approach to how they manage their finances, and we believe both councillors and officers would benefit from involvement in these programmes.

## **5.5 Capacity for improvement**

The restructure of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) earlier this year was designed to ensure the capacity and skills are in place to deliver against agreed priorities. A new transformation directorate has been established, overseen by a new Transformation Director. A number of enabling strategies are in development including a new Digital Strategy, Workforce Strategy, Asset Strategy, Economic and Tourism Strategy and Transformation Strategy.

The council is building the foundations to enable it to further improve its service delivery and place leadership, but the future programme of work is significant. Many of these work areas sit under the new Transformation Director, including external projects (the economic development strategy and future of the Marine Hall theatre);





internal strategies closely linked to 'usual' transformation activity (the Information, Communications and Technology (ICT) and digital strategies, workforce strategy, communications plan and council plan refresh) supported by relevant 'business as usual' (BAU) services; communications, policy, Human Resources, ICT, contact centre and corporate systems and economic development.

We recognise that the transformation programme is in its infancy, but there is a need to build greater clarity on what the drivers for transformation are as well as how the multiple workstreams of activity will fit together, be sequenced, prioritised and resourced. Officers and councillors are hopeful about the potential benefits of transformation but told us that they need greater clarity on what transformation means for them, council services and residents and the service challenges that can be overcome through service re-design. Some also told us that they are concerned about their capacity to deliver sustainable transformation with the resources available.

It is important for the council to be clearer on its vision for transformation, the intended outcomes, and the approach to the programme. It will then be important to communicate this vision (through your emerging transformation communications plan) to take both your officers and councillors with you.

As outlined earlier in this report, it is recommended that you build in an evaluation of the Senior Leadership Team structure (after it has had time to embed). This will help ensure that it is meeting the desired aims in relation to ensuring sufficient strategic capacity to lead across all service areas and support transformation.

A core team of project managers have been identified who will be responsible for the delivery of projects. To support transformation, it will be important to continue to invest in corporate and project management capacity, supported by an agreed corporate project and programme management methodology.

Examples where this would be of benefit were shared with the peer team. This included a view that better use of data and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) could help improve ways of working and potentially reduce costs, but that there was a lack of capacity to share pockets of existing GIS expertise in the council. Others told us that there are opportunities to strengthen the corporate approach to procurement of the many different ICT systems in place across the council. It was

also emphasised that corporate support is required to support the roll out of systems so that individual departments are not solely responsible for assuming knowledge of new systems and tools.

Ensuring a strong project management approach, with robust prioritisation and analysis of business cases, should also provide an opportunity to help strengthen a culture of creativity. It should involve officers and stakeholders feeling encouraged to share their ideas, and the council's programme management approach should help to develop these ideas across the council.

As outlined in section 5.4 of this report, the council's strong financial position means it is well placed to consider further short-term investment to build capacity in the transformation programme and the project resources required. This might, for example, involve investing in technology and systems that further help to modernise the way the council operates. The aim should be to help to drive out further efficiencies, savings and improvements. As with any other project resource, this needs to be allocated on the basis of robust business cases.


Wyre Council has knowledgeable officers and councillors who are engaged, committed and caring. All those who met with us clearly have strong local knowledge about the borough and its communities and a passion to make a difference. The latest officers survey shows how 79 percent of respondents are proud to work for the council.

The council's position statement highlights an ageing workforce. Succession planning is a key area to focus upon. Work to date includes growing the council's apprenticeship scheme. The council should continue to address the issue of succession planning by supporting its 'rising stars' of the future.

Similar to many other councils, there are also challenges associated with recruitment in some key service areas. It is positive that the council recognises this and has recently implemented a payline review to bring salary levels in line with nearby authorities to help retain officers and attract future talent

Peers were pleased to hear how workforce strategy is under development and will be key to ongoing recruitment, retention, and succession planning.

Peers were impressed with the council's work with the voluntary sector. This includes



work with over 202 volunteers across a range of council services over the past year. The borough is also heavily parished, with 21 parish and town councils. The peer team heard how the council work with parishes, including senior officer attendance at area parish and town council meetings, through events and community initiatives and also through a dedicated section on the council's website. Whilst the peer team did not have enough time to look at arrangements in more detail, it would seem that there are opportunities to work more closely with parishes and review opportunities for closer working, service delivery and place-shaping.

## 6. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. The LGA will continue to provide on-going support to the council. As part of the CPC, the council are also required to have a progress review and publish the findings from this within twelve months of the CPC. The LGA will also publish the progress review report on their website.

The progress review will provide space for a council's senior leadership to report to peers on the progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations, discuss early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC action plan. The progress review will usually be delivered on-site over one day.

In the meantime, Claire Hogan, Principal Adviser for the North-West, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, [Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk](mailto:Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk) is available to discuss any further support the council requires.