

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council

20-23 January 2025

Feedback Report



Corporate Peer Challenge

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1. Executive Summary:

Wigan Council is a well-managed and well-led authority that consistently delivers high-quality services to its residents while ensuring value for money. In the context of financial constraints and increasing demand, the Council has demonstrated resilience, innovation, and a commitment to developing new relationships with residents and community groups. The Council's performance is reflected in the reputation that it holds both in local government, and the wider public sector. This is shown by winning national awards, including Council of the Year from APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence), iESE (Improvement Efficiency Social Enterprise), and LGC (Local Government Chronicle) in 2023, 2021, and 2019 respectively.

The Council has cultivated a strong reputation, across the local government sector, for being a forward-thinking local authority. It is recognised for its willingness to develop, test, and try new ways of working. This commitment to innovation and ambition for the future is demonstrated through the Council's public service reform agenda. Building on their previous Wigan Deal¹, the Council has introduced Progress with Unity, which recognises areas for further improvement, and includes an approach that is underpinned by an ambition for a more collaborative way of working with partners to address issues of inequality in the borough.

This vision to address inequality, builds on the Council's commitment to partnership working, which has been demonstrated through this Corporate Peer Challenge process to be a significant area of strength. Across the borough, there are numerous examples of strong collaborative working between the Council and various stakeholders, including community organizations, businesses, and public sector bodies. As the implementation of Progress with Unity advances, the specific contributions of partners will become clearer, supporting more detailed engagement and planning. While this approach is relatively new, it has already gained significant support from councillors, staff, and partners, demonstrating the widespread belief in its potential to create meaningful change.

Wigan Council has a clear and confident vision for its future, underpinned by their track record of reform and delivery. The Council's ambition is supported by a well-defined strategic direction, ensuring that its objectives remain focused and achievable, illustrated through two clear missions. These missions can be summarised as creating fair opportunities and supporting neighbourhoods to flourish. The Council recognises the importance of ongoing transformation to ensure they continue to get the basics right for residents and businesses, that they fully embed person-centred approaches to deliver high

¹ The Wigan Deal was an informal agreement which was developed between Wigan Council and residents based on a mixture of rights, responsibilities, and expectations.

quality services and build on their 10-year learning and new approach of Progress with Unity to work with their communities on a new approach to neighbourhoods. The council understands its areas for improvement within this transformation plan with a specific focus on Housing as well as maintaining focus and embedding improvements in Children's social care. Moving forward, robust oversight mechanisms will be essential to track progress, measure benefits, and effectively communicate the Council's successes against these missions, and to develop a virtuous circle of partnership support and buy-in.

As this work develops, the Council should have the confidence to improve the visibility of its actions, thinking, performance oversight, and risk management through the inclusion of more detail in public papers and the creation of a clear performance framework that is widely understood. This will support and strengthen transparency but will also reinforce accountable and shared approaches to risk management within the organisation. By communicating decisions and challenges more openly, the Council can encourage wider participation in shaping services and policies that affect the borough.

Similarly, the Council is looking to advance its Neighbourhood working model to enable the co-design of preventative services to improve health outcomes at a community level. As this develops, it will be important to ensure that there is a thorough understanding of the relationship between this work and the Council's approach to service delivery and engagement. Driving this work forward at pace will be supported by ensuring that the council has clear governance structures for this work, and a robust understanding of the internal capabilities and capacity required to support this work.

The Council is in a relatively strong financial position which provides a stable foundation. However, similar to other authorities across the sector, significant budget pressures exist, particularly in demand led areas such as children's social care, health and adult social care, and homelessness. In this context, there is a continued need for the organisation to develop and implement robust financial plans to support their long-term sustainability. The organisation has a clear track record for effective financial management which will support them with this work, however, the potential move towards three-year funding settlements presents an opportunity to extend this work over a longer timeframe.

Wigan Council is a respected and influential voice within the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. However, as the region moves toward a 'single settlement' for the sub-region², the Council must remain vigilant in championing, protecting, and advocating for the borough's interests. Maintaining an effective presence in subregional decision-making will

² In the Spring 2023 Budget, central government announced trailblazer devolution deals for Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, which included a single funding settlement for public services as part of the next Comprehensive Spending Review.

be critical to ensuring that Wigan's needs are appropriately represented and met within the broader partnership framework at a Combined Authority level.

Finally, the most striking asset of the Council through this review was the organisations positive and enthusiastic culture. This commitment to putting the needs of residents at the heart of the Council's work will be central, not just to delivering Progress with Unity, but for the wider responsibilities and approach of the organisation. Continuing to protect this culture and these values will be central to sustaining the Council's approach to collaborative work, and enthusiasm for this agenda.

2. Key Recommendations:

The executive summary and main body of this report contain a range of findings and recommendations that are relevant to Wigan Council and should be considered through the organisation's Action Plan. The following are the peer team's key recommendations which have been prioritised on grounds of importance.

- **Recommendation One: Refine the council's performance management framework:** Build on the existing performance reporting arrangements and processes to develop a clear framework that tracks advances made against the two missions of Progress with Unity and reports publicly to Cabinet. This should bring together outcomes linked to these missions, an overview of service standards, and wider organisational health in a single report.
- **Recommendation Two: Further develop the relationship between the Council's performance management framework with the work of Scrutiny Committees:** A revised performance framework creates the opportunity to take a more systematic approach to using Scrutiny task and finish groups and maximise the contribution of elected members to strategic areas.
- **Recommendation Three: Champion the needs, opportunities, and achievements of Wigan in the wider context of Greater Manchester:** The Council has positive relationships with partners across the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, but in the context of a single funding settlement, there will be a continued need for the Council to champion issues of the borough. This will require ensuring that the Authority's work aligns to the emerging outcome framework associated with the single settlement included in the recent Devolution White Paper.
- **Recommendation Four: Develop the Council's neighbourhood working model at pace to support the engagement with the delivery of Progress with Unity:** The

Council is further reforming their approach to neighbourhood working, this will require further clarity regarding the ambitions of this work, and the role and contribution of councillors.

- **Recommendation Five: Move towards a three-year budget approach to support longer-term planning:** The potential national move towards three-year funding settlements presents an opportunity for the council to extend the timeline of their financial planning.
- **Recommendation Six: Revisit the Council’s approach to overseeing their collective capital programme:** The Council currently monitors capital programmes at an individual level and would benefit from establishing a wider oversight board to consider the cumulative picture as well as interdependencies, and impact on the missions of Progress with Unity.
- **Recommendation Seven: Continue the focus and prioritisation of improvement to Children’s Social Care:** The Council has invested time, resource, and clear corporate sponsorship to improve outcomes in this area and should continue this focus and approach over coming years.
- **Recommendation Eight: Consider the next phase of workforce engagement:** The Council’s Team Wigan Experience is a valuable asset for embedding culture, values, and behaviours within the organisation and partners. Going forward, the Council needs to ensure that these issues remain lived and visible on an ongoing basis.
- **Recommendation Nine: Maximise the energy of frontline staff including the delivery of the Progress with Unity missions:** The team recognise the clear enthusiasm of frontline staff to deliver for the residents of Wigan. In this context, the Council should consider how these ideas are captured, prioritised, and progressed to support and test new ways of working.

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge Approach:

3.1 Background and Overview:

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a well-established, respected, and rigorous process designed to support improvement and assurance in local government. This is reflected in the Best Value Standards published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government in May 2024. This guidance set-out the expectation for all Local Authorities to have a CPC every five-years and act on the findings, recognising the benefit of external perspectives, ideas, and challenge. The Peer Challenge process is designed to share

experience and expertise across the sector for improvement. Ultimately, the CPC process is locally led, with councils requesting challenges, engaging with the process, and responding to recommendations.

3.2 Peer Challenge Team:

Each Peer Team is designed to reflect the context and scope of each specific review. Ahead of the Wigan CPC, the LGA discussed the requirements for this team, including knowledge of working in Metropolitan Councils, community engagement, and wider issues of public service reform. Reflecting this scope, the Team for this review included:

- Steve Mawson (Chief Executive, Kirklees Council).
- Cllr Sir Steve Houghton (Leader, Barnsley Council).
- Andrea Watts (Executive Director, Operations and Partnerships, Sefton Council).
- Howard Emmett (Assistant Director Resources, North Yorkshire Council).
- Natalie Abraham (Assistant Chief Executive, Director of Strategy and Transformation, Cheshire West & Chester).
- Beth Stewart (Head of Strategy & Design (Sector), Local Government Association).
- Matt Dodd (Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association).

3.3 The Peer Challenge Methodology:

Peer Challenges are not inspections, and as such, the process is not designed to provide a technical assessment of specific plans, proposals, or individual services. Instead, the Peer Team drew on their experience to reflect on the information presented, documents reviewed, meetings and focus groups, and the culture they saw having been invited to the council.

The peer team reviewed the Council's position statement which was produced specifically for this review, encouraging self-assessment and reflection across the organisation. Alongside this, the peer team considered a library of 45 key documents relating to operating context, priorities, and local issues. Separately, the LGA also undertook a desktop analysis of the Council's performance using the LG Inform Intelligence tool and commissioned a review of the Council's financial position based on publicly available information. As part of this review, the Peer Team:

- Completed one-to-one meetings with council colleagues to understand local issues before arriving for the review.
- Benchmarked financial and service performance using the LG Inform intelligence tool.
- Completed approximately 46 interviews and focus groups with Councillors, Officers, and partner organisations, meeting with more than 130 people throughout the process.

- Visited a number of sites and offices across the borough, including Tanfield Court, Leigh Sports Village, Edge Hill University, Robin Park, The Hamlet Community Interest Company and Leigh Sports Village.

The peer team provided immediate feedback to the council on the afternoon of Thursday 23 January. This session was attended by the Council's cabinet and senior officers. A copy of the slides which were delivered during this meeting were shared with the Council to support their communication of findings and development of an action plan ahead of being provided the team's written report.

3.4 The Peer Challenge Scope:

The focus of this CPC included the five core themes which are included in all reviews and set out below. Alongside these, Wigan Council asked for the Peer Team to provide a perspective regarding their recently adopted 'Progress with Unity' Council Plan which underpins their approach to partnership working for the good of the borough, and the progress made against these borough wide missions, and the contribution of elected members to them. The Council also requested input regarding the effective roll-out of a co-designed model of neighbourhood working.

- 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 and achieving improved outcomes for all its communities?
- 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 respect, 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 clear plan to address its financial challenges?
- 5. Capacity for improvement:** Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the Council have the capacity to improve?

4. Feedback:

4.1 Understanding the local place and priority setting:

The Wigan Deal, launched in 2013, was a bold approach to redefining the Council's relationship with residents and garnered interest from across the wider local government sector. This approach, built on the principles of harnessing community strengths, fostering

independence, and driving public service reform, and was credited with maintaining service standards in the context of avoiding increases in Council Tax. This approach has been independently assessed by the King's Fund and was referenced in many wider academic and thought pieces regarding the potential for relational approaches to public services. "The Deal", gained high-profile recognition, and was synonymous with the Council. However, the changing landscape of public services, including the challenges that have emerged in the last decade including the pandemic, cost-of-living crisis, and deepening inequalities within the borough have illustrated new challenges for the Council. This includes child poverty rising from 16% to 23% and decreasing life expectancy rates.

In the context of these challenges, the Council made the brave decision to consciously move towards a "new era" of public service reform. This new phase, 'Progress with Unity' has been developed through extensive engagement with residents, businesses, community organisations, partners, and staff. Through this work, the Council has been keen to maintain the culture-defining asset-based nature of their approach, but to move towards a broader relationship with local partners that is based on less transactional terms and has a focus on *what* the partnership are aiming to achieve as it has previously had about *how* it wants to work. This reflects the feedback that the Council received from a wide range of partners and communities through an extensive period of reflection and co-development.

Importantly, Progress with Unity sets out two clear missions to both coordinate the Council and partners activities. The focus on two priority missions supports them being shared and understood across the organisation, partners, and residents, and support both prioritisation and understanding within the Council. The Peer Team met with many staff who were enthusiastic about the delivery of these missions. Importantly, the Council's staff survey has illustrated that 83% of the Council's workforce understand the principles and rationale underpinning Progress with Unity despite it being so early in its development and implementation (the survey was completed three months following the programme launch). The missions of this approach are repeated below:

- 1. Mission One: Create fair opportunities for all children, families, residents and businesses.** "Together, we will break down the barriers that create financial, health, education and environmental inequalities in our borough".
- 2. Mission Two: Make all of our towns and neighbourhoods flourish for those who live and work in them.** "Together, in genuine partnership with our residents and businesses, who know our communities best, we will help each town and neighbourhood in the borough to celebrate and maintain their identity whilst

understanding and helping to achieve what is needed to thrive”.

These missions create a clear and consistent narrative regarding the vision and outcomes that the Council are seeking for the borough, as set out in their new Council Plan. Importantly, the promotion of values based on kindness, courage, accountability, and positivity alongside these missions supports engagement with partners on ways of working alongside areas and issues of joint work.

In 2017 the Council made the decision to transfer their housing stock from an arm's length organisation back into the direct control of the Council. This means that they are directly responsible for the management and maintenance of 21,000 properties across the borough. This transfer originally saw Housing responsibilities integrated into a number of services and directorates. This was reviewed by the Council in 2022, bringing these dispersed services together to better manage interdependencies and align work. This illustrates the Council's willingness to take strategic decisions, as well as reviewing their impact.

Central to the success of Progress with Unity will be a strong performance framework to monitor progress, track outcomes, and support the communication of success stories. The peer team recognises that a first draft of this framework has been developed within the first six months, which is commendable. It includes key measures such as life expectancy, healthy life expectancy, and school ratings - critical indicators of long-term impact across the borough. However, these measures are more suited to an annual report rather than quarterly updates, ensuring a clearer focus on sustained progress rather than short-term fluctuations.

If these long-term measures are reported annually, the Council should consider what performance information is needed on a quarterly basis to act as key indicators of wider outcomes. This would provide organisational grip, enhance member oversight, and support ongoing evaluation. Regular quarterly reporting would help maintain momentum and ensure that Progress with Unity is driving tangible improvements. To support transparency and accountability, this performance reporting should be presented to Cabinet, offering a structured way to assess progress and adapt approaches as needed.

Currently, the Council reports its financial position and efficiency programme on a quarterly basis. There is an opportunity to align performance reporting with this existing structure, strengthening the overall narrative around delivery and impact. The peer team encourages

the Council to integrate these updates, ensuring that financial and performance reporting work together to provide a comprehensive picture of progress. By doing so, the Council can reinforce its commitment to openness, strategic oversight, and sustained improvement across the borough.

The Council also has a number of significant transport assets, including being on the West Coast Mainline, being bisected by the M6 motorway, and links to the GMCA bus franchise arrangements through the Bee network. Despite these assets, there remain transport challenges within the borough, as illustrated by only 51% of residents being able to access employment centres within 15 minutes, compared to 76% for statistical neighbours. However, the Council has a clear and structured approach to transport improvements, including M6 upgrades to a smart motorway, the creation of an M58 link road, as well as options for a Metrolink to Leigh, and Golborne railway station.

Alongside the Council's work on Progress with Unity, it is clear that there has been specific and targeted improvement made on a number of priority areas. This includes the Council's response to their OFSTED rating of 'Requires Improvement' in 2022 which has included corporate prioritisation, senior leadership, and financial investment. This is illustrated by the Council adding £30.3 million of recurrent growth to the Children's Services budget since 2019-2020. The most recent OFSTED focused visit in November 2024 highlighted a number of positives, including the appetite of Leaders for external challenge and a strengthened offer for care leavers, stating that 'senior leaders are unrelenting in their ambition to help young people succeed' and 'service improvement is making a difference to the lives of young people'. Children's social care data continues to show significant improvement with 95% of child protection plans being completed in timescales (compared to a statistical neighbour average of 93%) and a 34% reduction in children referred for a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time (71 children compared to 116 children in 2023/24).

The Council's approach to Children's improvement was strongly evidenced to the Team. The Council was able to provide examples, including their work on Family Hubs which included offers and support for those with emerging and additional needs, as well as their Family Safeguarding Model which is aligned at a locality level. The Council has also redesigned their targeted adolescents service model as well as their 'our safe space' model for children in care and care leavers. This has contributed to positive performance in these areas, with 89% of Children in Care being placed within 20 miles of their home (compared to 69% nationally) and with 69% placed within the borough (compared to 55% nationally).

Alongside the insourcing and review of housing stock, the Council has taken a pro-active stance in delivering Council houses, with 111 built in 2023-2024, which accounts for 25% of the affordable housing delivery in the borough. This has been supported through a funding partnership with Homes England and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, and includes schemes being targeted for brownfield sites and prioritising support for homeless

residents. This approach has enabled the Council to retain £9 million in receipts from the right-to-buy sales. Importantly, the peer team are conscious that under the Greater Manchester Places for Everyone Spatial Plan there is a target for the borough to deliver 972 homes a year, or approximately 15,000 by 2040, but recognise, similar to other areas, this may be impacted by National Planning Policy Framework targets and require further work in the future. This could be supported by refreshing the Council's Housing Needs Assessment and Strategy.

Finally, the Council's commitment to physical regeneration is clear, with exciting projects including the Galleries, the Cotton Works, Leigh and Ashton town centres and Haigh Hall. The Peer Team were told that whilst there is good understanding of development in Wigan, there is an opportunity to harness the assets and opportunities across the borough to drive growth that underpins the Council's wider missions.

4.2 Organisational and Place Leadership:

As context, Wigan is a borough in the North West of England created through the 1974 Local Government Act. The borough comprises of 14 towns, with significant conurbations in Ashton-in-Makerfield, Leigh, and Golborne, and with a population of 334,000 residents is the second most populated borough in Greater Manchester. It covers a geography of 77 square miles, and shares borders with Bolton, Salford, Warrington, and St Helens, as well as Lancashire.

The political and managerial leadership of Wigan Council are well respected and regarded both internally by Councillors and staff, as well as externally by a range of partners, with the Peer Team hearing consistent feedback for the effective leadership of the Leader and Chief Executive. This feedback reflected on both as individuals, but also the manner in which they worked together and developed shared approaches towards priorities, and responses towards challenges. This positive relationship will have undoubtedly been helped by the stability that the Council has enjoyed in these roles, with the Leader and Chief Executive being in post since 2018 and 2019 respectively.

The Council's approach to Place Leadership is central to their ambitions of Progress with Unity approach, with the movement for change designed to symbolise the Council's whole place approach and partnership's borough wide vision. The title, Progress with Unity, reflects the original coat of arms and motto of the borough from 1974, and was launched in September 2024, 50 years following its original use. This emphasis on unity is built upon a strong partnership of residents and communities, businesses, public services, and community organisations, with a dedicated listening, reflection and research project completed to better understand both the strengths of these organisations, and the

foundations of the Wigan Deal that this work builds on. Progress with Unity was co-produced in partnership with a shared launched through a place wide event to enable partners across the borough to share their views and perspectives and acts as an important foundation to this work. As the Progress with Unity movement progresses the continued focus on shared communication, engagement and feedback within the partnership and with communities will be important. As the peer team have heard, couching these conversations as 'relational rather than transactional' will be central to success.

Throughout this review the Peer Team have observed the strength and depth of the Council's partnership relations. This included a visit to Edge Hill University who are working closely with the Council through a historic 2023 Civic University Agreement that sets out a framework for joint work to tackle some significant local and national challenges including workforce planning at scale for health and care. The Team also engaged with the borough's sporting partners, including professional sports teams, and recognise that these organisations are coming together through a Progress with Unity Sporting event in February 2025. Finally, the Team met with many committed and enthusiastic community groups including Fur Clempt and The Hamlet. These visits illustrate not only the importance of partnership working to the Council, but also the strength of the local organisations that they are working with.

Whilst the Council has illustrated effective partnership working across a range of geographies, themes, and issues, the potential move towards a Local Strategic Partnership presents an opportunity to further embed this work. This will allow the Council to consider the support, and infrastructure requires to ensure that the Strategic Partnership has oversight of the missions and key transformation programmes, including the relationship with the Council's Health and Wellbeing Board. Beyond 'partnership working', the Peer Team can see that the Council has been pro-active in shaping markets for local services. This includes the example of developing an ethical partnership for the delivery of homecare, which was co-designed with residents and providers, to support community wealth building and embed asset-based neighbourhood working. The partnership has supported improvements in recruitment and retention with payment of the real living wage and 50% of care workers aged 30 and under.

This work is at an exciting juncture, and it is to the Council's credit that they have invited external challenge and perspectives at such an early stage of its implementation. The peer team recognise that partners have chosen for this work to use historic borough logo on Progress with Unity linking this work to the history of the borough and the principles of organisations working together

Beyond the work that is taking place within the borough of Wigan, the Peer Team were also told of the positive contribution that the organisation makes to the Greater Manchester

Combined Authority. There are clear examples of this partnership approach benefiting the borough, including £70 million investment for the Leigh guided busway and the Greater Manchester Spatial Plan – Places for Everyone. This includes the Leader having the portfolio for Resources and Investment, and the Chief Executive leading on Health and Social Care across wider Greater Manchester geography, illustrating how the Council works pro-actively across tiers of governance. The peer team recognised that working across two tiers of governance can add challenge and complexity. This is evidenced by the way the Council works effectively with health and care at a local and place level, but has a more challenging context, working through these issues at a regional footprint, and the external tendency for centralisation in this work.

However, in the context of the Government's appetite for devolution and the emergence of a single funding settlement, this will remain an area that will require time and energy to champion Wigan's interests and maximise the benefits of working with the Combined Authority. This will include considering the outcomes framework that will accompany any single funding settlement and ensuring that the approach and priorities of Wigan are best aligned with any requirements.

4.3 Organisational Governance and Culture:

Politically, Wigan Council is made up of 75 councillors with the administration comprising of 64 Labour Members. Beyond the administration, by group, there are four members of the Independent Group, four members of Independent together, two independent Councillors, and one Conservative Councillor. The political leadership of the Council operates through the Cabinet and Scrutiny System. Alongside these roles, the Council also operates through a model of 'Lead Members' to provide dedicated senior political leadership on specific themes and issues and support distributed ownership. The Council has four Scrutiny Committees; Confident Council, Place and Environment, Children and Young People, and Health and Social Care, meeting on an eight-weekly basis.

The Peer Team appreciate that the Council's Scrutiny Committees are chaired and vice-chaired by members of the same political group as the administration and recognise that it is seen as good practice for these roles to be given to opposition groups to maximise the benefit of external challenge. Their meetings are well attended by Portfolio Holders illustrating the link between scrutiny and decisions. It was noted that, including Chairs and Vice Chairs, there are 15 Members on each of these committees. This represents a significant amount of Member Capacity in these forums, and the Peer Team encourage the Council to maximise the contribution of Members in these groups. The Team were presented with good examples of task-and-finish groups to support policy development and service improvement. The refinement of the Council's performance management framework will support this capacity to be best aligned. It was noted that the Council is

working with North West Employers to review these groups over the coming months and encourage the organisation to consider the training needs that may result from this work. Additionally, whilst the Council has one long-service independent person on their Audit and Governance Committee, they may wish to consider increasing this number to support resilience, and ensuring anyone recruited to that role is supported with effective training and development.

The Peer Team were struck by the positive, upbeat, and unique culture of Wigan Council, with the positivity of staff being apparent throughout the week. This culture is built upon the six-ways of working which act as a whole-place framework, and are based upon: seeing the person, listening deeply, knowing the place, connecting to neighbourhoods, doing the right thing, and showing love and pride. This has been supported by well-established staff training on asset-based approaches. These values have been shaped by the relational and person-centred approach of the Council over the past 10-years, and in the Council's Staff Survey 87% of respondents felt these behaviours are displayed in their Teams. Importantly, these values contribute towards good relationships across Members and Officers at the Council, underpinned by strong levels of trust and support, and a shared commitment of doing the best for the residents of Wigan. With the Council's ambition for these values to underpin the missions of Progress with Unity, it is inevitable that further work will be required for them to be embedded within partner organisations.

The positive culture of the Council is evidenced in their Staff Survey Results. The 'Let's Talk Team Wigan' survey of 2,800 employees included very positive results for the organisation, with 90% of respondents recommending Wigan Council as a place to work, 87% enjoying working for the Council, and 87% feeling supported by their manager. These results illustrate the supportive nature of the organisation, and the positivity which was presented to the Peer Team. Furthermore, the Peer Team recognise that there are also low levels of grievances and complaints which further illustrate this point. This positivity is reflected in a number of tangible areas, notably, this includes 82% of the Council's social care workforce being permanent.

This positivity reflects the efforts of the organisation, with long-standing staff awards which have been in-place since 2013, including recognition for "*hidden gems*" and "*role models*". The council also has a well-established and regarded staff benefits programme through the 'Wigan Rewards' scheme which was referred to positively by a number of those that the Peer Team met. The Team was also told of effective staff communication, including regular updates from the Leader and Chief Executive, as well as constructive relationships with Trade Unions.

A further contributor towards the Council's culture is the 'Team Wigan Experience' which

brings together the history of the borough, organisation values, and ways of working. Launched in 2023, this interactive experience has been attended by over 4,000 staff, with 98% giving it a four- or five-star rating. It is a positive development, building on previous engagement approaches, that has been attended by both elected councillors, as well as partner organisations. Moving forward, the Council should consider how they will maintain engagement with staff on these themes, priorities, and resources to avoid this becoming a single-visit experience.

The Council's positive culture includes a focus on shared ownership and personal accountability. This sense of 'everyone being in it together' is a significant asset to the organisation. However, the Council will need to guard against the risk that this becomes detrimental to systems and processes of accountability, and the use of constructive challenge within the organisation. In this context, the Council may want to consider how risk management is embedded, and the relationship that this has with individual responsibility on risk management.

Through this review, the Peer Team have been told of positive member training and development opportunities, including engagement with external providers. Importantly, this included a significant appetite from Councillors for further opportunities and learning, and the Council should consider if any additional events or courses would support Councillors. The Team also heard many examples from staff who have been supported through meaningful training and development opportunities, including tailored and creative approaches to support specific roles, their impact, and the retention of staff.

The Council has a clear commitment on issues of Equality, Diversity, and inclusion. This is illustrated in their production of an Equality Annual Report which sets out their progress and achievements over the past 12 months. The Council's work in this area has been supported by their Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Steering Group, which, positively, also includes representatives from partners, and is driven forward by their Equity Strategy which was informed by learning meetings to help managers to better understand the perspectives of others. Achievements in this area include the delivery of inclusion awareness training for 800 managers, the development and support for a breadth of staff networks, as well as Wigan's public commitment to becoming an anti-racist organisation, adopting an anti-racist charter and Action Plan.

4.4 Financial Planning and Management:

Wigan Council has a net budget of approximately £272 million and has delivered savings and efficiencies of £180 million over the last decade. The Council's approach to financial planning and management is strong, with timely and accurate reporting, forecasting, and use of assumptions. This is reflected in the content of the Council's Medium-Term

Financial Strategy which includes prudential approaches to uplifts in fees and charges, as well as gas and electricity increases. Like all Councils, Wigan is required to make further savings over the timeline of their Medium-Term Financial Strategy, with figures of £10.1 million, £15.6 million, and £12.7 million in 2024-25, 2025-26, and 2026-2027 respectively. These figures do not include any assumption regarding the potential increase of Council Tax during these years.

Beyond the savings included in the Council's MTFS, Wigan, like other Councils is facing in-year pressures on their budget. This is largely linked to demand led services such as children's social care, health and social care, and homelessness. This includes a current overspend of approximately £15 million in Children's Services. It is to the Council's credit that there is a shared corporate ownership and response to this challenge. It is also noteworthy that the Council has recently reported a Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit of £700,000, this is significantly lower than many other authorities but will still require oversight and grip over the coming years.

In this context it is important that the Council's transformation programme is aligned to these issues. The Council has a number of transformation programmes with significant savings associated, including neighbourhood working and the use of artificial intelligence. The Council needs to assure itself that there is appropriate detail, planning, and benefits management arrangements in-place for these initiatives to best support their financial position.

The Council made best efforts to arrange meetings with their external auditors as part of this review, however, the Peer Team were disappointed that they were not able to meet with this important partner through the review. The Council's external draft audit for 2023-2024 was published in July 2024, illustrating a timeliness of completion. As of November 2024, the External Auditors describe their work on financial statements for 2022-2023 as 'substantially complete' and have not identified any risks of significant weaknesses or recommendations regarding Value for Money.

The strength of the organisation's financial management is reflected in the Council's Finance Team winning the 2024 Public Finance Team of the Year. Additionally, the Peer Team were told repeatedly that the Cabinet Member for Finance is well respected across both officers and members and provides clear leadership on these issues. This is a valuable foundation for the Council in the context of their recent recruitment of a new Section 151 Officer. Whilst this new officer does not start until the Spring, the Council demonstrated the strength of their interim arrangements through this process, including meetings with both the interim and previous post-holders. Furthermore, the Council's model of having financial officers placed in departmental teams has been conducive to

developing positive relationships between departments and corporate services.

The Council describes their approach to delivering savings and addressing financial pressures as being 'value led', built upon an asset-based approach to working with residents and community as enshrined in the Council's ways of working. The Peer Team appreciate that these values are well embedded within the organisation but recognise there will be instances when these approaches may conflict with more traditional approaches of financial planning, management, and grip. Moving forward, the Council will need to continue to appropriately balance these values against the organisation's needs for rigour. That said, as stated in this report, the council has strong financial management arrangements and a track record of delivering substantial savings through transformation.

The Council has a large and ambitious capital programme which is in excess of £400 million. This programme includes the delivery of their major town centre regeneration, Haigh Hall redevelopment, and wider social housing. The Council has been successful in attracting multiple and significant external funding streams to support this work. However, it is noted that there has been some slippage in the delivery of the Council's capital programme in 2024-2025 with the annual spend being at £142.3 million against an opening figure of £202.2 million. There is clear monitoring and management of these initiatives at an individual level, but the Team encourage the Council to re-establish their oversight across all capital works to support the management of interdependencies and consider issues holistically.

The Council's financial strength is also reflected in the organisation's reserves position, with general fund levels of £13.4 million and earmarked reserves of £100.9 million, this is above their CIPFA statistical neighbours. However, it is noted that the Council has had to use a significant level of reserves in-order to balance their budget, with £30.4 million and £29.2 million being used in 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. There is a public commitment from the Council to address this trend moving forwards.

With the potential national move towards a three-year settlement, there is a significant opportunity for the Council to move towards a three-year budget process and planning model from 2026 onwards. This will provide increased certainty both for the Council, but also, from the Council in ensuring that their priorities are reflected in the Council's use of resources supporting engagement with partner organisations. This may also support the Council to provide more detail and increased opportunities for resident engagement regarding how savings will be delivered.

4.5 Capacity for Improvement:

Wigan Council has a clear ambition and commitment to continuous improvement. This is

reflected in the Council's appetite to develop new approaches to service delivery, test new ways of working, and their history of successful public service reform. The launch, in September 2024, of Progress with Unity represents the next iteration of these ambitions based upon an increased emphasis on partnership working. The Council has invested time, thought and resources into the content of this programme and there is a clear commitment from the organisation to ensure that resources are aligned to support transformation through this programme.

Furthermore, the Council has also demonstrated the alignment of resources to support priority areas of work and targeted services for improvement and transformation. This includes working towards key priorities in Health and Social Care as well as Housing. The Peer Team appreciate that this is perhaps best illustrated by the targeted improvement work which has taken place regarding Children's Social Care following their OFSTED rating of 'Requires Improvement' in 2022. This improvement work has included an emphasis on children's experience through a new participation strategy, the development of co-produced and joint-funded 'our safe space' services for children in care and care leavers, as well as a visible ownership of corporate parenting responsibilities.

As the Council continues to refine its neighbourhood working model, it will be important to establish a clearer understanding of the resource implications for transformation activities associated with this work. This includes the clarity required regarding the contribution and input of elected-members into this model. As a more precise definition of this model emerges, it will provide better insight into how resources are aligned to both the Council's commitment to community local service improvement, but also the changes and structure required to deliver this.

Throughout this review, the Peer Team have been struck by the energy and enthusiasm of the Council's staff and workforce. Through meetings across all directorates and with staff ranging from front-line roles, middle-managers, and senior leadership, representatives of the Council have presented a clear and consistent narrative of doing what is best and right for the residents of Wigan. The passion of Wigan's staff is a hugely valuable asset for the Council and acts as a valuable foundation for the Council's continued improvement.

The Council possesses both the capacity, and the organisational culture required to manage and deliver change effectively. Notably, there is no evidence of 'change fatigue' among staff regarding the transformation agenda. However, within this environment of high capacity, enthusiasm, and collaborative spirit, there will need to be ongoing and live discussions regarding prioritisation. This dialogue will help to ensure that resources are aligned to the most impactful initiatives and council priorities and reduce the risk of duplicated work or the failure to map and manage interdependencies.

The strength of the Council's corporate capacity is reflected in the funding levels of the organisation's corporate core, illustrating their commitment in this area. The Council has an average spend of £300 per resident on 'central services' (as defined by LG Inform) in comparison to £200 for their statistical neighbours.


The Council has demonstrated a strong and commendable commitment to partnership working, both at a Greater Manchester level, but also within the borough. In the context of Progress with Unity, it is important that the Council maintains the capacity which supports and enables partnership working within the borough. As well as protecting the Council's capacity for this work, it is important to also consider the capacity of partner organisations who will also need to be part of these discussions. The Peer Team appreciate that there is work underway regarding the infrastructure arrangements for engagement with Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise Sector, and this presents the opportunity to increasingly engage with these organisations as a strategic partner.

Furthermore, the Council has acknowledged the opportunity to leverage data and intelligence more effectively in shaping and evidencing change, including the data held by partners. Harnessing the full potential of data-driven decision-making will enhance the Council's ability to implement targeted improvements and better measure the impact of transformation efforts. Strengthening analytical capabilities will provide a more robust foundation for strategic planning at a partnership level and ensure that changes are informed by accurate insights and evidence.

In summary, the Council's dedication to transformation, partnership working, and data-driven decision-making is evident and commendable. The enthusiasm of staff, coupled with a strong culture of innovation and collaboration, provides a solid foundation for continued progress. Moving forward, maintaining a focus on resource alignment, prioritisation, and effective stakeholder engagement will be key to sustaining the momentum of Progress with Unity and achieving the delivery of their missions for benefit of Wigan residents.

5. Next Steps:

It is recognised that the senior political and managerial leadership of Wigan Council will want to reflect, consider, and discuss these findings and recommendations to support the development of their Action Plan. To promote public transparency, it is a requirement Peer Reviews to be published in-full within three months of being completed. In this instance, this requires the report to be published no later than 21 April 2024.



To illustrate the Council's responsiveness to the findings and recommendations of this review, there is a requirement for the Council to develop and publish an Action Plan within five-months of the Peer Team being onsite, therefore, no later than 21 June 2024. This Action Plan should provide clarity on the activity, milestones, and timelines that the council will work to in responding to the Team's findings. The Action Plan will also be central to the Peer Team's re-engagement with the council through a Progress Review which is due to be completed in the Winter of 2025-2026.

The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government has published Best Value Standards for Local Authorities in 2024. This guidance describes arranging a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Challenge at least every five-years as a characteristic of a well-functioning authority. The Peer Team recognise that Wigan's previous Peer Challenge was completed in October 2017. In this context, it is expected that the council would commission to undertake their next Corporate Peer Challenge no-later than January 2030.

Finally, Claire Hogan (Assistant Director for Improvement) is the main contact between the LGA and Wigan Council. Claire is available to discuss the content of this report, and any further support that the council may require or benefit from, and can be contacted by email on: Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk