WLGA Executive Board   **Item 7**

28th January 2022

WLGA IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME 2022-23

Purpose

1. To seek Members' views on the delivery plan for the WLGA Improvement Programme 2022-23.

Background

2. The Improvement Programme demonstrates the shared commitment of the WLGA and Welsh Government to promoting, supporting, and resourcing sector-led improvement across local government in Wales.

3. Members endorsed the WLGA Improvement Programme 2021-22 at the Leaders' meeting on 19th March 2021 and have received updates on activity, the last at October's Executive Board.

4. The Welsh Government outlined an indicative three-year commitment to provide an annual improvement grant of up to £800,000 subject to approval of the Minister approving a delivery plan.

5. Although Welsh Government financial support is critical, funding a core team and the commissioning of specific services, sector-led improvement is founded on a commitment from senior members and professionals to 'mutual aid', the proactive offer and receipt of reciprocal peer challenge and support within and across the local government family. Local government invests significant in-kind commitment and contribution to sector-led improvement

6. The focus of the 2021-22 programme has been to provide improvement support to authorities covering several themes:

   - COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery
   - Local Democracy and Member Development
   - Corporate Governance & Performance
   - Corporate Capability
   - Targeted Improvement where organisational risks have been identified

7. Particular emphasis has been around supporting councils' implementation and planning for the new requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2022, including several democratic and governance reforms and the new performance duties around self-assessment and panel performance assessments.

8. Significant preparatory work has also been undertaken to develop resources and a programme of support for councils following May's elections.

9. The delivery of the full 2021-22 programme has however been impacted by recruitment challenges posed by the short-term nature of the grant, however, the full team has now been recruited, with 2 new members of staff joining in January:

   - Head of Improvement
   - 4 x Improvement Officers (plus P/T Officer 1 day per week supporting member development)
   - Senior Support Officer

10. An update on Quarter 3 and proposed Quarter 4 activities is included in Annex 1.

Improvement Programme 2022-23

11. The proposed Improvement Programme 2022-23 builds on the preparatory work from the 2021-22 programme and has been shaped through engagement with members, chief executives and political groups.

12. The Head of Improvement has met with most chief executives and leaders during Quarter 3 (and will meet others in Quarter 4) and has had discussions with SOLACE representatives, Society of Welsh Treasurers, Human Resources Directors Network and Heads of Democratic Services. Executive Board also identified member and authority support post-elections as a core priority for the 2022-23 programme, when improvement was discussed in October.

13. The draft outline delivery plan is included in Annex A and includes the following core themes:

   - **Local Democracy, Induction and Member Development**

   - **Supporting Corporate Capacity & Development**

   - **Corporate Governance & Performance**

   - **Targeted Improvement Support**

14. The overarching emphasis will be to provide extensive member and leadership development, induction and peer support post-elections along with further embedding the governance and performance requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2022, notably developing peer challenge and the statutory Panel Performance Assessment process.

15. The recruitment of senior officer and elected member peers will be a core priority following the elections. The WLGA will also be keen to retain a pool of former senior councillor 'peers' to increase peer capacity and to ensure that considerable leadership experience and expertise can be retained and made available to new councillors and lead members.

16. The programme will be sufficiently flexible to respond to emerging collective or individual needs throughout the year. Key to the success of the programme will be sharing and promoting good and innovative practice. Similarly cross-cutting improvement priorities around equalities, digital advancement and data management which will continue to be supported and promoted and aligned with the work of Data Cymru and the Chief Digital Officer and team.

17. Members views are therefore sought on the Improvement Delivery Plan (Annex A) prior to finalisation and submission to the Minister for Finance and Local Government.

Improvement Support Funding

18. Executive Board were supportive of engaging in discussions with the Welsh Government around longer-term, more sustainable funding of improvement support from the Welsh Government. The annual £800,000 Welsh Government grant is a welcome investment in sector-led improvement. Despite an indicative period of 3 years (2022-23 is year 2), an annual grant however does not provide longer-term assurance which impacts on longer-term planning and recruitment and retention of employees (recruitment during 2021-22 was particularly impacted). The Improvement Grant is also focused on corporate improvement support, so provides limited flexibility to provide support to councils with specific service needs. Transferring the grant into a top-slice would provide stability and sustainability, allow for longer-term planning and provide greater flexibility for the WLGA to respond to councils' needs.

19. Discussions at an official level have been constructive however the Welsh Government's preferred approach remains to retain the improvement funding as an annual grant. Similar discussions around the future of digital grant through the WLGA have however been productive, with a meeting between the Minister for Finance and Local Government and Cllr Jane Mudd, WLGA Digital Spokesperson planned for 26th January to consider transferring the current digital grant into a top-slice, which would provide sustainability and greater local government oversight and ownership of the digital agenda.

20. The Welsh Government has also confirmed that it will not fund or subsidise the new statutory Panel Performance Assessments through the improvement grant. Councils will be required to commission a Panel Performance Assessment once per municipal term. Panel Performance Assessments are essentially statutory corporate peer challenges, similar to those delivered previously by the WLGA and LGA (albeit there are specific statutory criteria that must be considered, including the need for an independent chair).

21. Although councils can commission anyone to deliver a Panel Performance Assessment, the WLGA will offer a service to all authorities based on its experience of peer challenge (with support from LGA), its developing methodology and utilising an extensive network of local government peers.

22. A WLGA coordinated offer would ensure a sector-led approach, some consistency in methodology and outcomes and shared learning and capacity within the local government family. The WLGA has already been approached by several authorities

to start planning the delivery of Panel Performance Assessments later in 2022-23 and in 2023-24.

23. The estimated cost of a Panel Performance Assessment will be c£21,000 (the RIA alongside the Act estimated c£26,500). The WLGA is therefore considering a range of options for funding Panel Performance Assessments, including through direct invoicing at the point of delivery or through an increase to subscriptions or a specific levy (both the latter options would allow costs to be spread across the 5-year term). Members views will be sought options during the WLGA budget-setting process during February and March.

Recommendations

24. **Members are asked to:**

    24.1   **Consider the Improvement Programme progress report for Quarter 3; and**

    24.2   **Provide views and endorse the proposed Improvement Delivery Plan for 2022-23.**

Report cleared by Cllr Hugh Evans, WLGA Spokesperson for Improvement

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Annex 1

WLGA Improvement Programme
Draft Delivery Plan 2022-2023

Introduction

1.1 The WLGA and Welsh Government have a shared commitment to self and sector-led improvement. This was endorsed through Welsh Governments, in principle commitment to support a three-year Improvement Programme delivered via the WLGA. In 2021-22 Welsh Government provided a revenue grant of £800,000 to the WLGA to promote, support and resource self and sector-led improvement across local government in Wales.

1.2 The Improvement Programme supports the WLGA mission to promote, protect, support and develop democratic local government and the interests of Councils in Wales. It is committed[1] to:

- Promoting sector-led improvement, with an emphasis around digital and innovation, supporting authorities in sharing best practice, developing workforce skills and developing a new corporate peer review programme.
- Promoting the role and prominence of councillors and council leaders, emphasising their equal democratic mandate with national politicians.
- Encouraging a vibrant local democracy, promoting greater diversity and enhanced democratic engagement and supporting councillors' development and training.
- Supporting authorities to manage their workforce effectively through our role as the Employers' Organisation.

1.3 The Improvement Programme will endeavour to support the delivery of some of the commitments to local government within Welsh Governments Programme for Government 2021-2026 and will endeavour to support the wider objectives for Wales where possible.

1.4 The Improvement Programme Delivery Plan 2021-22 set the context and vision for the programme from 2021-2024. The Delivery Plan 2022-23 and outline Delivery Plan 2023-24 highlights the foundations and achievements from 2021-22 and outlines how these will be built on over the next two years to deliver the vision, defines specific workstream objectives.

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[1] WLGA Corporate Strategy 2019

Improvement Programme Foundations & Achievements 2021-22

2.1   The Delivery Plan 2021-22 was set within the strategic context and challenges faced by Councils. The three-year approach was broadly defined as:

➢ 2021-22 - supporting councils' implementation of the 2021 Act, securing strong foundations for good governance and self-improvement and preparing for the new municipal term.
➢ 2022-23 – supporting new councillors and council leaderships, embedding peer challenge and support and commencing panel performance assessments.
➢ 2023-24 - further developing enabling support around public engagement, participation and data and digital capabilities to ensure all councils engage and involve their citizens who have confidence in their performance.

2.2   The Delivery Plan 2021-22 included four universal offerings and provision for Targeted Improvement Support for councils in need of more intensive and dedicated support to improve aspects of their business. There was an expectation that there would be some continuity of support within these areas over the three-year period to support the following desired outcomes by 2024:

➢ COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery: 'Councils have successfully managed recovery from the effects of the 2021 Global COVID-19 Pandemic.'.
➢ Local Democracy and Member Development: 'Councils are politically led by a diverse and talented group of locally elected members who drive their organisations to deliver continuous improvements in outcomes for their areas.'.
➢ Corporate Governance & Performance: 'Councils corporate governance and performance arrangements facilitate continuous improvement in effectiveness and efficiency of functions to achieve improved outcomes.'
➢ Corporate Capability: 'All councils in Wales have the corporate capability to drive continuous improvement and make optimal use of resources.'.
➢ Targeted Improvement Support: 'Council improvement challenges are consistently identified early and swiftly addressed.'

Improvement Programme Foundations

2.3   The first year of the programme has laid the foundations for sector-led improvement in Wales. One of the positive consequences of the pandemic has been closer working relationships across the 22 councils, Welsh Government and the WLGA. The Improvement Programme serves to build on this and support the emerging culture through sector-led support.

2.4   The Improvement Team has been established during 2021-22, albeit recruitment has been challenging with full complement only being achieved in January 2022.

2.5   Programme management methodology has been established to provide structure, focus, clarity over decision-making, oversight of threats and

opportunities, and to ensure appropriate stakeholder engagement and management, to optimise the achievement of objectives and delivery of value-added outcomes.

2.6 Further work is required to develop a robust approach to capturing and measuring outcomes from the Programme, this work will be prioritised for quarter four 2021-22.

2.7 The Head of the Improvement Programme has engaged with Chief Executives and Leaders during quarters two and three, with the last few meetings scheduled for quarter four. These engagement sessions have served to raise the profile of the programme, gauge the appetite and support for sector-led improvement, and capture current challenges and future priorities for Councils to inform this delivery plan. Input has been received from all 22 councils to inform the delivery plan. In addition, the Improvement Team have engaged with officers through professional networks and on an individual basis to raise the profile of the Improvement Programme and provide support where requested.

Improvement Programme Achievements 2021-22

Workstream: COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery	
Activity: Recovery & Renewal Panels	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• 2 Recovery & Renewal Panels delivered.	• 1 Recovery & Renewal Panel scheduled and further interest from another Council
Activity: Good Practice Exchange	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• 36 case studies developed	• Publication and further development of a further 8 case studies • Webinar scheduled January 2022
Activity: Data & Intelligence	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Data Cymru commissioned to collect and report relevant data to aid understanding of the pandemic, e.g. small business grants, enforcement activity, etc.	• Continued collation and dissemination of relevant datasets.

Workstream: Local Democracy & Member Development	
Activity: Civility in Public Life	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Four Nations Digital Citizenship Report and guidance launched along with 'e-flash cards' outlining the rules of online debate. • Ongoing local support	• Continuation of local support • Work with LGA on refresh and update of Guide to handling intimidation, exploration of 'Fair Campaign pledge' with parties and members.

Activity: Diversity in Democracy	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• 21 Councils signed Diverse Council Declarations	• Promotion of Be a Councillor resources • Sharing resources and signposting for local engagement and support • Participation, promotion and support for Welsh Government coordinated democratic engagement and participation programme (voter registration, voter awareness, schools and youth participation)
Activity: Member Development	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Be a Councillor website launched • 21 e-Learning modules in development • Supporting induction curriculum for new Members • Commissioned Councillors Guide website • Coordination of officer networks and ad hoc support for Heads of Democratic Services & Scrutiny Managers • Support for an assessment of 1 National Park Advanced Charter award.	• Launch Councillors Guide website • Finalise and publish e-Learning modules • Complete update and development of new induction materials • Finalise induction curriculum with Heads of Democratic Services • Plan any regional or national events/training • Update criteria for Wales Charter for Member Support and Development to align with new Act and statutory guidance (Democracy Handbook).
Activity: Leadership Development & Support	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Coaching for Cabinet Member (3 sessions) • Mayor training • Chairing skills training (National Park)	• On request – due to proximity to elections, no new requests expected.
Activity: Scrutiny Development	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Scrutiny Chairs training for 5 Councils, including observation and feedback • Questioning skills training 1 Council • Individual support provided • Working with MTCBC to support their Improvement Plan	• Continued work with Merthyr Tydfil Council

Activity: Governance & Audit	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Lay Person role descriptions and application form • Lay Person advert and National recruitment campaign • Presenting changes to the Audit Chairs network • Working with CIPFA on updated guidance for Governance & Audit Committees • Provision of local training on request	• Agreeing induction support with Welsh Chief Auditors Group • Continuing to work with CIPFA on updated guidance

Workstream: Corporate Governance & Performance	
Activity: Corporate Joint Committees	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Coordination and administration of CJC network meetings • Good practice exchange repository	• Coordination of CJC network meetings and sharing learning
Activity: Self-Assessment	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Two draft advisory papers developed and published • Ongoing individual support and advice to councils • Workshop held November 2021 • Draft advisory papers updated	• Prepare workshop on reporting approaches for delivery early in quarter one 2022-23.
Activity: Panel Performance Assessments (PPA)	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Draft PPA methodology produced • Alternative PPA methodology in development • Working group established to further develop methodology	• Working group meetings to further develop methodology • Consultation on methodology
Activity: Model Constitution & Constitution Guide	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Working with Lawyers in Local Government on new model constitution and guide.	• Publication of new model constitution and guide
Activity: Data & Intelligence	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Commissioned via Data Cymru: working with Councils to identify a consistent core datasets.	• Consultation on draft core datasets

Workstream: Corporate Capability	
Activity: Data & Intelligence	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
Commissioned via Data Cymru: • 3 Councils are receiving Data Basics training. • Continuing engagement with two benchmarking networks. • Two interactive dashboards developed. • Hosting, maintaining and promoting the use of OpenDataWales (ODW).	• Continuing to work with Councils to determine suitable dates for delivery. • Work on benchmarking ongoing. • Two dashboards published and further development work ongoing for a third dashboard. • Monitoring uptake and use of ODW.
Activity: Leadership & Workforce Development	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Promoted Improvement Programme opportunities with the HRD network, but limited progress.	• Continuing to work with the HRD network and newly appointed WLGA lead on themes to pursue for 2022-23.
Activity: Good Practice Exchange	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Delivery of good practise linked to new ways of working during the pandemic (see COVID-19 Recovery and Renewal)	• Preparation for Doughnut Economics webinar. • Continue to work with professional networks to identify and promote best practice.
Activity: Remote Peer Panels	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• 2 Councils have received remote peer panel support.	• Nothing further planned for delivery in Q4.
Activity: Remote Peer Support	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• 3 Councils have received remote peer support. Agreement to support an additional Council during Q4.	• Nothing further planned for Q4 other than work in progress.
Activity: Public Engagement & Participation	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Commissioned the update of National Guidance and resources.	• Publication and awareness raising of updated National Guidance and resources.

Workstream: Targeted Improvement Support	
Achievement as at end of Q3	Planned Q4
• Support provided to three Councils	• Continued support to MTCBC to be determined. • Support as requested with all Councils.

2.8   Work has also been completed to launch a recruitment campaign for Senior Officer Peers, this will be progressed during quarter four 2021-22 with timings

considered in the broader context of current pandemic demands and sensitivities.

2.9 A procurement exercise for Associate Peers (former senior officers, members or relevant consultants) will be undertaken during quarter four 2021-22 to provide wider support to the Improvement Programme.

2.9 Recruitment of Member Peers will be delayed until after the May 2022 elections.

2.11 Although good progress has been made in many areas, delayed establishment of the Improvement Team has hindered progress in other areas.

Draft Improvement Programme Delivery Plan 2022-23

3.1 The approved broad focus for the Delivery Plan 2022-23 is: 'supporting new councillors and council leaderships, embedding peer challenge and support and commencing panel performance assessments', in order to contribute to the overall objectives of the Improvement Programme as bullet-pointed in paragraph 2.2.

3.2 Based on the progress outlined above, the feedback from discussions with Leaders, Chief Executives and other Senior Officers, the following areas have been identified for delivery during 2022-23. Although broken down into five broad workstreams, there are interdependencies which will inform and support the delivery of achievements across the entire programme.

3.3 Key to the success of the programme will be sharing and promoting activities and outcomes to raise awareness. Similarly cross-cutting improvement priorities around equalities, digital advancement and data management which will continue to be supported and promoted, and aligned to other work plans, e.g., Digital Team and Data Cymru.

3.4 The Improvement Team will continually engage with Councils to identify changing priorities and ensure focus is on the collective highest priorities. To ensure flexibility and autonomy across the Improvement Programme, specific activities will be defined as they emerge based on stakeholder engagement and demand.

Workstream: Improvement Programme Development	
Core Activity	Outline
Team Development	- Provision of support and training to the team. - Expanding our network across Wales and beyond including working relationships with the LGA, COSLA and NILGA. - Horizon scanning to identify new emerging threats, opportunities, best practice, and innovation.
Website Development	Following the launch of the new WLGA website, further developing the online resources available to Councils, and promoting awareness.
Peer Recruitment & Development	- Continued recruitment of officer peers. - Recruiting Member Peers post-election, including Associate Peers. - Recruitment of 'independent' and partner peers (to participate in Panel Performance Assessments. - Provision of training and development opportunities for Peers.

Aligned Working and Joint Working	• Continuing to align with and support wider improvement agendas offered via different teams and funding streams, such as WLGA Service Leads, Digital Team, Decarbonisation, and Safer Communities network. • Continuing to work with external bodies such as WCVA, One Voice Wales, Academia, Academi Wales, Audit Wales, and Centre for Digital Public Services, etc.

Workstream: Local Democracy, Induction and Member Development	
Core Activity	Outline
Post- Elections: Member Induction	• Post-election induction support at a local, regional, and national level.
Post Elections: New Leadership Support	• Commissioning support for new Leaders and cabinets, e.g., clarity on roles and responsibilities, objective setting, understanding value of good scrutiny, relationship building, etc. • Collective work with new Cabinet and Senior Management Teams. • Support for Groups to transition to Opposition • Delivery of new 'Leadership Academy' for lead and aspiring members (with Academi Wales).
Mentoring/Coaching	• Commissioning individual support for new and aspiring senior Members.
Scrutiny Support	• Providing and/or commissioning training, coaching, and mentoring on chairing skills, effective scrutiny, questioning skills, etc. • Supporting effective self-assessment, continual development, and peer networking. • Support the development of effective joint scrutiny arrangements for both existing and new partnerships.
Governance & Audit Committee	• Induction and development support, through the coordination and provision of training. • Coaching/mentoring support for new Chairs. • Supporting the Chairs Network to collectively identify emerging issues, good practice, and training opportunities.
Civility and Standards	• Continued participation and promotion of civility in public life with LGA, COSLA and NILGA. • Promotion and support for duty of care and wellbeing support for members. • Support around promotion of standards, including support for new national network of Standards Committee Chairs, support for Group Leaders and new duties.

Workstream: Supporting Corporate Capacity & Development	
Core Activity	Outline
Innovative Ways of Working	• Exploring, showcasing, and supporting new and innovative working solutions for local government through case studies, webinars, working groups, etc.
Chief Executive workshops	• Coordinating and supporting workshops for Chief Executives on a quarterly basis to collectively explore emerging issues, showcase potential solutions, identify priorities for improvement.
Data Management	• Continuing to support the emerging shift in data culture towards data-driven councils. Working with the most appropriate solution providers to deliver against collective priorities. • Commissioning Data Cymru to continue to collate relevant datasets to support COVID-19 recovery. • Commissioning Data Cymru to provide Data Basics training to Councils (Officers and Members).
Senior Management Development	• Commissioning support on a collective or individual basis for Senior Managers and/or Senior Management Teams. • Supporting leadership training for aspiring Senior Managers (e.g., Leadership Academy).
Workforce Planning	• Working with the HR network and WLGA HR lead to support succession planning and workforce development.
Organisational Development	• Working with the HR and Transformation networks along with WLGA HR lead to support emerging best practice and new ways of working post pandemic.
Financial Management	• Providing additional capacity to support talent management and transformational opportunities, including data management to enhance financial management arrangements and long-term sustainability.
Community Engagement & Participation	• Provide support to Councils on good and innovative practice in engaging with the community, encouraging community participation, representation and empowerment, utilising available tools and techniques such as behavioural insights, digital, social media, etc.
Professional Networks	• Continuing to support and liaise with professional networks to encourage peer support and collaborative working, identify common issues and potential solutions, providing additional capacity where appropriate.

Workstream: Corporate Governance & Performance	
Core Activity	**Outline**
Risk Management	• Continuing to work with Councils to support effective risk management through the early identification of emerging corporate risks and the provision of support to manage those risks where appropriate. • Using the corporate knowledge gleaned across the 22 Councils to network, share good practice and escalate major risks either regionally or nationally.
Data Management	• Commissioning support to collate and publish performance datasets across the 22 Councils for self-assessment and benchmarking purposes. • Working with Councils to further develop useful datasets, benchmarking, and dashboards.
Self-Assessment	• Continuing to support Councils with their self-assessment journey, through individual support, peer support, and webinars, to share best practice, emerging issues, and potential solutions. • Using the intelligence gleaned from self-assessments to identify common performance issues and successes to explore best practice and potential solutions.
Panel Performance Assessments (PPA)	• Piloting the agreed PPA methodology. • Delivering two statutory PPA's.
Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC)	• Provision of Peer Challenge to support COVID-19 recovery and renewal or corporate matters around governance, finance, communications, leadership of place, procurement, risk management and digital and data management.
Equalities	• Development of business case for wider equalities improvement support programme to local government. • Initial focused support around EIAs, good practice exchange and training and development to support delivery of expectations around Welsh Government equalities priorities.
Peer Support	• Provision of individual peer support on corporate matters.

Workstream: Targeted Improvement Support
• As in the first year, funding will be set aside for the provision of targeted support on emerging critical corporate risks or issues identified by Councils, Audit Wales and Regulators.