

24th February 2023

WLGA IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME 2023-24

Purpose

1. To seek Members' views on the delivery plan for the WLGA Improvement Programme 2023-24.

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. The Welsh Government outlined an indicative three-year commitment to provide an annual improvement grant of up to £800,000 subject to achievement of previous year outcomes and ministerial approval of the delivery plan. This is the final year of the three-year commitment.
4. Members endorsed the WLGA Improvement Programme 2022-23 at the Executive Board meeting on 28th January 2022 and received an update on activity at the Executive Board meeting on 30th September 2022.
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 overarching objective of the 2022-23 plan was to 'supporting new councillors and council leaderships, embedding peer challenge and support, and commencing panel performance assessments'. This has been delivered through the provision of improvement support to councils covering the following workstreams:
 - Local Democracy, Induction and Member Development
 - Corporate Governance & Performance
 - Corporate Capability
 - Targeted Improvement where organisational risks have been identified

An update on the work undertaken during the last two quarters of 2022-23 is included at Annex B.

Improvement Programme 2023-24

7. The proposed Improvement Programme 2023-24 builds on the work undertaken over the last two years of the programme and has been drawn from council self-assessments, which highlighted the following collective corporate themes:

- Equalities
- Scrutiny
- Data culture
- Risk management
- Public engagement and participation
- Organisational culture and community resilience
- Workforce planning
- Managing demand and capacity

In addition, we have engaged with councils and professional networks, to gain an understanding of expectations of the programme, priorities, and anticipated demand. Engagement has also been undertaken with the WLGA spokespersons and Welsh Government.

8. The draft outline delivery plan is included in Annex A. The programme will continue to 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 Digital Team.
9. Members views are therefore sought on the Improvement Programme delivery plan (Annex A) prior to finalisation and submission to the Minister for Finance and Local Government.
10. Welsh Government are commissioning a review of the design and delivery of the programme and an evaluation of the impact of the programme to date. The review and evaluation will be completed in 2023-24 and will be used to inform future and longer-term funding arrangements for the programme, as well as providing a measure of the impact of the programme to date.

Recommendations

11. Members are asked to:

- 11.1 Provide views and endorse the proposed Improvement Programme delivery plan for 2023-24 (Annex A).**
- 11.2 Consider the Improvement Programme progress report for Quarters 3; and 4 2022-23 (Annex B).**

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Improvement Programme Delivery Plan 2023-24

Introduction

1.1 The programme supports the WLGA mission to promote, protect, support, and develop democratic local government and the interests of Councils in Wales. It is committed¹ 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.

1.2 The programme is funded by Welsh Government up to an annual grant of £800k, subject to achievement of outcomes and ministerial approval of the delivery plan. The grant supports corporate improvement (but targeted support can be provided in key services where there is a corporate risk) focuses on the core themes determined by the WLGA in 2019, of:

- **Leadership, financial resilience, and transformation**

Community leadership and leadership of place is a fundamental role of local government, and the programme seeks to address the continuous support and development of councillors and senior officers. This is to ensure councils are well governed, well led and well managed, and engage and work with the public and partners to improve outcomes for their communities.

- **Self and peer assessment, challenge, and support**

The programme seeks to support councils to be more resilient and self-aware, committed to and receptive of collective improvement support and critical-friend challenge provided from within the sector. The programme will help ensure councils' self-assessment arrangements are embedded, evidence-based, robust and contribute to good governance and leadership and are supplemented by proportionate sector-coordinated peer challenge.

¹ [WLGA Corporate Strategy 2019](#)

- **Improvement capacity and support**

The programme aims to enable and provide an intensive and dedicated support package to assist local governments to respond to:

- emerging or initial improvement challenges;
- challenges or recommendations identified through self-assessment or peer/panel assessment; and
- any emerging concerns or recommendations from external audit, including feedback from Heads of Inspectorate Forum and/or Improvement Support Conference discussions.

1.3 The delivery plan 2021-22 set the context and vision for the programme from 2021-2024. 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.

Improvement Programme Delivery Plan 2023-24

- 2.1 The approved broad focus for the delivery plan 2023-24 is: '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', to contribute to the overall objectives of the Improvement Programme as bullet-pointed in paragraph 2.2.
- 2.2 The three-year objectives and the desired outcomes of the Improvement Programme were developed based on the strategic context and pressures across local government in 2020-21. Whilst much of this remains relevant and we are required to deliver these outcomes, we need to adapt the programme to support new and emerging challenges to remain relevant and add value. Current challenges such as the cost-of-living crisis, workforce pressures, impact of strikes and continuing health and social care crisis, climate change, etc. are all impacting on current demand and delivery, adding financial and other resource pressures and require an immediate and longer-term strategic shift. Whilst the programme is focused on corporate improvement, there is a need to integrate support. Therefore, we will endeavour to include cross-cutting themes which have an organisation-wide impact, into the improvement programme. Core themes for the programme will include sustainability and equality, in particular supporting authorities deliver the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan.
- 2.3 In developing the delivery plan 2023-24, we have engaged with councils, professional networks, and taken into consideration findings from council self-assessment reports, the ombudsman and regulator reports. Although broken down into three broad workstreams, there are interdependencies which will inform and support the delivery of achievements across the entire programme. The team will continue to collaborate on improvement opportunities with the Digital Team and Data Cymru, as well as continuing to work with external partners such as the LGA, SOLACE, WCVA, the Centre for Digital Public Services. Finding from the work of the Ombudsman, Care Inspectorate Wales, Audit Wales and Estyn, will continue to be collated to use core themes to inform improvement priorities and targeted support.
- 2.4 The delivery plan 2023-24 follows the agile approach taken in 2022-23 to allow flexibility to respond to changing priorities, demand, and risk, with a focus on quality and breadth of coverage over quantity of activities. The absence of specific delivery targets is contingent on the principles of demonstrating value, engagement, and improvement outcomes across councils.
- 2.5 The work of the team will be formed around the following core activities:
 - Delivering/commissioning training and development support.
 - Identifying and sharing innovative practice to promote new ways of working.
 - Identifying emerging issues to provide learning opportunities.
 - Collaborating internally and externally to raise awareness of key issues which could have a corporate impact.
 - Supporting member and professional networks.

- Coordinating and facilitating peer challenge and panel performance assessments (PPA) (although it should be noted that PPA's are administered on a full cost recovery basis rather than funded through the improvement grant).

2.6 The Improvement Team will continually engage with Councils to identify and respond to needs and 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, however the plan provides an outline of potential support based on current engagement feedback.

2.7 It is proposed that an additional Improvement Officer will be recruited to the team during the next financial year on a fixed-term basis. This will increase the specialist skillset of the team to deliver the ambitious delivery plan outlined below.

Workstream: Local Democracy & Member Development	
Core Activity	Outline of proposed support
Leadership Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued support in delivery of the Leadership Programme with Academi Wales. • Commissioning development support for Cabinet or Cabinet & Senior Leadership teams. • Coaching & mentoring support. • Commissioning training on request (e.g. media, public speaking, equalities, etc). • Training for Group Leaders on duties under the Local Government & Elections Act (Wales) 2021.
Scrutiny Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued provision of skills-based training to councillors (e.g. questioning skills, effective scrutiny, charring skills, etc.). • Provision of support around scrutinising performance and financial scrutiny. • Establishing and facilitating Scrutiny Chairs networks, events/forums and collaborating with the wider WLGA on priority themes. • Facilitating scrutiny self and peer-assessment. • Supporting joint scrutiny development (including CJC's). • Developing a democratic services and scrutiny officer development programme.
Standards & Democratic Services Committee Chairs Forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to support the recently established National Standards Committee forum, to share practice and learning, including provision of bespoke standards committee chairs training. • Re-establishing the Democratic Services Committee Chairs forum.
Governance & Audit Committee Chairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to work with the network to identify and support collective training and development needs (e.g. counter fraud, risk management, financial management). • Facilitating committee self and peer-assessment.

Workstream: Local Democracy & Member Development	
Core Activity	Outline of proposed support
All Councillors	<p>New programmes including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community leadership training – focusing on promoting public engagement, participation, and community empowerment. • Equalities and anti-racism training. • Data 101: an introduction to understanding and using data (commissioned via Data Cymru). • Understanding and using performance data (commissioned via Data Cymru).
Councillor Safety, Civility and Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued promotion and support for councillor safety, civility and standards including ongoing participation in the joint Civility in Public Life programme with LGA, COSLA and NILGA.

Workstream: Supporting Corporate Capacity & Development	
Core Activity	Outline of potential support
Senior Management Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top team development • Coaching and mentoring programmes with SOLACE • Supporting aspiring senior managers • Supporting networking events
Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce planning support, including development workshops across the organisation, skills and knowledge sessions for HR/OD teams, maturity assessments, data analytics of critical roles. • Organisational design consultancy and advice. • Anti-racism policy development and training in accordance with the Anti-Racism for Wales Action Plan. • Supporting and promoting best practice in workforce engagement (linked with performance duty) to promote a healthy organisational culture • Promoting innovative recruitment practice. • Promoting good practice in attracting, retaining and supporting a diverse workforce.
Financial Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a programme of financial improvement support, delivered by local government finance experts, offering insight, challenge, and advice. This will be a bespoke offering tailored to the needs of each council.
Financial Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to work with the Society of Welsh Treasurers to identify areas for improvement and development. • Supporting the delivery of identified improvement projects and good practice exchange.

Workstream: Supporting Corporate Capacity & Development	
Core Activity	Outline of potential support
Transformation & Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publication of Welsh Guidance on the General Power of Competence (GPoC). • Supporting the Transformation & Innovation Officer Network with delivery of the networks new transformation and innovation plan.
Community Engagement & Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide support to Councils on 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.
Data (commissioned via Data Cymru)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to support councils with DataBasics plus training. • Training sessions on use of summary statistics. • Survey design and analysis support/effective use of focus groups. • Engagement with professional networks to encourage and support the use of data. • Supporting specific projects that emerge through engagement. • Development of up to 4 data dashboards based on emerging local authority requirements.

Workstream: Corporate Governance & Performance	
Core Activity	Outline of potential support
Risk Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting best practice in Risk Management via the Risk Management network, inviting expert speakers on key risk areas, sharing good practice, and collectively escalating major risks either regionally or nationally.
Equalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting councils implementation of their equality duties, including the role of members, scrutiny and mainstreaming EIAs, and councils' response to national equality action plans, including Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, LGBTQ+ Action Plan and the anticipated Disability Rights Action Plan.
Data Management (commissioned via Data Cymru)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host, continually develop and maintain the self-assessment data sets. • Co-development of data dashboards.
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting councils with the evolving approach to self-assessment and panel performance assessment. • Using the intelligence collated from self-assessments to identify common performance issues and successes to explore best practice and potential solutions. •

Workstream: Corporate Governance & Performance	
Core Activity	Outline of potential support
Peer Challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of Peer Challenges to support corporate improvement.
Peer Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of individual peer support on corporate matters.
Peer Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalising Councillor Peer recruitment arrangements • Continuing to recruit Officer Peers • Formalising Associate Peer recruitment
Workstream: Targeted Improvement Support	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	

Improvement Programme 2022-23 Progress Report (Quarters 3 and 4)

An update report on delivery of the Improvement Programme 2022-23 for the first two quarters, was presented to the Executive Board at the meeting on 30th September 2022. The update below provides an overview of delivery for quarters 3 and 4 (forecasting planned delivery to the end of March).

Local Democracy, Induction & Member Development

Building on the work undertaken in the first half of the year, further support included:

- Supporting Academi Wales with delivery of the Leadership Programme, 25 delegates attended the North Wales programme and 23 delegates are attending the South Wales programme due to be completed in early March. All councils have nominated delegates to attend the programmes.
- Establishing a new coaching programme for senior councillors designed to provide additional support to those who have completed the Leadership Programme.
- Commissioning Cabinet & Senior Management development sessions.
- Sponsoring a development session delivered by CIPFA for Chairs of Governance & Audit Committees.
- Convening the establishment of the National Standards Chairs Forum and providing ongoing secretariat support.
- Brokering individual mentoring support arrangements.
- Participating in the delivery of 3 regional Councillor Diversity Events with Welsh Government.
- Engaging with all Heads of Democratic service on delivery of training, skills gaps, and further support required.
- Delivery of skills-based training to councils.
- Delivered coaching support to Councillors.
- Review of Councillor Development Charter.
- Delivery of Joint Scrutiny training to Gwent PSB.
- Facilitating Education Scrutiny Chairs participation in w Welsh Government briefing on school improvement and the information landscape.
- Publication of the Councillor Exit survey.

Supporting Corporate Capacity & Development

- Engaging with all councils on workforce planning support required.
- Brokering support with the LGA to deliver workforce planning support for 7 councils.
- Commissioning senior management team development sessions.
- Commissioning an update of the Public Evaluation Guide and support.
- Working with the Resourceful Communities Partnership to embed community resilience and resourcefulness approaches through shared learning of practice and knowledge.
- Sponsoring the Transformation Network event to launch the networks new terms of reference, priorities and work programme.
- Expanding the WLGA workshop training materials to include equalities, joint scrutiny, and scrutiny of performance.
- Convened a Cabinet Member meeting for Equalities portfolio holders to highlight emerging issues and identify common improvement themes.
- Coordinated a Social Justice Ministerial meeting with Cabinet Equality leads to discuss local government obligations in relation to the Anti-Racism Wales Action Plan.
- Commissioned Data Cymru to provide DataBasics training to councils (further two cohorts in Q3).
- Commissioned Data Cymru to develop two additional data training modules for councillors.

Corporate Governance & Performance

- Establishing the Risk Management Network and undertaking individual engagement discussion with all councils to establish risk management improvement priorities and good practice.
- Convening and facilitating officer network meetings.
- Collating council self-assessment reports to capture themes for improvement to inform programme priorities, identify good practice and shared learning opportunities.
- Convening a workshop for councils with involvement from Audit Wales and Welsh Government reflecting on implementation of the first year of the self-assessment duty, considering opportunities for improvement and further support.
- Supporting Corporate Joint Committees in establishing corporate duties
- Representing the experiences of Welsh Councils at a EHRC (England) good practice event on socio-economic duty implementation.

- Development a draft protocol on Support for Councillor research requests.
- Commissioned Data Cymru to develop and publish dataset to support councils assessment of performance.
- Commissioned Data Cymru to develop and publish the following data dashboards: inflation; cost of living; Ukraine visa data; child poverty dashboard.

Continued provision of targeted improvement support to councils on request.

Whilst no Panel Performance Assessments were requested in 2022-23, work has been undertaken to develop the methodology and provide advice and guidance to councils on the approach.