

Report To Envoys – 9 October 2025

Background

On 9 July 2025, the previous Minister for Local Government, Jim McMahon, confirmed to Parliament that the Secretary of State had appointed Ministerial Envoys to Warrington Borough Council.

As part of the actions that are required of the council, one of these is “to report to the Ministerial Envoys on the development and delivery of the Improvement and Recovery Plan after the first three months, and six months and thereafter at six-monthly intervals, or at such intervals as the Ministerial Envoys may direct”.

This is the first of those reports.

Update from the Leader, Cllr Hans Mundry

This report is an important first step in demonstrating our commitment to addressing the ministerial direction, and at pace.

The first three months of our work have primarily focused on ensuring we have the right foundations in place to deliver our improvement and recovery work. While Cabinet and SLT have always had a good working relationship, we are working more closely than ever, meeting more regularly, and know what we need to do collectively to deliver on our improvement and recovery programme.

I am particularly thankful to officers who have worked tirelessly in recent weeks and months to ensure that our improvement and recovery programme continues to develop, while also ensuring that our day-to-day services continue to be provided to the good standards we expect. We will increase the capacity to deliver our transformation, ensuring that we have the right expertise within the organisation to deliver what is needed into the future.

Importantly, we remain committed to ensuring that all elected members have the opportunity to scrutinise and support our improvement work. There will be opportunities in the coming weeks, via workshops and dedicated sessions, for all councillors to share their views and ultimately help shape our improvement approach. To be a truly member-led organisation, I am clear that we need to take all members with us.

Equally however, I make a commitment that as part of our work, we will look to also engage meaningfully with our workforce, our partners including businesses and community organisations, our trade unions, and our residents.

Achieving the actions in our improvement and recovery plan won't be easy. Through its delivery, we will ultimately have a council that is smaller but stronger, with a focus on delivering cost-effective and good-quality services. In that respect, through our improvement work, we will need to transform as a whole council to ensure our long-term financial sustainability.

Finally, I want to express my thanks to you, our envoys. Your constructive challenge and scrutiny, and your support, even in these early months has been invaluable. We are one team together, and your collegiate approach will help us to deliver the transformative changes needed.

Update from the Interim Chief Executive, Steve Park

Since the confirmation in July of the Directions that Warrington is required to deliver, and particularly during the last two months when we have had regular engagement, I have been focused on ensuring that the council is in a position to genuinely respond at pace and in the right way to each of the Directions. I have done this whilst also ensuring we do not in any way neglect the 'business as usual' and that the organisation continues to function effectively whilst we enter this hugely significant period of change.

We've covered a lot of ground, significantly in standing up an Improvement and Recovery programme within a small number of weeks, and establishing both a delivery plan and an initial governance framework, led by Members and supported by the Envoy team and senior officers, which will oversee our actions.

We have also made good progress in establishing and starting to deliver on the key themes that our Improvement and Recovery plan will be based on, and which our Cabinet and wider set of Elected Members can take forward over the coming months.

There is no illusion amongst any of us that this is going to be an easy or quick process, and there are going to be numerous hard decisions to be made both to ensure the organisation's future financial sustainability, and also to transform it into one which can lead an ambitious future for the borough, with a fundamental reset and a genuinely member-led culture.

However, based on the initial few weeks, I'm pleased with the progress we have made. Importantly, I am particularly pleased with the positive working relationships we have started to establish with the Envoy team.

I look forward to being able to report further progress to you in three months' time.

Our Improvement and Recovery plan

As per the Directions from the Minister, as a council we are required to:

“Prepare and agree an Improvement and Recovery Plan to the satisfaction of the Ministerial Envoys, within 6 months, with resource allocated accordingly. This should integrate relevant contents and recommendations of the Best Value Inspection report, published on 8 May 2025, and the July 2023 CIPFA Capital assurance review, published on 8 May 2024. The plan should set out measures to be undertaken, together with milestones and delivery targets against which to measure performance, to deliver rapid and sustainable improvements in finance, commercial, property management and governance functions, thereby securing compliance with the Best Value Duty”.

Our engagement with the envoy team started in earnest with a workshop on Friday 8 August, with the Deputy Leader, Cabinet member for Finance, Assets and Investments, and a number of Senior Officers meeting with the envoy team and representatives from the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

That whole day session proved to be a positive and important catalyst for the joint work that has taken place since then.

We have also had a regularity of meetings take place involving Envoys and Senior Officers from the Senior Leadership Team, along with specialists from finance and property services, and also regular sessions involving our Cabinet.

We have now established eight key themes which our Improvement and Recovery Plan will be based on:

- Financial sustainability and debt reduction
- Service standards
- Governance, Scrutiny and Audit backlog
- Organisational capacity, culture and development
- Working with partners (including on delivering Devolution)
- Improvement and Recovery Programme Delivery
- General continuous improvement
- Corporate/Borough Strategy refresh

Whilst it is important that officers are dedicated to supporting and resourcing the delivery of this Improvement and Recovery Plan, it is also essential, particularly given previous recommendations made to the council, that this Plan is fully owned and led by Members.

Therefore, an all-member workshop to discuss the draft Improvement and Recovery plan will take place in November. This, alongside other engagement activity will ensure that all members get the chance to contribute thoughts and ideas to the Plan.

In addition, our Cabinet will discuss the draft plan in public at their meeting on 10 November, with this and the aforementioned workshop informing an updated draft that goes to our Full Council on 1 December for debate.

We will then take the final draft plan to the Leader-led Improvement and Recovery Board for final sign-off.

Improvement and Recovery (I&R) programme

Including governance, reporting, resourcing etc

The I&R Recovery programme set-up was led by the Chief Executive following the Directions received in July.

Despite the challenges of setting the programme up during the peak holiday season, when almost all officers take at least some annual leave, we have still made good progress in moving through the initial set-up phase.

The programme is currently resourced entirely by internal staff who have been assigned for the initial programme set up phase. In line with the directions from the Minister, an external recruitment campaign was launched which sought to recruit an individual to lead the I&R programme and ensure the successful delivery of the actions required of the Council.

A subsequent decision was taken in agreement with the Lead Envoy that it would be more appropriate to bring an external person to lead the programme, initially on a fixed term basis. As at the time of writing this report, discussions on this arrangement are well advanced and we should shortly be able to make an announcement in relation to the individual who will lead the programme.

We are also clear that further resource for both the programme and key areas of delivery (e.g. finance, where we have brought in some temporary resource) are required, although we must ensure this is high quality and offers the council best value for money.

The programme has an established delivery/action plan (with the Envoy Team having access to) which sets out all actions from the key themes from the Improvement and Recovery Plan, with an owner being assigned to all actions, who is responsible both for its delivery and ensuring they keep that action updated for reporting purposes.

As demonstrated to Envoys, we are using PowerBI to report on each of these themes. Using PowerBI allows for a strategic oversight on progress, but also facilitates a “deep dive” into the detail by the Envoy team, Cabinet and senior officers.

A regular set of meetings dedicated to overseeing the programme are now in place and running well:

- I&R Officer Programme Group - weekly meeting held each Tuesday
- A regular item on meetings held between Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team
- A formal Improvement and Recovery Board has been set up, with the draft terms of reference agreed with the Lead Envoy. The first meeting of the Board is set for the end of October, and whilst this isn't a public meeting, we plan to accompany each meeting with an update that can be published on **warrington.gov.uk** and shared with all members and staff

Delivery progress

We have made some progress against a number of the actions. Indeed, some progress was already made prior to the official issuing of Ministerial Directions.

Some key achievements are:

- Establishing a Joint Leadership group with Cabinet, SLT and the Envoy Team, who meet much more regularly on a wide range of issues
- Implementing a new budget setting process with much wider engagement planned prior to setting what will be an extremely difficult budget in March 2026
- Agreeing a structure to work with Envoys on agreeing an appropriate Commercial Strategy
- Changing our constitution in order that we can appoint an Independent chair of Audit and Corporate Governance committee
- Setting up an Improvement and Recovery Board which will meet for the first time later this month to consider the first draft of our Improvement and Recovery Plan
- Commencing a review of all our investments
- Proceeding at pace with key senior recruitment including the permanent Chief Executive position, and Section 151 Officer

After further imminent engagement on the draft plan and with Members, we will be in a good position to share a first report on our detailed delivery progress, which will be presented to the Improvement and Recovery Board on 27 October.

In terms of our ongoing process progress, you have full access to the delivery/action plan, and PowerBI, so are able to see in real time how we are progressing against each action, and we hope you welcome this.

Already, we are receiving feedback from you on the presentation, which for example included a request for a narrative to be included on each theme of our improvement and recovery plan. This narrative explains what each theme will address and how it will contribute to our overall improvement plan. Your feedback is extremely helpful and we will continue to respond positively and openly to it.

Key actions planned for the next reporting period

Our next report will be with you by 9 January 2026. By this point, we will:

- Have had the first (and second) meetings of the new Improvement and Recovery Board.
- Have shared a publicly available Improvement and Recovery Plan, which will sit on our website and which will be reviewed and updated as we progress.
- Have commenced a member-led review of our governance, through a workshop which will be timetabled to make clear recommendations to our Annual Council meeting in June 2025.
- Continued our intensive financial work to be in a position to present a draft budget for 2026/27 and updated Medium Term Financial Plan, ready for Scrutiny in January 2026.
- Completed the current recruitment campaign, launched in September, for our next permanent Chief Executive, with a recommendation being made to our Full Council.

Publishing and sharing of this report

This report has been agreed by the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive. Following its submission, and in keeping with our determination to be increasingly open and accountable, it will be shared with all elected members, staff, key partners and also published on our website, around the time when the 10 November Cabinet papers are published.

We will publish the report at warrington.gov.uk/improvement-and-recovery which is an area of our website we have jointly established with the Chief of Staff supporting the Envoy team.