

Use of performance information: service user perspective and outcomes – Denbighshire County Council

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Report summary

- 1 We considered the service user perspective and outcome information provided to senior officers and senior members (senior leaders), and how this information is used.
- 2 Overall, we found that senior leaders at Denbighshire County Council (the Council) are provided with some information that helps them understand the outcomes of its activities and the perspective of service users, but service user perspective information is limited for some of its new objectives.
- 3 We have made three recommendations to strengthen the information given to senior leaders.

What we looked at – the scope of this audit

- 4 We focused on the performance information provided to senior officers and senior members (senior leaders) about service user perspective and outcomes, and how this information is used. We did not undertake a full review of the Council's performance management arrangements or an in-depth review of the quality of the data that the Council collects. Neither did the review focus on engagement with service users on specific service changes or the development of policies and strategies.
- 5 We have set out our audit questions and audit criteria in **Appendix 1**. The audit criteria essentially sets out what good looks like and what we would expect to find.
- 6 Overall, we were looking for performance information to be shared with senior leaders to help them understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users and how well they are helping the Council to achieve the outcomes it is working towards. We were also looking to see that senior leaders use this information to monitor progress and take action where necessary to improve outcomes.
- 7 This is an important part of arrangements to ensure that councils are securing value for money in the use of their resources. It is also an important way in which the Council can assure itself that it is acting in accordance with the 'involvement' way of working in taking steps to meet its well-being objectives. Without this information, it is difficult to see how senior leaders can understand whether their policies and actions are having the intended impact and make changes where they are not.
- 8 Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with the Cabinet Member, Director and senior officers with responsibility for the Council's performance management arrangements. The evidence we have used to inform our findings is limited to these sources. We undertook this work during May and June 2023.

- 9 We set out to answer the question '**Does the Council's performance information enable senior leaders to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities to effectively manage its performance?**' We did this by exploring the following questions:
- Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the perspective of service users?
 - Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the outcomes of the Council's activities?
 - Does the Council have robust arrangements to ensure that the data provided is accurate?
 - Does the Council use the information to help it achieve its outcomes?
 - Does the Council review the effectiveness of its arrangements?

Why we undertook this audit

- 10 This audit was undertaken to help fulfil the Auditor General's duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 (the 2004 Act) and section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.
- 11 We sought to:
- gain assurance that the performance information the Council provides to senior officers and elected members enables them to understand the service user perspective and the outcome of its activities;
 - gain assurance that this information forms part of the Council's arrangements to secure value for money in the use of its resources and its application of the sustainable development principle; and
 - identify opportunities for the Council to strengthen its arrangements.

The Council's key performance reporting arrangements

- 12 The Council reports on its performance through the following mechanisms:
- Cabinet and Performance Scrutiny (in addition to the Corporate Executive Team and Senior Leadership Team) receives quarterly performance update reports on progress towards well-being objectives and financial monitoring information.
 - Services report their performance annually through the Council's Service Performance Challenge Programme and monitor progress against Corporate Objectives via quarterly performance reports.
 - The Performance Scrutiny Committee receives a quarterly overview of compliments, suggestions and complaints received under the Council's customer feedback policy; 'Your Voice'.

- Corporate Executive Team and portfolio leaders receive several statutory annual reports, such as the Council's annual corporate self-assessment and the Director of Social Services' report.

13 Our review focused on these key performance reporting mechanisms.

What we found

Senior leaders are provided with some information that helps them understand the outcomes of its activities and the perspective of service users, but service user perspective information is limited for some of its new objectives

Senior leaders are provided with some information that enables them to understand the perspective of service users, but this information is limited for some of its new corporate objectives

- 14 Overall, we found some examples of performance information within the Council's quarterly self-assessment reports and the Director of Social Services' annual report, which help senior leaders understand the perspective of service users.
- 15 The Council's quarterly self-assessment reports include some information which would enable senior leaders to understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of its service users, but this was not consistent across all the Council's objectives. We found that almost a quarter of the measures listed within the reports related to service user perspective. The Council conducts an annual stakeholder survey which feeds into the quarterly reports and its annual self-assessment.
- 16 The Council adopted a new corporate plan in October in 2022 and is in a period of transition with its reporting against this new plan. Although much of the performance information included in the quarterly reports we reviewed still relates to the previous corporate plan, the final report for 2022-23 provided to senior leaders in June and July 2023 included measures which were directly relevant to its new objectives. These measures include some information which would help senior leaders understand the perspective of service users, but to a lesser extent than the information reported in the previous quarterly reports.
- 17 At the time of our fieldwork, the Council had not agreed all of the measures it would use to help it understand progress with three of its nine well-being objectives. This limits the value and relevance of the information provided to senior leaders to understand service users' perspective in relation to the Council's current objectives. The Council has an opportunity to revisit its performance information to ensure this enables senior leaders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the

service user perspective. Having this information is a key part of arrangements to be able to understand if the Council's activities and policies are meeting the needs of its service users and providing value for money.

- 18 The Director of Social Services' annual report for 2021-22 includes some good examples of information which would help senior leaders understand how the Council's social services policies and services were being received by users. The report includes feedback from the 'Have your Say' survey completed by children, young people and their parents and feedback from foster carers. The Council could reflect on how it could learn from having this type of information to help strengthen the information on the perspective of service users in other service areas.
- 19 As we found that the Council was providing some information on the views of service users to senior leaders, we explored whether this information was drawn from the diversity of service users. We found that the Council that the annual stakeholder survey and surveys issued by some service areas have information within the raw data on the demographic groups of the respondents and their protected characteristics. However, the Council does not analyse this information so cannot assure itself that it is understanding the perspective of a diverse range of service users.

Performance information provided to senior leaders enables them to understand the outcomes of some of the Council's activities although this focuses on the short-term, rather than mid and long-term outcomes

- 20 The performance information the Council provides quarterly to senior leaders includes information which would help senior leaders assess and understand the outcomes from the Council's activities. However, the information largely enables senior leaders to monitor progress over the short term, primarily on a quarterly and annual basis. Without insight into its progress against longer-term milestones, it will be difficult for senior leaders to assess progress over the medium to long term.
- 21 The Council draws on a range of evidence sources to help leaders understand the outcomes of its activities and helps to provide a holistic view of its performance. This includes measures on how the Council is perceived by the press and case studies within reports. For example, there is a case study on an individual who had benefitted from the community navigator and social prescribing service within a quarterly update report. Case studies such as this and data on positive and negative news articles can help senior leaders understand the impact of the Council's activities, but they may not provide a representative and comprehensive picture of performance.

The Council has limited arrangements to ensure that service user perspective and outcomes information provided to senior leaders is accurate

- 22 The Council's arrangements to check the accuracy of service user perspective and outcomes data within its performance information are limited. The Council has a contact officer within the corporate performance team for each of the services and the services have a specific data officer or another colleague who provides the performance data to the corporate team. These individuals 'sense-check' the data, that is they check that fluctuations from anticipated levels of performance are explained. But these officers do not routinely check the accuracy of the service user perspective data.
- 23 The Council uses a facility within its performance information software to describe the method of collating the data and the unit of measurements. But this doesn't cover the service user perspective and outcomes information.
- 24 The Council's Internal Audit service has not undertaken any data quality reviews in the last five years.
- 25 Overall, therefore, the Council does not have robust arrangements to ensure that the information provided to members about the perspective of service users and outcomes is accurate. As a result, there is a risk that decisions and actions may be taken, and resources deployed based on inaccurate information.

Where the Council does have information on service users' perspectives, it is used to help it achieve its outcomes by responding to feedback when poor performance is identified

- 26 We found that the Council uses the service user perspective information it has to help it identify which improvements and changes are required. Most of the examples were changes made after identifying poor performance, such as with the adequacy of the complaints process itself. This demonstrates that the Council is actively taking account of the perspective of service users where it has this information.

The Council has identified that it needs to review its outcomes measures

- 27 The Council has already identified that it needs to check for gaps in its outcome measures and assign an owner for each measure.
- 28 The Council does not compare the type of information it collects or collection methods on service user perspective or outcomes with the information collected by similar organisations. We do not mean comparing performance per se, but to help it learn how other organisations are providing information about service user perspectives and outcomes to help strengthen its own arrangements. This is an important element of arrangements to secure value for money.

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

Information on the perspective of the service user

- R1 The Council should strengthen the information it provides to its senior leaders to enable them to better understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users relevant to its new corporate plan. This should include strengthening its arrangements to assure itself that this information is drawn from a diverse range of service users.

Outcomes information

- R2 The Council should strengthen the information provided to senior leaders to help them evaluate whether the Council is delivering its objectives and the intended outcomes over the medium-longer-term.

Arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of data

- R3 The Council needs to assure itself that it has robust arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of the information it provides to senior leaders relating to service user perspective and outcomes.

Appendix 1

Key questions and what we looked for

Exhibit 2: key questions and what we looked for

The table below sets out the question we sought to answer in carrying out this audit, along with the audit criteria we used to arrive at our findings.

Level 1	
Does the Council's performance data enable senior leaders to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities to effectively manage its performance?	
Level 2	Audit Criteria ¹ (what we are looking for)
2.1 Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the perspective of service users?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The information is:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– relevant to the objectives the Council has set itself;– sufficient to enable an understanding of the service user perspective;– sufficient to provide an understanding of progress towards the outcomes the Council is planning to achieve;– drawn from the diversity of service users including groups who share protected characteristics; and• The Council has involved service users in determining which information to collect.
2.2 Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the outcomes of the Council's activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The information draws on a range of evidence sources to provide a holistic view of progress.• The information enables senior leaders to monitor progress over the short, medium and long term.• The information enables senior leaders to monitor the delivery of outcomes that cover multiple service areas and/or organisations.

¹ Our audit criteria have been informed by our cumulative knowledge of previous audit work, as well as the question hierarchy and positive indicators we have developed to support our sustainable development principle examinations.

Level 1

Does the Council's performance data enable senior leaders to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities to effectively manage its performance?

Level 2

Audit Criteria¹ (what we are looking for)

2.3 Does the Council have robust arrangements to ensure that the data provided is accurate?

- The Council has clear arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of the data it provides to senior leaders.
- Where weaknesses in data quality are identified, the Council addresses them.

2.4 Does the Council use the information to help it achieve its outcomes?

- Where poor performance is identified, the Council uses the information to make changes/interventions.
- There is evidence of the Council improving its progress towards its outcomes as a result of interventions.

2.5 Does the Council review the effectiveness of its arrangements?

- The Council reviews the information provided to senior leaders to ensure it is appropriate and relevant.
- The Council compares the information it collects with the information collected by similar organisations to identify opportunities to strengthen its arrangements.



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