

Use of performance information: service user perspective and outcomes – Neath Port Talbot 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 **the performance information provided by the Council to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities is limited.**
- 3 We have made three recommendations to strengthen the performance information given to senior leaders.
- 4 Our findings are based on fieldwork we did between July and September 2023.

What we looked at – the scope of this audit

- 5 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.
- 6 We have set out our audit questions and audit criteria in **Appendix 1**. The audit criteria essentially set out what good looks like and what we would expect to find.
- 7 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.
- 8 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.
- 9 Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with the Cabinet Member, Chief Executive, 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.

- 10 We set out to answer the question '**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?**' 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

- 11 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.
- 12 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 performance reporting arrangements

- 13 The Cabinet and three Cabinet Boards receive quarterly performance reports that include details of service performance and some corporate cross cutting measures that show a contribution link towards the Council's well-being objectives. All quarterly performance data that is reported to the Cabinet and the Cabinet Boards is reviewed by the Corporate Directors' Group (CDG) beforehand. A set of strategic dashboard performance indicators were being reported to the CDG on broadly a six-weekly basis which have recently moved to quarterly reporting.
- 14 Budget monitoring reports are provided monthly to CDG and quarterly to Cabinet. Information on compliments and complaints data is presented to the Cabinet and Cabinet Boards at the same time as the performance information.

- 15 The Council published its Annual Self-Assessment for 2021-22 in March 2023. Prior to this, the Governance and Audit Committee considered it in February 2023 in line with the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.
- 16 Our review focused on these key performance reporting mechanisms.

What we found: the performance information provided by the Council to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities is limited

The performance information the Council provides to senior leaders on the perspective of service users is limited

- 17 The Council's performance reports do not generally include information on the perspective of service users, apart from a few examples. It is, therefore, difficult to see how senior leaders would be able to understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users.
- 18 The Council's Service Recovery Plans (SRP) are a key component of its Corporate Performance Management Framework. The accompanying SRP Guidance is very clear on the need for services to understand the needs of, and engage with, service users. However, this information is not reflected in the quarterly performance reports. This is a missed opportunity to give senior leaders information which would help them understand the views of service users and to take action to address any issues.

The performance information the Council provides to senior leaders largely focuses on activities and outputs, rather than evaluating their impact

- 19 Despite a few exceptions, the Council's performance reports generally describe activities and outputs, as opposed to an assessment of progress against the outcomes the Council is seeking to achieve. This limits the ability of senior leaders to understand the impact of the Council's activities and assess whether it is meeting its overall objectives.
- 20 In its Corporate Plan Annual Report 2021-22, the Council provides some case study examples to illustrate the outcomes it has achieved under each of its three Wellbeing Objectives. These examples contain a range of information, including feedback and quotes from service users. Sharing this information can help senior leaders understand the impact of the Council's activities. However, the small

number of examples does not provide a comprehensive picture of performance and does not enable senior leaders to fully understand the impact of the Council's activities.

- 21 The Council acknowledges that reporting on the progress of outcomes is an area it needs to improve. It has identified the outcomes it wants to achieve. Its Strategic Change Programme 2023-24 (for the Corporate Plan 2022-27) lists the intended outcomes under each of its Wellbeing Objectives. The SRP Guidance is clear on the need to deliver outcomes. One of the key questions managers must answer when creating their SRP is, "How well is the service improving outcomes and improving the well-being of residents/stakeholders?" But this information has not featured in the recent quarterly reports, which is a missed opportunity to give senior leaders information to help them understand the impact of the Council's activities.

The Council has limited arrangements to ensure the information it provides to senior leaders on the service user perspective and outcomes is accurate

- 22 The Council does not have comprehensive arrangements in place to routinely check the data quality of performance information relating to outcomes and the service user perspective.
- 23 The Council relies on individual service areas to ensure their own data is accurate before submitting it. The performance data is then 'sense checked' by the Performance User Group (PUG) and the Corporate Performance Management Team. It then goes to Heads of Service to be signed off for presentation at the CDG, Cabinet and Cabinet Boards.
- 24 The Council created the PUG to oversee the operational performance management arrangements of the Council. The PUG uses a checklist to review the Council's performance reports. One of the items on the checklist is 'accuracy of data', but it does not give any further detail or explain how the PUG would know the data is inaccurate or how they would check the accuracy.
- 25 The Council's Interim Performance Management Framework makes no reference to data quality. We found no recent evidence that the Council's Internal Audit Service has done any reviews of data quality.
- 26 As a result of the Council having limited arrangements in place to ensure the accuracy of its service user perspective and outcomes performance information, the Council cannot assure itself that its performance information is accurate. Consequently, there is a risk that any actions and decisions it takes, and the resources it deploys, may be based upon inaccurate performance information.

As the information provided on outcomes and the perspective of service users is limited, the extent to which the Council can use this information to help it achieve its outcomes is also limited

- 27 As set out above, our main finding is that limited performance information is provided to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities. Therefore, it follows logically that the extent to which the Council uses the service user perspective and outcomes information to help it achieve its outcomes from this performance information is limited.
- 28 Where we did find a few examples of the Council providing performance information on the perspective of service users and outcomes, we found some evidence of the Council using this information to make changes. For example, the Council receives and records complaints information and monitors the outcomes of the action it takes in response to those complaints.

The Council recognises it needs to improve the performance information it provides to senior leaders so they can better understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities

- 29 In its 2021-22 Annual Self-Assessment, the Council stated it needed to strengthen its performance management arrangements during the development of its revised Corporate Plan and to do more work to gauge residents' satisfaction levels with the services they access and use. Consequently, the Council has begun a review of its existing Corporate Performance Management Framework.
- 30 It has introduced interim arrangements as it conducts its review. For example, it has introduced a new quarterly Highlight Report that presents performance information in a clearer and more user-friendly way. It also includes more cumulative quarterly trend data over a longer timescale. However, the Council has not outlined how it will include the service user perspective or information on the progress of outcomes. The Council now has the opportunity to use its review to action the findings of this report and address this issue.
- 31 The Council does not compare its arrangements for collecting and reporting performance information on outcomes and the service user perspective with other 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. As the Council undertakes its review, it will be important for it to compare arrangements with other organisations.

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

Information on the perspective of the service user

- R1 The Council should ensure that the information provided to its senior leaders enable them to understand the service user perspective on a broader range of services and policies. The Council should ensure this information is drawn from the diversity 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 intended outcomes.

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– used to inform comparisons with the performance of similar bodies where relevant.• 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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