



24 Cathedral Road / Heol y Gadeirlan
Cardiff / Caerdydd
CF11 9LJ
Tel / Ffôn: 029 20 320500
Fax / Ffacs: 029 20 320600
Email / Epost: wales@wao.gov.uk
www.wao.gov.uk

Mr Keith Griffiths
Chief Executive
Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
The Pavilions
Cambrian Park
Clydach Vale
Tonypandy
RCT
CF40 2XX

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Pages	1 of 5

Dear Mr Griffiths

Improvement Assessment Letter 2

This letter summarises the key conclusions arising from my work in respect of improvement reporting under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure). I am required to report my audit and assessment work in relation to whether Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (the Council) has discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure.

Further to my Improvement Assessment letter of 26 September 2012, this letter summarises:

- my views on whether the Council has discharged its statutory duties in respect of improvement reporting;
- my views on the reliability of the Council's self-evaluation; and
- my further proposals for improvement.

I have arrived at my views by:

- reviewing the Annual Delivery Report (the Report) produced and published by the Council by 31 October 2012, in which it reported its performance for 2011-12;
- undertaking interviews with managers and reviewing supporting documents in a sample of the service areas included in the Report; and
- testing the reliability of a sample of performance indicators.

Further to this, I will undertake more detailed work on the arrangements that support the Council's performance management and reporting over the following months.

I shall summarise all of my work, and that of relevant regulators, during 2012-13 and publish an Annual Improvement Report for the Council by the end of March 2013.

The Council has discharged its improvement reporting duties under the Measure and has acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance

By publishing the Report by the deadline of 31 October 2012, the Council has complied with the statutory requirements outlined within the Welsh Government's guidance for the Measure, under Section 15 (7).

The Report was approved by full Council on 17 October 2012 and is available on the Council's website. The Council considers the Report to be a technical document of limited public interest. Accordingly, in line with its Welsh Language Scheme, it has not published a Welsh version of the Report although it will provide one on request. A brief bilingual summary of the Report is contained within the November 2012 edition of *Outlook*, the Council's newsletter to residents, and in customer access points such as libraries and One-for-All centres. The summary includes a link to the Report, therefore alerting citizens to its existence. The Council provides quarterly progress updates to all residents via *Outlook*. This summary, together with the summary of the *Corporate Plan*, will be included in an information pack to a wide range of stakeholder groups as part of the budget consultation process for 2013-14.

The Council's Report sets out a comprehensive range of evidence to demonstrate the progress it is making against its eight improvement priorities, together with other aspects of wider improvement, and appropriate information on its collaboration activity. The Report is well structured and logically set out, helping the reader to understand the legal framework and community responsibilities that guide the Council's actions.

The Report provides evidence to demonstrate what the Council has done, why and what it plans to do differently in future. It also helps explain how the Council has gone about improvement, including the role of Cabinet and Scrutiny in monitoring progress. The contribution of cross-cutting issues which help support delivery of the Council's improvement objectives – such as medium-term financial planning and better customer contact – are well integrated.

The Annual Delivery Report is comprehensive, fair and balanced with an improved focus on outcomes but it could more clearly evaluate the Council's overall progress in achieving its improvement priorities

The Measure has now been in place for three years. This is the second year the Council has been required to publish a backward-looking Performance Report in line with the requirements of the Measure. In my Annual Improvement Report in January 2012, I emphasised that the Measure requires councils to be more self-critical and evaluative around how they deliver their services and that councils need to focus much more clearly on the impact of services upon citizens and the outcomes for citizens.

My audit of the Council's self-assessment of its performance in 2011-12 has found evidence that the Council is making progress in addressing proposals for improvement set out in my previous reports, although some further work is needed. Overall, the quality of the Council's self-assessment of its performance in delivering its key areas for improvement has improved in comparison with that of the previous year.

The Annual Delivery Report contains a comprehensive range of data and explanatory narrative but could more clearly evaluate the Council's overall progress in achieving its improvement priorities

Reporting, both in the Report and its Summary, is factual and balanced and the Report includes all the measures the Council is using to monitor progress. The assessments made in respect of each improvement priority are thorough and detailed, including details of improvement actions completed and relevant statistical analysis (e.g. percentage of targets met). The Council is continuing to improve its focus on outcomes and the difference the Council's actions are making to citizens and service users. In some improvement priority areas, the Council's assessment could more clearly explain the benefits of key achievements; and identify the impacts of any underperformance describing the approach to be taken to address them.

Given the length of the Report and the level of detail it contains, it can be difficult for a reader to absorb the information presented and maintain a coherent overview. A clear and concise overall summary of key achievements and outstanding challenges would provide the reader, and in particular a citizen or service user, with a more meaningful evaluation of the Council's progress in relation to its improvement priorities. In order to achieve this, the Council needs to apply resources to the production of the Summary in parallel with its compilation of the main Report, and may wish to consider utilising the skills of its Communication Team to help ensure that the content of the Summary is readily accessible and understandable from the citizen's perspective.

The Council has appropriate arrangements in place to monitor and challenge performance on a quarterly basis but there is limited scrutiny of the Annual Delivery Report prior to its publication

The Council has a well-established framework for monitoring performance based on quarterly reporting. The performance information that is fed into this system is both comprehensive and accurate. In monitoring performance on an exception basis, it is important that targets set are appropriately challenging in the context of current performance and available resources. The Council has described the arrangements it has in place, which include robust challenge of service managers in relation to their plans and targets prior to their approval. The Chief Executive has invited members of my team to attend a number of these planning meetings this year in order that they may assess the effectiveness of these arrangements. I will report my findings in my next Improvement Assessment Letter.

Relevant performance information is considered and discussed on a quarterly basis throughout the year, by service and corporate management, and by Cabinet and Scrutiny. As is to be expected, these arrangements lead to questions being raised at appropriate levels where performance is not in line with expectations, and to decisions being taken which are intended to address identified underperformance. The Council is engaging fully in this year's Scrutiny Improvement Study which will inform its self-assessment of the effectiveness of its scrutiny arrangements through the use of peer review and shared learning with other Welsh councils.

However, the production of the Council's Annual Delivery Report is resource intensive and the timetable to ensure its publication by the statutory deadline is challenging. The Report is approved by Cabinet before publication but, to date, there has been limited opportunity to subject the Report to wider scrutiny by Members prior to its publication.

Some other Welsh councils have arrangements in place which require their annual improvement report to be scrutinised by a group of members (e.g. Joint Chairs of Scrutiny) prior to Council approval and publication. A report of scrutiny's findings as to whether the report presents a fair and balanced representation of progress made in delivering against improvement priorities is provided to Cabinet/Council to inform the approval process. In my view, such arrangements are beneficial in increasing accountability for performance and using internal challenge to promote critical self-assessment and robust self-evaluation of progress in achieving improvement priorities and positive outcomes for citizens. I have proposed that the Council considers what similar arrangements would be appropriate in the context of its own improvement reporting timetable, and my staff will work with officers to support their implementation in readiness for the Annual Delivery Report 2013.

Further proposals for improvement

Some new proposals for improvement are being made in this letter. I will continue to monitor and report on the progress made by the Council in implementing the proposals set out in my previous reports and letters.

Proposals for improvement

- P1 Prepare and publish a summary of key achievements and their benefits; and outstanding challenges and the approach to be taken to them, in order to provide citizens with a meaningful evaluation of the Council's overall progress in relation to its improvement priorities.
 - P2 Further develop arrangements to scrutinise the Annual Delivery Report and Summary prior to their publication.
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Yours sincerely



HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS
AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES

CC: Carl Sargeant, Minister for Local Government and Communities