



WALES AUDIT OFFICE
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

Annual Improvement Report 2017-18

Powys County Council

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This Annual Improvement Report has been prepared on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales by Colin Davies, Jeremy Evans and Justine Morgan under the direction of Jane Holownia and Huw Rees.

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The Auditor General and staff of the Wales Audit Office aim to provide public-focused and proportionate reporting on the stewardship of public resources and in the process provide insight and promote improvement.

We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English. Corresponding in Welsh will not lead to delay. Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg. Ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

This document is also available in Welsh.

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Summary report

2017-18 performance audit work

- 1 In determining the breadth of work undertaken during the year, we considered the extent of accumulated audit and inspection knowledge as well as other available sources of information including Powys County Council's (the Council) own mechanisms for review and evaluation. For 2017-18, we undertook improvement assessment work at all councils. We also undertook work at all councils in relation to the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, a service-user-perspective themed review and a review of overview and scrutiny arrangements. At some councils, we supplemented this work with local risk-based audits, identified in the Audit Plan for 2017-18.
- 2 The work carried out since the last Annual Improvement Report (AIR), including that of the relevant regulators, is set out in [Exhibit 2](#).

The Council is not meeting its statutory requirements in relation to continuous improvement

- 3 Following a critical report by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) relating to their inspection of Children's Services, the Cabinet Secretary issued a warning notice requiring the Council to publish an improvement plan and establish an Improvement and Assurance Board. The Improvement Board has an independent chair and is supported by Welsh Local Government Association (WLGGA) advisors. The Board is tasked with overseeing the progress the Council is making in delivering its improvement plan.
- 4 In May 2018 CIW published their report on Adult Services, as a result the Council extended its improvement plan to cover this area and bring this activity into the Improvement and Assurance Board's remit.
- 5 In his annual audit letter issued in January 2018 ([Appendix 3](#)) the Auditor General stated that in his view the Council did not have sufficient appropriate arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources, and the current and future financial position represents a significant challenge. He issued a statutory recommendation covering this area. ([Exhibit 1](#)).
- 6 As a consequence, based on, and limited to, the work carried out by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators, the Auditor General believes that the Council is not complying with the requirements of the Local Government Measure (2009).

Recommendations and proposals for improvement

- 7 Given the wide range of services provided by the Council and the challenges it is facing, it would be unusual if we did not find things that can be improved. The Auditor General is able to:
- make proposals for improvement – if proposals are made to the Council, we would expect it to do something about them and we will follow up what happens;
 - make formal recommendations for improvement – if a formal recommendation is made, the Council must prepare a response to that recommendation within 30 working days;
 - conduct a special inspection, and publish a report and make recommendations; and
 - recommend to ministers of the Welsh Government that they intervene in some way.
- 8 During the course of the year, the Auditor General issued a statutory recommendation and made a number of proposals for improvement and these are repeated in this report. We will monitor progress against them and relevant recommendations made in our national reports ([Appendix 2](#)) as part of our improvement assessment work.

Statutory Recommendation

- 9 The table below contains the statutory recommendation issued by the Auditor General.

Exhibit 1 – statutory recommendation

Statutory Recommendation	
R1	<p>In setting a balanced budget, the Council must ensure that all savings plans are sufficiently well developed for inclusion in the annual budget.</p> <p>The Council must also act immediately to update its Medium Term Financial Strategy to enable the Council to live within its means going forward, and design and implement actions to address the weaknesses identified and reported by me in respect of its corporate and financial arrangements.</p>

Audit, regulatory and inspection work reported during 2017-18

Exhibit 2 – audit, regulatory and inspection work reported during 2017-18

Description of the work carried out since the last AIR, including that of the relevant regulators, where relevant.

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
August 2018.	<p>Service User Perspective Review</p> <p>To understand the 'service user perspective' at every Council within Wales. In Powys County Council, we reviewed the Housing service. In particular, whether the Council was using the experiences and aspirations of service users to inform the design and delivery of services for the Welsh Housing Quality Standard.</p>	<p>The Council is making progress towards achieving the Welsh Housing Quality Standard for many components and most Council tenants are satisfied with the quality of the service and their homes, but it needs to accelerate its approach to ensuring tenants homes are warm.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the Council is making progress towards achieving the Welsh Housing Quality Standard for many components by 2020, but it needs to accelerate its approach to ensuring tenants homes are warm; tenant engagement has worked well in the past but now needs to be built upon and strengthened to gather more views; and most Council tenants are very satisfied with the quality of the service and their homes. 	<p>P1 The Council should urgently strengthen the future delivery of the WHQS by accelerating its development of a comprehensive strategy and action plan to address the issues facing tenants who are living in cold homes.</p> <p>P2 The Council should work with tenants to strengthen its approach to assisting people experiencing problems with condensation and damp.</p> <p>P3 The Council should strengthen its approach to engagement and explore more innovative ways to reach the many people who are hard to reach due to the geographical challenges of living in Powys.</p>

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
July 2018	<p>‘Scrutiny: Fit for the Future?’ Review</p> <p>Review of how well placed council’s overview and scrutiny functions are to respond to current and future challenges.</p>	<p>The Council has been slow to develop its scrutiny arrangements and there are fundamental areas it needs to address if scrutiny is to operate effectively and have impact in the face of future challenges.</p> <p>We came to this conclusion because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Council’s governance framework does not help to create a supportive environment for scrutiny to operate effectively and to have impact; • the Council recognises that its scrutiny function needs to improve. There is scope for improvement in how scrutiny is planned, how scrutiny meetings are conducted and how forward work programmes are developed; and • the Council does not evaluate the impact of overview and scrutiny and cannot demonstrate its overall effectiveness. 	<p>P1 Be specific in the reports presented to overview and scrutiny why the committee is receiving the information and how this relates to the role of the scrutiny committee.</p> <p>P2 Provide more training specifically for Chairs and Vice Chairs of overview and scrutiny committees to enable them to be more effective in their role.</p> <p>P3 Make arrangements for further training for scrutiny committee members on the Well-Being of Future Generations (WFG) Act in order to help embed WFG considerations into the Council’s decision-making processes</p> <p>P4 Strengthen arrangements for public and other stakeholder engagement in overview and scrutiny.</p> <p>P5 Clarify the arrangements for feeding back overview and scrutiny committees’ views to Cabinet and for Cabinet to respond to recommendations made.</p> <p>P6 Put in place arrangements for assessing the effectiveness and impact of overview and scrutiny.</p>

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
January 2018	Follow-up review of Powys County Council whistleblowing and grievance policy arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council's whistleblowing policy has improved since our last review and complies with recommended good practice • The Council signposts its whistleblowing policy to staff but the Council may wish to consider more formal training arrangements • The Council withdrew its Fairness and Dignity at Work policy in October 2015 but the Grievance Policy is not clear on how to raise a complaint in respect of bullying and harassment. 	None.
March 2018	Observations of the HTR Commissioning Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In our observation role we did have concerns about aspects of the project but were ultimately reassured by the level of challenge shown; and • Certain governance aspects of the project could have been more robust. 	None

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Statutory recommendation
January 2017	<p>Annual Audit Letter 2016-17</p> <p>Letter summarising the key messages arising from the Auditor General's statutory responsibilities under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 and his reporting responsibilities under the Code of Audit Practice. The Annual Audit Letter is in Appendix 2 of this report.</p>	<p>The Council complied with its responsibilities relating to financial reporting but did not have sufficient appropriate arrangements in place to secure economy, efficient and effectiveness in its use of resources.</p> <p>I issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts has been completed on 22 November 2017.</p> <p>My work to date on certification of grant claims and returns has not identified significant issues that would impact on the 2017-18 accounts or key financial systems.</p> <p>The Council did not have sufficient appropriate arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources, and the current and future financial position represents a significant challenge.</p>	<p>In setting a balanced budget, the Council must ensure that all savings plans are sufficiently well developed for inclusion in the annual budget. The Council must also act immediately to update its Medium Term Financial Strategy to enable the Council to live within its means going forward, and design and implement actions to address the weaknesses identified and reported by me in respect of its corporate and financial arrangements.</p>

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
Improvement planning and reporting			
April 2017	<p>Wales Audit Office annual improvement plan audit</p> <p>Review of the Council's published plans for delivering on improvement objectives.</p>	The Council has complied with its statutory improvement planning duties.	None
November 2017	<p>Wales Audit Office annual assessment of performance audit</p> <p>Review of the Council's published performance assessment.</p>	The Council has not complied with its statutory improvement reporting duties. The Local Government Measure 2009 requires the Council to publish its assessment before 31 October in the financial year following that to which the information relates, or by any other such date as Welsh Ministers may specify by order. The Council published its assessment on 20 November 2017.	None

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Recommendations
Reviews by inspection and regulation bodies			
CIW July 2017	<u>Inspection of Children's Services</u>	<p>The implementation of the recommendations of an external review further exacerbated failings in children's services, and destabilised the workforce to a significant extent and as a result placed children at risk of harm.</p> <p>Children and young people do not appear to be well served by the current arrangements for accessing support services in Powys. A lack of assessment, care and support planning combined with an inconsistent approach to working in line with the child sexual exploitation guidance and the management of sexual exploitation and risk assessment framework process placed children at risk of harm. In addition, child protection processes did not always comply with statutory guidance with delays in investigations and assessments being undertaken and completion of statutory visits.</p> <p>There is evidence of missed opportunities to safeguard children, despite requests for support. Risks were not being appropriately and robustly assessed and there is no effective system to identify and manage risks.</p>	<p>Immediate priority (within 1 month):</p> <p>Case management</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 The local authority must ensure assessments are carried out within statutory timescales and are undertaken in partnership with children and families. <p>Staffing</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2 Arrangements for team managers and senior practitioners should be reviewed to ensure capacity to effectively and consistently provide management and leadership oversight and testing of decision making along with support and direction for frontline staff. 3 The local authority and senior managers should take steps to improve the frequency, consistency and quality of supervision for front line staff; an assurance mechanism must be implemented to ensure compliance with expectations and quality of decision making, recordkeeping and reporting. 4 Caseloads monitoring is required to ensure there is sufficient capacity for workers to engage effectively with children and their families.

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Recommendations
Reviews by inspection and regulation bodies			
CIW July 2017	<u>Inspection of Children's Services</u>	<p>The vision and strategic direction for children's services has been set out by the interim leadership team, together with members of the operational management team. However, this vision requires significant corporate and political support for it to be delivered. There is a lack of awareness of its content outside of children's services and considering its reliance on the full support of council this is of concern.</p> <p>There are serious performance issues with front line services, however these arose because of instability in management, poor and confused direction and weak governance. Without effective support and capacity to undertake the work frontline staff cannot be expected to undertake the complex work required in children's social services.</p> <p>Inspectors noted the commitment of the staff, who have shown resilience and professionalism whilst coping with significant changes, and depletion in support services and leadership capacity. We have seen real commitment to protect and respond to safeguarding children in very difficult circumstances. Staff have been mutually supportive through challenging and difficult times and have shown us their real desire to move on.</p>	<p>Leadership</p> <p>5 The chief executive must immediately provide strong corporate support for children's services to ensure service improvements are prioritised and the pace of improvement accelerated and sustained.</p> <p>6 The council leader and the portfolio member must provide strong political support to children's services and take the necessary steps to put in place well informed and effective scrutiny to make sure service improvements are made quickly, effectively and are sustainable.</p> <p>Assurance</p> <p>7 An assurance mechanism must be implemented as a priority to ensure compliance with legislation, statutory guidance and protocols with regard to looked after children and children at risk.</p>

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Recommendations
Reviews by inspection and regulation bodies			
CIW July 2017	<u>Inspection of Children's Services</u>		<p>Medium term priority (within 4 months):</p> <p>Case management</p> <p>8 The quality of assessments and plans must be improved to ensure they are consistently of a good quality, with a clear focus on the needs, risks, and strengths of children and families, and that desired outcomes, timescales and accountabilities for actions are clear.</p> <p>9 The quality and consistency and timeliness of record keeping must be improved; all staff and managers must ensure that records are of good quality, up to date and systematically stored.</p> <p>10 The local authority must clarify the role and purpose of Powys People Direct (PPD) within the overall provision of information, advice and assistance and must ensure staff and partners have clear guidance to support decision making. The local authority must ensure that all staff are suitably trained, skilled and supported to deliver this role. A clear protocol is required between PPD and the Emergency Duty Team to ensure cases are not lost between services.</p> <p>11 The local authority must implement an effective model of assessment to support its interventions with families, which is understood by all staff and partners, underpinned by robust training and development.</p> <p>12 The local authority must ensure its fostering service provides consistent support, training and guidance to foster carers in order to improve the quality and availability of placements.</p> <p>13 The local authority must ensure that all care and support plans have a clear focus on outcomes for children, which incorporate the voice of the child.</p>

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Recommendations
Reviews by inspection and regulation bodies			
CIW July 2017	<u>Inspection of Children's Services</u>		<p>Staffing</p> <p>14 The local authority must ensure every employee understands the legislative and statutory requirements in safeguarding children and action is taken to address poor performance.</p> <p>15 A robust workforce strategy should be developed as a matter of urgency to include short, medium and long term plans for recruitment and retention of social work and senior staff. Permanent appointments are required in key posts as a high priority to provide resilience and stability to the service.</p> <p>Interagency/partnership working</p> <p>16 Effective multi-agency quality assurance systems and training arrangements should be established to ensure thresholds for assessments to statutory children's services are understood by staff and partners and are consistently applied; this should include multiagency child protection decision making protocols.</p> <p>17 There is a need for clear strategic direction supported by operational protocols to enable partners to have a clear understanding of the purpose, structure and decision making in children's services. Leadership</p> <p>18 There should be an early consideration of the impact of the changes made as a result of the commissioned review and whether decisions made as part of the review should be revisited.</p> <p>19 Elected members need to be clear about the vision for children's services and recognise this as a high risk area for the council. To support this members need clarity about, and training to understand, the direction of services and the particular risks inherent in children's services.</p>

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Recommendations
Reviews by inspection and regulation bodies			
CIW July 2017	<u>Inspection of Children's Services</u>		<p>20 The chief executive with support from the statutory director of social services must make arrangements to ensure all elected members have a clear understanding of, and are able to fulfil, their corporate parenting responsibilities</p> <p>21 The local authority needs to undertake further work in relation to implementing the requirements of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 so there is understanding at a corporate level in relation to the delivery of information, advice and assistance. Assurance</p> <p>22 Performance management and quality assurance arrangements, including scrutiny of service demand and routine auditing of the quality of practice needs to be embedded so that managers at all levels have timely, relevant and accurate performance and quality assurance information.</p> <p>23 At a corporate level the local authority must establish systems and structures effectively monitor and evaluate progress within children's services'.</p> <p>24 The consistent application of a quality assurance system must be implemented to ensure families who are referred to the Team around the Family service are not subject to drift and delay and to ensure there 10 are targeted plans in place which are reviewed and checked by managers.</p> <p>25 The local authority must strengthen the oversight of the response to complaints to improve reporting and analysis and ensure there is a mechanism to capture lessons learned.</p>

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Recommendations
Reviews by inspection and regulation bodies			
CIW July 2017	<u>Inspection of Children's Services</u>		<p>Longer term priority (within 12 months):</p> <p>Case management</p> <p>26 The local authority must ensure compliance with the active offer of the Welsh language. Interagency/ partner working.</p> <p>27 .A multi-agency child protection protocol (drawing on regionally agreed arrangements) should be implemented to support decision making on the need for assessments in statutory children's services. This needs to be understood by staff and partners and consistently applied. Multiagency quality assurance systems and training arrangements are required to support this.</p> <p>28 The local authority and partners must work together to develop a cohesive approach to the collection and analysis of information about the needs of communities, which includes the views of children and families. This should be used to inform the shaping of strategic plans to achieve effective alignment of service delivery between information, advice and assistance services, the preventative sector and statutory services.</p> <p>Leadership</p> <p>29 Future changes to structure and service delivery need to include consultation with all stakeholders in its shape and development. The change needs to be incremental and with changes implemented at a pace that will ensure the full involvement of staff and young people and ensure children are not placed at risk.</p>

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Recommendations
Reviews by inspection and regulation bodies			
CIW May 2018	<u>Inspection of Adult Service</u>	<p>Some people received good care and support but this was not consistent. Some people faced significant delays in being assessed for care and support and in receiving a service. Significant improvement is required.</p> <p>There was good co-operation between frontline health and social care staff and a range of voluntary sector and community groups.</p> <p>Urgent safeguarding referrals were dealt with swiftly and effectively but there was an unacceptable backlog of safeguarding work at screening and enquiry stages.</p> <p>Inspectors noted the commitment of staff who have shown professionalism whilst coping with many changes and depleted resources</p>	<p>As a priority:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • senior leaders must continue to provide strong political and corporate support for adult services to ensure service improvements; • ensure all safeguarding enquiries are undertaken within statutory timescales; • ensure clear management oversight and understanding of demand, capacity and prioritisation of workflow within adult safeguarding; • strengthen the existing adult services improvement plan; and • produce a robust workforce strategy including short, medium and long term plans for recruitment and retention of the adult services workforce.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Status of this report

The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) requires the Auditor General to undertake a forward-looking annual improvement assessment, and to publish an annual improvement report, for each improvement authority in Wales. Improvement authorities (defined as local councils, national parks, and fire and rescue authorities) have a general duty to 'make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of [their] functions'.

The annual improvement assessment considers the likelihood that an authority will comply with its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement. The assessment is also the main piece of work that enables the Auditor General to fulfil his duties. Staff of the Wales Audit Office, on behalf of the Auditor General, produce the annual improvement report. The report discharges the Auditor General's duties under section 24 of the Measure, by summarising his audit and assessment work in a published annual improvement report for each authority. The report also discharges his duties under section 19 to issue a report certifying that he has carried out an improvement assessment under section 18 and stating whether (as a result of his improvement plan audit under section 17) he believes that the authority has discharged its improvement planning duties under section 15.

The Auditor General may also, in some circumstances, carry out special inspections (under section 21), which will be reported to the authority and Ministers, and which he may publish (under section 22). An important ancillary activity for the Auditor General is the co-ordination of assessment and regulatory work (required by section 23), which takes into consideration the overall programme of work of all relevant regulators at an improvement authority. The Auditor General may also take account of information shared by relevant regulators (under section 33) in his assessments.

Appendix 2 – Annual Audit Letter

Councillor Rosemarie Harris – Leader / David Powell - Acting Chief Executive
Powys County Council
County Hall
Llandrindod Wells
Powys
LD1 5LG

Reference: AJB356

Date issued: 25 January 2018

Dear David and Councillor Harris

Annual Audit Letter Powys County Council 2016-17

This letter summarises the key messages arising from my statutory responsibilities under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 and my reporting responsibilities under the Code of Audit Practice.

The Council complied with its responsibilities relating to financial reporting but did not have sufficient appropriate arrangements in place to secure economy, efficient and effectiveness in its use of resources

It is Powys County Council's (the Council) responsibility to:

- put systems of internal control in place to ensure the regularity and lawfulness of transactions and to ensure that its assets are secure;
- maintain proper accounting records;
- prepare a Statement of Accounts in accordance with relevant requirements; and
- establish and keep under review appropriate arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

The Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 requires me to:

- provide an audit opinion on the accounting statements;
- be satisfied that the Council has appropriate arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources; and
- issue a certificate confirming that I have completed the audit of the accounts.

Local authorities in Wales prepare their accounting statements in accordance with the requirements of the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom. This code is based on International Financial Reporting Standards. On 28 September 2017, I issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council's and Powys Pension Fund's financial position and transactions. My report is contained within the Statement of Accounts.

The key matters arising from the accounts audit were reported to members of the Audit Committee in my Audit of Financial Statements report on the 22 September 2017, and a more detailed report will follow in due course.

I issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts has been completed on 22 November 2017

My report dated 28 September 2017, highlighted that at that point in time I could not formally conclude my audit until I had completed my consideration of matters brought to my attention by a local authority elector. This matter has now been resolved and I issued my certificate confirming the completion of the audit on 22 November 2017.

My work to date on certification of grant claims and returns has not identified significant issues that would impact on the 2017-18 accounts or key financial systems

My ongoing work on the certification of grant claims and returns has not identified any significant issues to date in relation to the accounts or the Council's key financial systems. A more detailed report on my grant certification work will follow in the spring 2018 once this year's programme of certification work is complete.

The financial audit fee for 2016-17 is currently expected to be in line with the agreed fee set out in the Annual Audit Plan.

The Council did not have sufficient appropriate arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources, and the current and future financial position represents a significant challenge

My consideration of the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness has been based on the audit work undertaken on the accounts as well as placing reliance on the work completed under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. In my [Annual Improvement Report](#), I highlighted a number of areas where the effectiveness of these arrangements has yet to be demonstrated or where improvements could be made.

I have concluded that whilst the Council has clearly articulated a strategic ambition to achieve transformational change, its ability to drive the pace of change required is compromised by a lack of capacity and expertise. Strategic workforce planning has been slow in development, and staff resources have been depleted as a result of the Council's response to austerity. New business planning and programme management is placing demands for specialist skills and competencies which are in scarce supply, and the Council has difficulty in recruiting to fill some key positions. A significant proportion of key management positions are now held under interim arrangements.

I have further concluded that given the ambition and pace of its service change programme, there is significant scope for the Council to strengthen its governance arrangements. The findings of our corporate assessment, undertaken in November 2016, were that the Council's scrutiny and decision-making arrangements were neither strategic nor robust. Key decisions around fundamental service change have been predominantly driven by the need to deliver financial savings, with Council policy and service outcomes being less influential. There has been an insufficient clear line of sight, for example through the Cabinet Forward Work Programme, to facilitate appropriate and timely scrutiny. At the time of our assessment relationships between the then Cabinet and Scrutiny function were strained, and scrutiny recommendations were not always valued or appropriately responded to by the then Cabinet. The conduct of Cabinet meetings we observed in November 2016 led to a lack of clarity and consequently transparency with regard to decision-making. It was not clear to us at that time that key officers were providing members with appropriate advice and direction in the circumstances. For some key service changes that we reviewed, the quality of option appraisals was mixed as were the arrangements for engaging with citizens and stakeholders in relation to those proposed changes. Overall, I concluded that there were weaknesses in the sufficiency and timeliness of information made available to members in relation to both scrutiny and decision-making functions of the Council.

In relation to its use of resources, I:

- recommended that the Council strengthen its financial planning arrangements by ensuring that all savings plans are sufficiently well developed for inclusion in the annual budget; forecasting the use of reserves over the medium term financial plan period; and ensuring that the service savings targets set for third party spend, income and cost improvement opportunities can be achieved in planned timescales; and
- reported the need for the Council to increase the pace and scale of change in implementing its 'Schools Organisation Policy, Planning Education Provision', in order to achieve an affordable and sustainable education service.

In October 2017, the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) issued a critical report in respect of the provision of Children's Services within the Council. An independently chaired Children's Services Board is in place and the Council has submitted an improvement plan in response to the recommendations contained within the report. This improvement plan is in the process of being costed. Some of the resource needed has been identified but if the requirements impacting on the current financial year exceed the amount set aside then this could have a further significant impact on the forecast operating deficit for the financial year ended 31 March 2018. In addition, the Council has drafted a Corporate Leadership and Governance Plan.

The Council has contacted the Cabinet Secretary for Local Government and Public Services (the Cabinet Secretary) seeking support under section 28 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. As a result a formal package of support will be provided.

The Council has acknowledged that it is facing significant financial challenges in the 2017-18 financial year and as at November 2017, the Council anticipated an operating deficit of £4.5 million for the year ended 31 March 2018. The Council has reported that the projected operating deficit is largely due to the combination of unachieved in year (and previous years) savings plans, coupled with service overspends primarily within Adult Social Care and Children's Services.

The Council is currently exploring a range of options to reduce the level of forecast deficit as at 31 March 2018. These include:

- reducing projected spend across services by either not incurring or delaying non-essential expenditure;
- utilising under committed revenue budgets set aside to support transformation and change; and
- reviewing a number of technical accounting options to generate in year revenue.

The Council intends to utilise a combination of the above options to reduce the forecast operational deficit to a balanced position for the financial year to 31 March 2018. Specifically, it intends to utilise the release of non-recurrent savings of £4 million via a planned reduction to the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) charge. The projected General Fund reserves position is expected to remain at £8.5 million as at 31 March 2018. In addition to the General Fund, the Council has two specific reserves (Budget Management Reserve £3.6 million and Adult Services Reserve £2.0 million) which are ring fenced to support financial pressures and these specific reserves are projected to amount to approximately £5.6 million as at 31 March 2018.

The Council continues to face significant financial challenges in 2018-19 and beyond. Initially, the Council identified the need to find savings of £8.4 million in 2018-19 but further annual costs pressures have been identified of £8.3 million and £6.8 million for Children's Services and Adult Social Care respectively. Therefore, the Council will need to find savings totalling approximately £23 million in 2018-19.

We understand that plans are in place to deliver a balanced financial budget for the financial year 2018-19. However, a balanced position is primarily dependent on:

- the need to deliver £8 million of efficiency savings;
- the release of non-recurrent savings of £5 million via a planned reduction to the MRP charge; and
- the use of the specific reserve set aside to support financial pressures (Adult Social Care £2 million) and following a review of other reserves, the use of the specific reserve originally set- aside for 21st Century Schools of £5 million.

Given that the Council has acknowledged that it has had difficulty in achieving its planned level of efficiency savings in previous years, this represents a significant risk to the Council. It is imperative that the Council delivers these savings plans and adopts a more robust approach to budgetary control to manage and mitigate the potential for in-year over spends. Both Cabinet and scrutiny committees will need to play a key role in monitoring the delivery of the savings plans.

As outlined above, the Council intends to utilise reserves to support the financial pressures identified in 2018-19. Whilst reserves provide a temporary cushion against financial pressures, they should not be considered as a sustainable medium or longer term solution. In this respect, the Council's General Fund reserve (and any other reserves utilised to support the financial position) will need to be closely monitored to ensure they are maintained at appropriate levels.

Financial pressures continue in 2019-20 with the Council predicting the need to deliver efficiency savings of £17 million.

Given the scale of the future financial challenge, a strategic and transformational approach is required to the way the Council currently delivers its services as it can no longer afford to deliver its services in their current form. In this respect, the Council need to revisit and update their medium term financial strategy to enable it to live with its means going forward.

I have decided to make a Statutory Recommendation to the Council under section 25(2) of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004

Having carefully considered the improvements required to the Council's governance arrangements and financial challenges outlined above, I have decided to make a Recommendation pursuant to section 25(2) of the Public Audit (wales) Act 2004 (the Act).

In setting a balanced budget, the Council must ensure that all savings plans are sufficiently well developed for inclusion in the annual budget. The Council must also act immediately to update its Medium Term Financial Strategy to enable the Council to live within its means going forward, and design and implement actions to address the weaknesses identified and reported by me in respect of its corporate and financial arrangements.

In accordance with sections 25 and 26 of the Act, the Council is now required to consider my Recommendation at a meeting within one month of the date of this letter.

Specifically, and in accordance with section 26(5) of the Act, that meeting of the Council should decide:

- 1 whether the report requires the Council to take any action;
- 2 whether the Recommendation made is to be accepted; and
- 3 what action, if any, is to be taken in response to the Recommendation.

As soon as is practicable after the meeting, I should be notified of the decisions made by the Council and provided with a notice summarising the decisions which, once approved by me, must be published in a local newspaper circulating in the Council's area, subject to the exceptions in relation to confidential issues contained in section 26(5) of the Act. The Council is also required to publish the recommendation and its decisions in relation to it.

Yours sincerely



Anthony Barrett

Assistant Auditor General

For and on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales

Appendix 3 – National report recommendations 2017-18

Exhibit 3 – national report recommendations 2017-18

Summary of proposals for improvement relevant to local government, included in national reports published by the Wales Audit Office, since publication of the last AIR.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
June 2017	<u>Savings Planning in Councils in Wales</u>	The report did not include any recommendations or proposals for improvement, although proposals for improvement were included in local reports issued to each Council.
October 2017	<u>Public Procurement in Wales</u>	The report contained seven recommendations. Six of the recommendations were for the Welsh Government, one of the recommendations was for public bodies: R3 It was clear from our sampling that some procurement strategies are out of date and there has also been a mixed response to new policy and legislation, such as the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. We recommend that public bodies review their procurement strategies and policies during 2017-18 and on an annual basis thereafter to ensure that they reflect wider policy and legislative changes and support continuous improvement.
October 2017	<u>Good governance when determining significant service changes – National Summary</u>	The report did not include any recommendations or proposals for improvement, although proposals for improvement were included in local reports issued to each Council. The report was designed primarily to provide insight, share existing practice and prompt further conversations and discussions between councils and other organisations.
December 2017	<u>Local Government Financial Reporting 2016-17</u>	The report did not include any recommendations or proposals for improvement.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
January 2018	How Local Government manages demand – Homelessness	<p>R1 Implementing the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 requires local authorities to develop services which are focussed on preventing homelessness and reducing demand. These are very different to traditional casework led homelessness services, and prevention work requires new skills and early interaction with users and potential users. We found local authorities' progress in revising and strengthening services is variable (paragraphs 1.12 to 1.20). We recommend that local authorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure their staff are sufficiently skilled to deal with the new demands of mediating, problem solving, negotiating and influencing with homeless people; and • review and reconfigure their services to engage more effectively with homeless and potentially homeless people to prevent homelessness. <p>R2 The Welsh Government provided funding to support local authorities to implement the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 and this funding has been critical in enabling new preventative services to be developed. The funding is in place until 2019-20 but authorities need to ensure they use headspace provided by these resources to revise their services to deliver their responsibilities in the future (paragraphs 1.21 to 1.28). We recommend that local authorities review their funding of homelessness services to ensure that they can continue to provide the widest possible preventative approach needed. Reviews should consider use of Supporting People as well as General Council fund monies to support delivery of the authority's homelessness duties.</p> <p>R3 How services are configured and managed at the first point of contact can significantly influence how effective local authorities are in managing and reducing demand. Easy to access services which maximise usage, avoid gate keeping and focus on early solutions can significantly improve the prospects for successful homelessness prevention. We found that some authority point of entry systems are poorly designed which reduces the authority's prospects for early intervention to prevent homelessness from occurring (paragraphs 2.4 to 2.11). We recommend that local authorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • design services to ensure there is early contact with service users; • use 'triage' approaches to identify and filter individuals seeking help to determine the most appropriate response to address their needs; and • test the effectiveness of first point of contact services to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
January 2018	How Local Government manages demand – Homelessness	<p>R4 Establishing clear standards of service that set out what the authority provides and is responsible for is critical to ensuring people know what they are entitled to receive and what they need to resolve themselves. We found that authorities are not always providing clear, concise and good quality information to help guide people to find the right advice quickly and efficiently (paragraphs 2.12 to 2.17). We recommend that local authorities publish service standards that clearly set out what their responsibilities are and how they will provide services to ensure people know what they are entitled to receive and what they must do for themselves. Service standards should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be written in plain accessible language. • be precise about what applicants can and cannot expect, and when they can expect resolution. • clearly set out the applicant’s role in the process and how they can help the process go more smoothly and quickly. • be produced collaboratively with subject experts and include the involvement of people who use the service(s). • effectively integrate with the single assessment process. • offer viable alternatives to the authority’s services. • set out the appeals and complaints processes. These should be based on fairness and equity for all involved and available to all. <p>R5 Local authorities need to design services to engage with service users effectively and efficiently, but current standards are too variable to ensure service users are getting access to the advice they need (paragraphs 2.18 to 2.24). To improve current performance we recommend that local authorities make better use of their websites to help manage demand by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • testing the usability and effectiveness of current website information using our lines of enquiry set out in Appendix 5; • increasing and improving the range, quality and coverage of web based information; making better use of online applications; and • linking more effectively to information from specialist providers and advice specialists, such as Citizens Advice. <p>R6 The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 introduces a new duty on social services and housing associations to collaborate with local authority homelessness services in preventing homelessness. We found that these arrangements are not operating effectively and service responses to prevent homelessness and assist homeless people are not always being provided, nor are they consistently effective (paragraphs 3.13 to 3.25). We recommend that local authorities set out and agree their expectations of partners identifying how they will work together to alleviate homelessness. The agreement should be reviewed regularly and all partners’ performance reviewed to identify areas for improvement.</p>

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
January 2018	<u>How Local Government manages demand – Homelessness</u>	<p>R7 Local authorities monitoring systems and evaluation approaches to ensure compliance with their responsibility under the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty are not working as well as they should (paragraph 3.35 to 3.39). We recommend that local authorities address weaknesses in their equalities monitoring, and ensure that their homelessness service accurately records and evaluates appropriate data to demonstrate equality of access for all service users that the local authority has a duty towards.</p> <p>R8 Managing demand can be challenging for local authorities. There are some clear lessons to be learnt with regard to the implementation of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 and homelessness prevention duties that can be applied to managing demand in other services (paragraphs 4.24 to 4.27). We recommend that local authorities use the checklist set out in Appendix 10 to undertake a self-assessment on services, to help identify options to improve how they can help manage demand.</p>

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
February 2018	Housing Adaptations	<p>The report contained nine recommendations. One of the recommendations was for the Welsh Government, eight of the recommendations were for local authorities and/or delivery organisations:</p> <p>R1 There are many sources of funding and policies for adaptations, which results in disabled and older people receiving very different standards of service (paragraphs 1.5 to 1.9). To address these discrepancies we recommend that the Welsh Government set standards for all adaptations to ensure disabled and older people receive the same standard of service irrespective of where they live, who their landlord is and whether they own their own home.</p> <p>R2 Most public bodies are clear on how their work on adaptations can positively impact on disabled and older people, and have set suitable aims that provide focus for action. For adaptations, having the right strategic goals also establishes a clear basis for decision-making on who should be prioritised for services and how and where to use resources. However, we found that current policy arrangements have a number of deficiencies and public bodies are not maximising the benefit of their investment (paragraphs 3.8 to 3.15). We recommend that local authorities work with partner agencies (health bodies, housing associations and Care and Repair) to strengthen their strategic focus for the provision of adaptations by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting appropriate strategic objectives for adaptations that focus on wellbeing and independence; • improving the quality of information on the demand for adaptations by using a wide range of data to assess need including drawing on and using information from partners who work in the local-authority area; and • linking the system for managing and delivering adaptations with adapted housing policies and registers to make best use of already adapted homes. <p>R3 Ensuring that all those who might need an adaptation have all the information they need in order to apply for and receive an adaptation is important. Good-quality and accessible information is therefore essential for delivery organisations to demonstrate fair access and transparency. However, we identified weaknesses in the quality and coverage of public information relating to housing adaptations (paragraphs 2.6 to 2.15). We recommend that delivery organisations provide information on housing adaptations in both Welsh and English, and accessible formats including braille, large fonts, audio versions and other languages. Information should be promoted widely via a range of media including social media, websites and published information, and also through key partners. Preferably, information should be produced jointly and policies aligned between delivery bodies to improve coverage and usage.</p>

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
February 2018	Housing Adaptations	<p>R4 Given the wide number of routes into services, delivery organisations need to ensure they have robust systems to deal effectively and quickly with applications. However, we found that the processes used by delivery organisations vary widely and often create difficulties for disabled and older people seeking assistance (paragraphs 2.16 to 2.19). We recommend that delivery organisations streamline applications by creating single comprehensive application forms covering all organisations within a local-authority area that are available via partners and online.</p> <p>R5 Delivery of adaptations can be delayed by a variety of factors (paragraphs 2.20 to 2.33). To improve timeliness in delivery we recommend that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Welsh Government reviews whether local authorities should continue to use the means test for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs); • local authorities provide or use home improvement agency services to support disabled and older people to progress their DFG applications efficiently; • delivery organisations work with planning authorities to fast track and streamline adaptations that require approvals; • delivery organisations use Trusted Assessors to undertake less complex adaptation assessments; and • the Welsh Government streamlines its approval processes for Physical Adaptation Grants (PAGs).

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
February 2018	Housing Adaptations	<p>R6 Most local authorities, housing associations and Care and Repair agencies have established processes to appoint, oversee and manage builder and/or contractor performance. However, we found wide variations in how delivery organisations arrange, contract and deliver building works (paragraphs 2.37 to 2.44). We recommend that delivery organisations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • introduce formal systems for accrediting contractors to undertake adaptations. These should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – standards of customer care such as keeping to appointments, keeping the site tidy, controlling noise etc; – vetting of financial standing, tax and VAT status; – promoting good health and safety practices; – requiring the use of warranty schemes; – ensuring that adequate insurance is held; and – requiring references. • use framework agreements and partnered contracts to deliver adaptations; • address weaknesses in the contracting of adaptations, updating Schedule of Rates used to tender work and undertaking competitive tendering to support value for money in contracting; • develop effective systems to manage and evaluate contractor performance by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – setting an appropriate range of information to judge performance and delivery of works covering timeliness of work; quality of work; applicant/tenant feedback; cost of work (including variations); health and safety record; and customer feedback; – regularly reporting and evaluating performance to identify opportunities to improve services; and – providing formal feedback to contractors on their performance covering key issues such as client satisfaction, level and acceptability of variations, right first-time work, post-inspection assessment and completion within budget and on time.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
February 2018	Housing Adaptations	<p>R7 Maximising impact and value for money in provision of adaptations requires effective joint working between housing organisations and health and social care services to ensure the needs of often very vulnerable people can be met, and their quality of life improved. However, our findings highlight that delivery organisations continue to have a limited strategic focus on adaptations, concentrating on organisational specific responses rather than how best collectively to meet the needs of disabled or older people (paragraphs 3.16 to 3.21). We recommend that local authorities work with partner agencies (health bodies, housing associations and Care and Repair) to develop and improve joint working to maximise both take-up and the benefits of adaptations in supporting independence by pooling of resources, co-locating staff and creating integrated delivery teams.</p> <p>R8 Most public bodies recognise the value of adaptations in reducing the risk of falls, preventing hospital admissions and speeding up discharge from hospital. However, the importance of adaptations is not always reflected in local partnership arrangements and outside of Occupational Therapists, health professionals noted that the different local-authority and housing-association systems for administering, approving and delivering adaptations are difficult to navigate (paragraphs 3.22 to 3.24). To enhance take-up and usage of adaptations with health bodies we recommend that delivery organisations jointly agree and publish joint service standards for delivery of adaptations within each local-authority area. The service standards should clearly set out how each agency approaches delivery of adaptations and how they will provide services to ensure people know what they are entitled to receive. Service Standards should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be written in plain accessible language; • be precise about what people can and cannot expect to receive; • be produced collaboratively to cover all adaptations services within an area; • set out the eligibility for the different funding streams, application and assessment processes, timescales and review processes; and • offer the viable options and alternatives for adaptations including linking with adapted housing registers to maximise use of already adapted homes.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
February 2018	Housing Adaptations	<p>R9 Having the right performance indicators and regularly reporting performance against these are important for public bodies to manage operational performance, identify areas of improvement and evaluating the positive impact of services. We found that the current range of performance indicator data is extremely limited and not sufficient to enable a full evaluation of performance (paragraphs 4.5 to 4.20). To effectively manage performance and be able to judge the impact of adaptations, we recommend that the Welsh Government and delivery organisations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set appropriate measures to judge both the effectiveness and efficiency of the different systems for delivering adaptations and the impact on wellbeing and independence of those who receive adaptations; • ensure delivery organisations report against their responsibilities in respect of the Equalities Act 2010; • ensure performance information captures the work of all delivery organisations – local authorities, housing associations and Care and Repair agencies; and • annually publish performance for all delivery organisations to enable a whole systems view of delivery and impact to support improvement to be taken.
April 2018	Speak my language: Overcoming language and communication barriers in public services	<p>Ensuring that people who face language and communication barriers can access public services</p> <p>R1 Public bodies are required to ensure that people can access the services they need. To take account of the requirements of the 2010 Equality Act and other legislation, we recommend that public bodies regularly review the accessibility of their services to people who do not speak English or Welsh as a main language including Deaf people who use sign language. This assessment can include using our checklist.</p> <p>Developing interpretation and translation services in Wales</p> <p>R2 Our work with public bodies, interpretation and translation service providers and service users has identified some challenges for interpretation and translation services. We recommend that the Welsh Government work with public bodies, representative groups and other interested parties to make sure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the supply of interpreters is sufficient especially for languages in high demand such as BSL and Arabic; • interpreters with specialist training are available to work in mental health services and with people who have experienced trauma or violence; and • quality assurance and safeguarding procedures are in place.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
May 2018	<u>Reflecting on Year One: How Have Public Bodies Responded to the Well-being of Future Generations</u>	The report did not include any recommendations or proposals for improvement.
May 2018	<u>Strategic Commissioning of Accommodation Services for Adults with Learning Disabilities</u>	<p>R1 People with a learning disability have a right to live independently. The last 50 years have seen significant changes in the provision of accommodation and support. Service provision has moved to a model that enables people to live in the community in ordinary houses throughout Wales (paragraphs 1.3 to 1.10). We recommend that local authorities continue to focus on preventing people becoming dependent on more expensive placements in care homes by providing effective support at home and a range of step up accommodation by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improving the evaluation of prevention activity so local authorities understand what works well and why. • utilising the mapping of prevention services under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 that covers other agencies and service providers. • improving the signposting of additional help so carers and support networks can be more resilient and self-reliant. This should include encouraging carers to make long-term plans for care to maintain and protect their dependants' wellbeing. • sharing risk analysis and long-term planning data with other local authorities, service providers, and partners to agree a shared understanding of the range of options. <p>R2 Population projections show that the number of people with a learning disability will increase in the future, and those aged over 65 and those with a moderate or severe learning disability will rise significantly (paragraphs 1.3 to 1.10). We recommend that local authorities improve their approach to planning services for people with learning disabilities by building on the Regional Partnership Boards' population assessments for people with learning disabilities and agreeing future priorities.</p>

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
May 2018	<u>Strategic Commissioning of Accommodation Services for Adults with Learning Disabilities</u>	<p>R3 The Welsh Government produced guidance to local authorities, entitled 'developing a commissioning strategy for people with a learning disability' to support authorities in producing strategic plans for the commissioning of learning disability services. In conjunction with codes of practice developed following the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, the Welsh Government requires local authorities to develop integrated commissioning options with Local Health Board services. The aim is to provide a joined-up and cost-effective approach to the commissioning of services but our review highlighted weaknesses in current arrangements (paragraph 2.4 to 2.12). We recommend that local authorities do more to integrate commissioning arrangements with partners and providers and take account of the work of the National Commissioning Board by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding the barriers that exist in stopping or hindering further integration; • improving the quality of joint strategic plans for learning disability services (see also paragraphs 3.11 to 3.14); • establishing investment models and sustainable financial structures, joint workforce planning and multi-year budgeting; and • developing appropriate governance and data sharing frameworks with key local partners that include a clear process for managing risk and failure. <p>R4 Local authorities' engagement with people with learning disabilities and their carers is variable. Whilst many authority services have positive relationships with advocacy groups, some are less successful in involving these groups and carers in evaluating the quality of services (paragraph 2.18 to 2.20). We recommend that local authorities do more to involve people with learning disabilities and their carers in care planning and agreeing pathways to further independence by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consistently including people with learning disabilities and their carers in the writing, monitoring and development of care plans; • systematically involving carers and advocacy groups in evaluating the quality of services; • involving people with learning disabilities in procurement processes; and • ensuring communications are written in accessible and appropriate language to improve the understanding and impact of guidance and information.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
May 2018	<u>Strategic Commissioning of Accommodation Services for Adults with Learning Disabilities</u>	<p>R5 Local Authorities could do more to involve service providers in commissioning and make the tendering process more effective by making it easier to navigate and more outcome focused. However, providers are not as effectively engaged as they should be (paragraphs 2.28 to 2.38). We recommend that local authorities collaborate with providers, the third sector and suppliers in understanding challenges, sharing data, and pooling expertise by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improving the quality, range, and accessibility of tendering information; and • working with providers to shape local markets by coming to a common understanding of the opportunities, risks, and future priorities in providing learning disabilities services. <p>R6 Most local authorities do not have effective arrangements to monitor and evaluate their commissioning of learning disability services (paragraphs 3.3 to 3.15). We recommend that local authorities develop a more appropriate set of performance indicators and measures of success that make it easier to monitor and demonstrate the impact of service activity by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • co-designing measures, service and contract performance indicators with service providers, people with learning disabilities and their carers; • ensure commissioners have sufficient cost and qualitative information on the full range of placement and care options available; • equipping commissioners with data to demonstrate the long-term financial benefits of commissioning choices, this includes having the right systems and technology; • integrating the outcomes and learning from reviews of care plans into performance measures; • evaluating and then learning from different types of interventions and placements; and • including learning disability services in local authority scrutiny reviews to challenge performance and identify improvements.

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