

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

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Contents

What we looked at – the scope of this audit	4
Why we undertook this audit	5
The Council’s performance reporting arrangements	5
What we found	6
Senior leaders are provided with a range of information to help them understand the perspective of service users, albeit this varies across services, but information on outcomes is limited, restricting their ability to manage performance effectively	6
Recommendations	9
Appendices	
Appendix 1: Key questions and what we looked for	10

Report summary

- 1 We considered the service user perspective and outcome information provided to senior officers and senior members (senior leaders), and how this information is used.
- 2 Overall, we found that Conwy County Borough Council (the Council's) senior leaders are provided with information that helps them understand how well most services and policies are meeting the needs of service users, but information on the outcomes of its activities is limited restricting their ability to manage performance effectively.
- 3 We have made three recommendations to strengthen the information given to senior leaders.

What we looked at – the scope of this audit

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

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

Why we undertook this audit

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

The Council's performance reporting arrangements

- 12 The Council produces Service Performance Review reports every six months. These include details of individual services' performance and progress towards the 2022-27 well-being objectives as well as financial monitoring information. The service performance review reports are presented to the relevant members of the Senior Leadership Team, portfolio holders and scrutiny committee members.
- 13 The Council produces several annual performance reports which are presented to Cabinet. These include its corporate self-assessment and the Director of Social Services' report.
- 14 Our review focused on these key performance reporting mechanisms.

What we found

Senior leaders are provided with a range of information to help them understand the perspective of service users, albeit this varies across services, but information on outcomes is limited, restricting their ability to manage performance effectively

Senior leaders are provided with a range of information which enables them to understand the views of service users, but this varies across services, limiting senior leaders' ability to get a comprehensive overview of the perspective of service users

- 15 The Council has included a specific section within the template for its Service Performance Review reports which prompts services to set out what they have learnt from conversations with customers and improvements made as a result of customer engagement and feedback.
- 16 Our review of a sample of the Service Performance Review reports found examples of information which would help senior leaders understand the perspective of service users. This included case studies, quotes and analysis of feedback from service users. However, some services just stated that they had conducted a survey but did not include, or analyse, the feedback. This is a missed opportunity to give senior leaders information which would help them understand what service users think about the service and to act upon the feedback.
- 17 As we found that the Council was providing a range of information on the views of service users to senior leaders, we explored whether this information was drawn from the diversity of service users. We found that the Council did sometimes seek the perspectives from a diverse range of service users, but the breakdown is not generally shared with senior leaders. The Council needs to assure itself that the information on the perspective of service users is drawn from a diverse range of service users, including those who share protected characteristics, and is relevant to the objectives it has set itself. Without this information, it will be difficult for the Council to understand whether it is achieving its objectives and whether all service users' needs are being met.

Performance information provided to senior leaders largely focuses on actions and outputs rather than outcomes

- 18 Overall, we found that most of the information provided to senior leaders focused on outputs and activities rather than outcomes.

- 19 The Council's annual progress report includes sections entitled 'how we will know if we're making a difference'. But, overall, we found that the report contained a lot of output and activity-based information rather than an evaluation of the outcome of these activities. This limits senior leaders' ability to understand the impact of the Council's activities and whether it is meeting its objectives.
- 20 We found some examples of outcomes information that is reported to senior leaders, and this was drawn from a range of evidence sources to help provide a holistic view of its performance. This included a combination of case-studies, direct quotes and analyses of survey responses as well as complaints and compliments. Sharing information about outcomes via case studies and direct quotes can help senior leaders understand the impact of the Council's activities, although they tend to relate to a small number of individuals and may not provide a representative and comprehensive picture of performance.

The Council has arrangements to check the accuracy of its performance data, but these don't generally cover information about the perspective of service users and outcomes

- 21 The Council has arrangements which help give senior leaders some assurance that there is rigour behind the performance information they are given. For example, the Council has method statements which set out how each indicator is calculated and to which corporate objective they relate. We saw an example of how the Council has considered its approach to one measure about the service user perspective.
- 22 The Council's Internal Audit function has also conducted reviews of data accuracy and the Council addressed weaknesses. However, these reviews have not specifically covered outcomes or service user perspective data.
- 23 As we found that the Council provides a range of information about the perspective of service users to senior leaders, we would have expected the Council's arrangements to have provided greater coverage of this type of information. This would help the Council to assure itself that its service user perspective information is accurate. Unless the Council ensures that its data accuracy arrangements specifically include service user perspective and outcomes data, there is a risk that decisions and actions may be taken, and resources deployed on the basis of inaccurate information.

The Council uses service user perspective data as a source of information to help it achieve its objectives

- 24 Where poor performance is identified, such as increased complaints in a service area, the Council uses the service user perspective information to make changes or adapting plans which were in progress. For example, the Council includes details of the remedial action taken and lessons learnt in its complaints reports presented to senior leaders.

- 25 The Council also takes the perspective of service users into account in the scoring within its risk status report. This highlights that the Council values and uses this type of information.
- 26 However, because of the limitations we have identified about the outcomes and service user perspective information, this limits the extent to which the Council is able to make use of this information.

The Council’s review of its performance arrangements has emphasised the importance of strengthening reporting on outcomes, but has not addressed how it can strengthen information provided on the service user perspective

- 27 The Council reviews the effectiveness of its performance management arrangements on an ongoing and formal basis. The Council has produced a new draft Performance Management Framework to help it achieve the 2022-27 Corporate Plan which emphasises the importance of evaluating and conveying the impact of its activities.
- 28 However, the Council has not specifically covered the information provided about the perspective of service users in this review. This is a missed opportunity, and the Council would benefit from factoring this into its future reviews to see how it could strengthen its information to help senior leaders better understand the perspective of its service users taking account of our findings set out in paragraph 17.
- 29 The Council does not compare the type of information it collects or collection methods on service user perspective or outcomes with the information collected by similar organisations. We do not mean comparing performance per se, but to help it learn how other organisations are providing information about service user perspectives and outcomes to help strengthen its own arrangements. This is an important element of arrangements to secure value for money.

Exhibit 1: Recommendations

R1 Information on the perspective of the service user

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. This should include strengthening its arrangements to assure itself that this information is drawn from the diversity of service users.

R2 Outcomes information

The Council should strengthen the information provided to senior leaders to help them evaluate whether the Council is delivering its objectives and intended outcomes.

R3 Data accuracy

The Council should ensure that its data quality assurance arrangements cover service user perspective and outcomes information so it can assure itself that this information is accurate.

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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