

Application of the Sustainable Development Principle – Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

Audit year: 2023-24

Date issued: June 2024

Document reference: 4290A2024



Why we did this audit

- 1 We undertook this work in order to help fulfil the Auditor General's duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 (the 2004 Act) and under section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.
- 2 Under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (the Act), councils must carry out sustainable development in accordance with the sustainable development principle.
- 3 To do something in accordance with the sustainable development principle means that the Council must act in a manner which seeks to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
- 4 To act in that manner, the Council must take account of the five ways of working: long-term, integration, involvement, collaboration and prevention.
- 5 From work we did at the Council in the last couple of years¹, we identified some concerns regarding the Council's application of the sustainable development principle. We found a consistent theme that plans and strategies are not always well-integrated. Therefore, our objective for this audit was to gain assurance that the Council has proper arrangements in place to drive the application of the sustainable development principle across the organisation.



What does good look like²

- 6 The audit criteria that we used to assess the Council's arrangements against each of our questions is set out in **Appendix 1**. The audit criteria drew upon our 'positive indicators', which are an illustrative set of characteristics that describe how the sustainable development principle could be applied effectively. These indicators have been used to inform previous sustainable development principle examinations. They were developed through engagement with public bodies and informed by advice and guidance from the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales.



What we looked at

- 7 The audit sought to answer the overall question - Does the Council have effective arrangements to drive the application of the sustainable development principle across the organisation?
- 8 To do this we looked to answer the following questions:
 - Is the Council providing clear leadership to ensure that expectations regarding the application of the sustainable development principle are clear and understood by the wider organisation?
 - Does the Council have arrangements to effectively support the application of the sustainable development principle when developing policies and strategies?

¹ We made a recommendation in our report [Springing Forward - Strategic asset management](#) We also made similar points in our report [Springing Forward - Workforce](#) and in the Digital Strategy section of our [Assurance and Risk Assessment review](#) Assurance and Risk Assessment review.

² Defined as 'what should be' according to laws or regulations, 'what is expected' according to best practice, or 'what could be' given better conditions.

- Does the Council provide effective support for service areas to apply the sustainable development principle?
- Does the Council have arrangements in place to assure itself that it is effectively applying the sustainable development principle across the organisation?

9 When we refer to leadership in this project, we are referring to officers as opposed to members. This is because the focus of our work is on how officers ensure that service areas are applying the sustainable development principle.



What we found

- 10 **Overall, we found that the Council has broadly effective arrangements to drive the application of the sustainable development principle across the organisation. However, there are opportunities to refine guidance for staff and expand the Learning and Development offer.** This will help to ensure that the application of the sustainable development principle is further embedded across the Council. It would also help minimise the risk that the Council misses opportunities to effectively apply the sustainable development principle. We set out below why we reached this conclusion.
- 11 The Council provides clear leadership to ensure that expectations for applying the sustainable development principle are understood. In its corporate documents and templates, such as the Directorate Delivery Plans guidance, the Council clearly sets out the expectation that the sustainable development principle will be applied. During our fieldwork, we found that expectations are well understood by officers.
- 12 The Council has arrangements in place to ensure that its expectations around the application of the sustainable development principle are met by officers. However, there is scope to build on those arrangements to ensure greater clarity and improved application of the sustainable development principle, as set out below.
- 13 The Council's explanations of the five ways of working in the Directorate Delivery Plan guidance could be more detailed, and more closely aligned to the wording in the Act, and related guidance³ particularly in relation to integration.
- 14 The Council could refine the service self-evaluation template to ensure that each of the five ways of working is explicitly covered by a separate question. In the current template, it is clear for three of the five ways of working, but could be more explicit for integration and prevention.
- 15 The Council has challenge arrangements in place for its service self-evaluations, with challenge provided at various stages, including from the Chief Executive. As the self-evaluations explicitly require services to respond to prompts on three of the five ways of working, this can provide some assurance in respect of the application of the sustainable development principle. Further refinement of the self-evaluation template to be explicit on the other two ways of working will increase that assurance.
- 16 The Council does not have a consistent means of assuring itself that officers consider the sustainable development principle at the outset of a project. The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) department has developed project documentation that explicitly references the five ways of working for ICT related projects, but this is not necessarily the case for other projects. Such assurance could be gained in various ways, such as through standard documentation, and/or through support, challenge and/or training.
- 17 Staff from the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales recently provided training to the Council, but this was for a relatively small sample of officers and members. The pre-training survey indicated that amongst attendees there was room for improvement in terms of people's understanding of how to apply the Act. Officers we spoke as part of our fieldwork demonstrated a good understanding of the sustainable development principle, although this was also a relatively

³ [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015: guidance | GOV.WALES](#)

small sample. At present, new starters are not given any information on the application of the Act as part of their induction. The Council, therefore, should develop its learning and development offer to ensure wider understanding of the Act and help staff to be better equipped to apply the sustainable development principle in their work.

- 18 Despite the gap around formal training opportunities, the Council provides a range of support and advice for officers. This includes a well-regarded team of corporate support officers who provide advice and challenge around the service self-evaluation process, and a central Communications team who can assist with engagement and involvement activity. Officers, therefore, feel well supported to meet the Council's expectations around applying the sustainable development principle.
- 19 The Council has mechanisms in place to encourage staff to integrate their work with that of colleagues, such as a large senior leadership team that meets regularly, and various cross-cutting and transformation groups.
- 20 The Council has made progress in ensuring that different service areas integrate their work with that of colleagues. For example, the recent Office Accommodation Strategy 2023-2030 makes clear links to other strategic documents, and during our interviews, officers were able to provide examples of how they had worked in an integrated way. We are assured, therefore, that the Council has made progress towards ensuring its work is integrated across service areas.
- 21 Through our fieldwork, we saw examples where the Council has reflected on and amended its approach to ensure that the sustainable development principle is applied. For example, changes to the Directorate Delivery Plan template, and revising the documentation associated with new ICT related projects.
- 22 The Council also intends to shortly use the Future Generations Commissioner's Office's progress checker⁴ to help it to assess how effectively it is applying the sustainable development principle.



Our recommendations for the Council

- R1 – The Council should refine and strengthen its corporate guidance and templates by revising the service self-evaluation template to ensure that each of the five ways of working is explicitly covered by a separate question, and ensuring that explanations of the five ways of working in the Directorate Delivery Plan guidance are more detailed, and more closely aligned to the wording in the Act.
- R2 – The Council should expand its learning and development offer in respect of the Well-Being of Future Generations Act to help to ensure that staff are able to apply the sustainable development principle as needed in their roles.
- R3 – The Council should develop arrangements to ensure that the sustainable development principle is effectively and consistently applied as part of its project planning and project management arrangements.

⁴ [Ways of Working progress checker – Future Generations Commissioner for Wales](#)

Appendix 1 – Audit questions and criteria

Overall question: Does the Council have effective arrangements to drive the application of the sustainable development principle across the organisation?

Level 2 questions	Criteria
Is the Council providing clear leadership to ensure that expectations regarding the application of the sustainable development principle are clear and understood by the wider organisation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The leadership send a clear message on how they expect the sustainable development principle to be applied across the organisation. The Council has arrangements to drive the application of the sustainable development principle across the organisation Expectations regarding the application of the sustainable development principle have been understood by the wider organisation
Does the Council have arrangements to effectively support the application of the sustainable development principle when developing policies and strategies?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff have sought to integrate their work with that of their colleagues from across the organisation and partner organisations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They have proactively shared information and are they open and transparent with their colleagues and partners. - They understand what colleagues and partners do and how their work relates - There is a sense of collective responsibility and common purpose (i.e. the delivery of the body's long-term vision and well-being objectives) There is a sense of collective responsibility and common purpose (i.e. the delivery of the body's long-term vision and well-being objectives) Integration is evident in key strategies/ documents, including joined up objectives, priorities and resources The Council has addressed our previous recommendation⁵ relating to the sustainable development principle
Does the Council provide effective support for service areas to apply the sustainable development principle?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Council provides a range of support and advice, such as training, guidance and tools, to the support the application of the sustainable development principle across the organisation. Staff make use of the advice and support, which builds their knowledge and enables them to better apply the sustainable development principle in their context.
Does the Council have arrangements in place to assure itself that it is effectively applying the sustainable development principle across the organisation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are appropriate challenge and accountability arrangements that ensure the sustainable development principle is applied as intended. The Council is seeking to understand whether its arrangements are driving application of the sustainable development principle across the organisation as intended. The Council is reflecting on and learning from its arrangements and making any necessary improvements (including support and advice) to continue

⁵ We made a recommendation in our report [Springing Forward - Strategic asset management](#) We also made similar points in our report [Springing Forward - Workforce](#) and in the Digital Strategy section of our [Assurance and Risk Assessment review](#)

This document has been prepared as part of work performed in accordance with statutory functions. In the event of receiving a request for information to which this document may be relevant, attention is drawn to the Code of Practice issued under section 45 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

The section 45 code sets out the practice in the handling of requests that is expected of public authorities, including consultation with relevant third parties. In relation to this document, the Auditor General for Wales and the Wales Audit Office are relevant third parties. Any enquiries regarding disclosure or re-use of this document should be sent to Audit Wales at infoofficer@audit.wales.

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.

[Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This document is also available in Welsh.

Audit Wales

1 Capital Quarter

Cardiff CF10 4BZ

Tel: 029 2032 0500

Fax: 029 2032 0600

Textphone: 029 2032 0660

E-mail: info@audit.wales

Website: www.audit.wales

We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English.

Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg.