

Torfaen County Borough Council

Annual audit summary 2020

This is our audit summary for Torfaen County Borough Council. It shows the work completed since the last Annual Improvement Report, which was issued in July 2019. Our audit summary forms part of the Auditor General for Wales' duties.



More information about these duties can be found on our [website](#).

About the Council

Some of the services the Council provides



Key facts

The Council is made up of 44 councillors who represent the following political parties:

- Labour 29
- Independent 8
- Non-aligned 5
- Conservative 4

The Council spent £186.6 million on providing services during 2019-20, the sixth-lowest spend of the 22 unitary councils in Wales.

As at 31 March 2020 the Council had £16.7 million of usable financial reserves. This is equivalent to 9% of the Council's annual spend on services, the joint-fourth lowest percentage of the 22 unitary councils in Wales.

Key facts

Torfaen County Borough Council has three (5%) of its 60 areas deemed the most deprived 10% of areas in Wales, this is the ninth lowest of the 22 unitary councils in Wales¹.

Torfaen County Borough Council's population is projected to increase by 4.3% between 2020 and 2040 from 95,587 to 97,585, including a 5.1% decrease in the number of children, a 0.8% decrease in the number of the working-age population and a 27.4% increase in the number of people aged 65 and over².

The Auditor General's duties

We complete work each year to meet the following duties

- **Audit of Accounts**
Each year the Auditor General audits the Council's financial statements to make sure that public money is being properly accounted for.
- **Value for money**
The Council has to put in place arrangements to get value for money for the resources it uses, and the Auditor General has to be satisfied that it has done this.
- **Continuous improvement**
The Council also has to put in place arrangements to make continuous improvements, including related plans and reports, and the Auditor General has to assess whether the Council is likely to (or has) met these requirements.
- **Sustainable development principle**
Public bodies need to comply with the sustainable development principle when setting and taking steps to meet their well-being objectives. The Auditor General must assess the extent to which they are doing this.

¹ An area in this context is defined as a 'Lower Super Output Area'. Source: Stats Wales

² Source: Stats Wales



Since the Spring of 2020, the ongoing pandemic has affected our audit work. We recognise the huge strain on public services and have reshaped our work programme, and found new ways of working to reduce its impact on public bodies' response to COVID-19, while still meeting our statutory duties.



To meet the Auditor General's duties we complete specific projects, but we also rely on other audit work, and the work of regulators such as Care Inspectorate Wales and Estyn (the education inspectorate). We take the findings of our audit work into account when assessing whether the Council has put in place arrangements to secure value for money. Our findings and conclusions are summarised below.

What we found

Audit of Torfaen County Borough Council's 2019-20 Accounts

Each year we audit the Council's financial statements.

For 2019-20:

- The Auditor General gave an unqualified true and fair opinion on the Council's financial statements on 15 September 2020, in line with the statutory deadline.
- The Council's Annual Governance Statement and Narrative Report were prepared in line with the CIPFA Code and relevant guidance. They were also consistent with the financial statements prepared by the Council and with our knowledge of the Council.
- The quality of the draft statements presented for audit on 5 June 2020 was good and delivered in line with the statutory deadline.
- Four changes were made to the Council's financial statements arising from our audit work which were disclosure in nature. These were reported to the Audit Committee in our Audit of Financial Statements Report in September 2020.
- In addition to the Auditor General's responsibilities for auditing the Council's financial statements, he also has responsibility for the certification of a number of grant claims and returns. Our work to date has not identified any significant issues.
- The Auditor General gave an unqualified opinion on the Greater Gwent (Torfaen) Pension Fund on 15 September. The quality of the draft financial statements presented for audit was good, which resulted in disclosure-only amendments.
- The Auditor General issued the certificate confirming that the audit of accounts for 2019-20 has been completed.
- Key facts and figures from the 2019-20 financial statements can be accessed [here](#).

Well-being of Future Generations Examination – Children and Young People’s well-being (January 2020)

The examination that we undertook in 2019-20 considered the extent to which the Council has acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when taking steps to develop a Well-being Offer for All Children and Young People. We concluded that while key partners are clearly committed, the Council is not fully considering the sustainable development principle in developing its well-being offer for all children and young people.

The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Continuous Improvement

The Auditor General certified that the Council has met its legal duties for improvement planning and reporting, and believes that it is likely to meet the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 during 2020-21.

Financial Sustainability (March 2020)

During 2019-20 we examined the financial sustainability of each council in Wales. In Torfaen County Borough Council, we concluded that despite a higher-than-expected settlement, the Council’s financial position remains challenging, and its historically low level of reserves means that it must achieve its spending and savings targets to ensure it maintains financial sustainability. The full report can be viewed [here](#).

National Fraud Initiative

In October 2020, the Auditor General published his report on the findings of the latest National Fraud Initiative (NFI) data-matching exercise in Wales. The exercise helped public bodies in Wales, including the 22 unitary authorities, identify fraud and overpayments amounting to £8 million. The report can be accessed on our website [here](#). NFI continues to be developed and in the forthcoming NFI exercise (NFI 2020-2022), local authorities will have access to matches designed to help identify potential fraudulent applications for COVID-19 business support grants.

Environmental health follow-up review (November 2019)

During 2019-20 we examined the Council’s progress in addressing our proposals for improvement issued in 2014 relating to environmental health services. We concluded that the Council has made progress in addressing recommendations 2 to 4, but should continue to address recommendation 5 which relates to improvements in strategic planning for the service.

Collaborative working with Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council to date has contributed to the Council’s ability to deliver with less. Following the withdrawal from the arrangements in November 2019, the Council will face additional financial pressures that may affect its ability to continue providing environmental health services to the same standard.

The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Follow-up review of corporate safeguarding arrangements for children (January 2020)

We undertook this review to seek assurance that the Council has acted upon our previous national recommendations issued in 2015 and local proposals for improvements for corporate arrangements for safeguarding children issued in 2014. We concluded that: **the Council has made progress in addressing our previous recommendations, but needs to ensure more cohesive oversight and assurance.**

The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Other Inspectorates

We also took into account the reports of Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) and Estyn as well as any subsequent actions taken by the Council in response.

CIW undertook an inspection jointly with Healthcare Inspectorate Wales (HIW) and explored how well Torfaen County Borough Council is promoting independence and preventing escalating needs for older adults.

The full report can be viewed [here](#).

The review identified the following strengths and areas for improvement;

Strengths

- Well-being – the local authority demonstrates a good understanding of its strengths, areas of challenge and areas requiring improvement.
- People – voice and choice – Torfaen County Borough Council has embraced the principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (SSWBA) and is supporting people to voice their wishes about what matters to them and support them to have an independent advocate, if necessary, to strengthen their voice.
- Partnerships, integration and co-production – the local authority has a positive and maturing relationship with the health board. We also found positive strategic partnership working between social services and housing services in considering the housing needs of residents.
- Prevention and early intervention – the local authority has reorganised to ensure a preventative and early intervention approach to meeting the care and support needs of people who require help. People are supported to remain independent and where possible remain in or return to their own homes.

Areas for improvement

- Wellbeing – more work is required to develop performance measures to monitor the impact of the patch-based teams.
- People voice and choice – the local authority should work towards ensuring communities and partners better understand the changing nature of adult social care provision.
- Partnerships, integration and co-production – more opportunities could be taken for structured joint learning across health and social care specifically to drive integration in community resource teams.
- Prevention and early intervention – the local authority should consider the promotion of third-sector organisations in the development and delivery of the care and support and preventative services to promote community resilience.

- CIW will monitor progress through its ongoing performance evaluation activity with Torfaen County Borough Council.

CIW published its Local Authority Performance Review in August 2020.

The full report can be found [here](#).

Local Government Studies

As well as local work at each council, each year we also carry out studies across the local-government sector to make recommendations for improving value for money. Since the last annual improvement report we have published the following reports:

The ‘Front Door’ to Social Care (September 2019)

We considered the effectiveness of the new ‘front door’ to social care, looking specifically at services for adults. We found that whilst councils are preventing social-care demand, information, advice and assistance are not consistently effective.

The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Review of Public Services Boards (October 2019)

We inspected how Public Services Boards are operating, looking at their membership, terms of reference, frequency and focus of meetings, alignment with other partnerships, resources and scrutiny arrangements. We concluded that Public Services Boards are unlikely to realise their potential unless they are given freedom to work more flexibly and think and act differently.

The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Progress in implementing the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Act (November 2019)

We examined how the new duties and responsibilities of the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act are being rolled out and delivered.

We found that victims and survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence are often let down by an inconsistent, complex and fragmented system.

The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Rough Sleeping in Wales – Everyone’s Problem; No One’s Responsibility (July 2020)

We looked at how well public services are responding to the issue of rough sleeping. Overall, we found that responding to COVID-19 is an opportunity for public bodies to start addressing long standing weaknesses in partnership working which has stopped them from tackling rough sleeping in the past.

The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Better Law Making (September 2020)

This report draws on five reports published between 2019 and today looking at how local authorities are responding to the challenge of implementing new legislation. Implementation is a complex task which needs to be fully thought through by the Welsh Government and the

Senedd whenever they bring forward and make any new legislation. The paper highlights the difficulties faced by local authorities and their public-sector partners in implementing their new responsibilities.

The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Commercialisation in Local Government (October 2020)

Councils have conducted commercial activity for a long time, and many councils are exploring additional commercial opportunities to mitigate against the financial pressures they face. Our report is specifically targeted at helping elected members and senior officers to examine and judge the potential impact on their organisations when considering whether to undertake commercialisation. It will also help councils to demonstrate how well they are discharging their value-for-money responsibilities.

The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Planned work for 2020-21

We also looked at the key challenges and opportunities facing the Council. These risks could have an effect on the Council's ability to meet its legal obligations in relation to the sustainable development principle, the use of its resources and continuous improvement.

The most significant risk and issue facing councils and the wider public sector during 2020-21 is the COVID-19 pandemic. We have shaped our work to provide assurance and challenge in a way which helps to support the Council through this period. Our work for 2020-21 includes:

- Recovery planning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic
- COVID-learning project – helping to identify and share learning from the way in which public bodies have responded to the pandemic
- Assurance and risk assessment
- A review of the Council's financial sustainability

The Auditor General is independent of government, and is appointed by Her Majesty the Queen. The Auditor General undertakes his work using staff and other resources provided by the Wales Audit Office, which is a statutory board established for that purpose and to monitor and advise the Auditor General. The Wales Audit Office is held to account by the Senedd.

The Auditor General audits local government bodies in Wales, including unitary authorities, police, probation, fire and rescue authorities, national parks and community councils. He also conducts local government value for money studies and assesses compliance with the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009.

Beyond local government, the Auditor General is the external auditor of the Welsh Government and its sponsored and related public bodies, the Senedd Commission and National Health Service bodies in Wales.

Audit Wales is the non-statutory collective name for the Auditor General for Wales and the Wales Audit Office, which are separate legal entities with their own legal functions, as described above. Audit Wales is not a legal entity.

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.