

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

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## 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 **performance information provided to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities is limited, restricting their ability to understand the impact of their services and policies.**
- 3 We have made three recommendations to strengthen the information given to senior leaders.
- 4 Our findings are based on fieldwork we did between May and June 2023.

## What we looked at – the scope of this audit

- 5 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.
- 6 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.
- 7 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.
- 8 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.
- 9 Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with the Cabinet Member, Director and senior officer with responsibility for the Council's performance management arrangements. The evidence we have used to inform our findings is limited to these sources.

- 10 We set out to answer the question ‘**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?**’ 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

- 11 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.
- 12 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

- 13 Performance balanced scorecards are presented to senior leadership quarterly by each directorate. Performance against the Council’s Delivery Plan and corporate risks are reported publicly on a quarterly basis through Cabinet. The Council produces an annual self-assessment and well-being report. This report includes details of service performance and progress towards the Council’s well-being objectives.
- 14 The Council’s 2021/22 Annual Self-Assessment and Well-being report was reviewed by Governance and Audit Committee on 29 September, and approved by full Council on 25 October 2022, in keeping with the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.
- 15 Our review focused on these key performance reporting mechanisms.

## What we found

### **Performance information provided to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities is limited, restricting their ability to understand the impact of its services and policies**

#### **Performance information provided to senior leaders on the perspective of service users is limited**

- 16 Information to help senior leaders understand the perspective of service users is limited within the Council's current performance reporting.
- 17 There is some information that reflects the service user perspective, for example, provided through satisfaction surveys and complaints information. The 'Changing Lives' Director of Social Services Annual Report 2021/22 also includes some information to help understand the perspective of service users, as does the Economy and Environment balanced scorecard for Quarter 3, 2022/23. However, not all balanced scorecards provide information on the service user perspective.
- 18 Overall therefore, it is difficult to see how senior leaders can be assured that they understand the impact that the Council's services and policies are having on service users.

#### **Performance information provided to senior leaders largely focuses on outputs and activities rather than evaluating the impact of service delivery**

- 19 Overall, we found that the performance information reported to senior leaders is mainly focused upon outputs and quantitative measures, with limited examples of outcomes provided.
- 20 For example, the quarterly updates on the Council's County Plan 2022-27 Delivery Plan focus on activities rather than outcomes and extent to which the Council is achieving its objectives.
- 21 This limits senior leaders' ability to understand the impact of the Council's activities and whether it is meeting its objectives.

### **The Council has limited arrangements to ensure performance data reflecting the service user perspective and outcomes information is accurate**

- 22 The Council has limited arrangements to routinely check the quality and accuracy of its data and performance information relating to outcomes and the service user perspective.
- 23 The Council trusts its staff to be familiar with its data and how it is collected and verified. The Council has arrangements in place to sense check data. For example, the Council's Adult Services Performance Team run regular data cleansing reports, produced by one officer then validated by another. This process will pick up anomalies with performance information, but inaccuracies within performance information may not be identified if anomalies were not noted.
- 24 The Council also has processes and controls in place, such as limits set on data entry options in Welsh Community Care Information System dashboards and case study files.
- 25 However, overall, accuracy within performance information is not routinely checked. Consequently, there is a risk that performance information presented to senior leaders may be inaccurate, increasing the risk of actions being taken and resources deployed on the basis of inaccurate information.

### **As the information provided on outcomes and the perspective of service users is limited, the extent to which the Council can use this information to help it achieve its outcomes is also limited**

- 26 As previously identified, the Council provides limited performance information to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities. It is, therefore, logical that the extent to which the Council uses the service user perspective and outcomes information to help it achieve its outcomes from this performance information will be limited.
- 27 Where we did find examples of the Council providing information on the perspective of service users, we could see it then using this information to make changes. For example, Revenues, Benefits and Social Care have used complaints information to make changes to their charges, and management training.

### **The Council has identified that it needs to analyse the outcomes of its activities better**

- 28 The Council has identified its need to better understand its arrangements for evaluating impact and has taken steps to revise its approach to self-evaluation, risk management and performance reporting. In its Annual Self-Assessment and Well-Being Report October 2022, the Council acknowledges that it needs to be more aware of why it does what it does, with an evaluative approach to help understand

its impact. But our review found that this has not led to improvements in its outcomes and service user perspective information to date.

- 29 It will be important for the Council to ensure that it benchmarks and compares its arrangements for collecting and reporting performance information on outcomes and the service user perspective with the approaches of other organisations. This is an important element of arrangements to secure value for money. Doing this will also help the Council understand and learn from how other councils are providing information on service user perspective and outcomes.

## Recommendations

### Exhibit 1: recommendations

#### R1 Information on the perspective of the service user

- The Council should ensure sufficient information is provided to its senior leaders to enable them to understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users.

#### R2 Information on progress towards outcomes

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

#### R3 Quality and accuracy of data

- The Council needs to assure itself that it has robust arrangements, across the Council, to check the quality and accuracy of the service user perspective and outcomes data it provides to senior leaders.



# 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 <sup>1</sup> (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"><li>• The information is:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– relevant to the objectives the Council has set itself;</li><li>– sufficient to enable an understanding of the service user perspective;</li><li>– sufficient to provide an understanding of progress towards the outcomes the Council is planning to achieve;</li><li>– drawn from the diversity of service users including groups who share protected characteristics; and</li><li>– used to inform comparisons with the performance of similar bodies where relevant.</li></ul></li><li>• The Council has involved service users in determining which information to collect.</li></ul>
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"><li>• The information draws on a range of evidence sources to provide a holistic view of progress.</li><li>• The information enables senior leaders to monitor progress over the short, medium and long term.</li><li>• The information enables senior leaders to monitor the delivery of outcomes that cover multiple service areas and/or organisations.</li></ul>

<sup>1</sup> 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 Criteria<sup>1</sup> (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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