



WALES AUDIT OFFICE
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

Annual Improvement Report 2015-16

Wrexham County Borough Council

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This Annual Improvement Report has been prepared on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales by Jeremy Evans and Paul Goodlad under the direction of Jane Holownia.

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Together with appointed auditors, 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 Assembly Commission and National Health Service bodies in Wales.

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.

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Summary report

About this report

- 1 This Annual Improvement Report (AIR) summarises the audit work undertaken at Wrexham County Borough Council (the Council) since the last such report was published in July 2015. This report also includes a summary of the key findings from reports issued by relevant regulators, namely: the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW); Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales (Estyn); and the Welsh Language Commissioner (the Commissioner). Nonetheless, this report does not represent a comprehensive review of all the Council's arrangements or services. The conclusions in this report are based on the work carried out at the Council by relevant external review bodies and, unless stated otherwise, reflect the situation at the point in time that such work was concluded.
- 2 Taking into consideration the work carried out during 2015-16, the Auditor General will state in this report whether he believes that the Council is likely to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2016-17.
- 3 This statement should not be seen as a definitive diagnosis of organisational health or as a prediction of future success. Rather, it should be viewed as providing an opinion on the extent to which the arrangements currently in place are reasonably sound insofar as can be ascertained from the work carried out.
- 4 We want to find out if this report gives you the information you need and whether it is easy to understand. You can let us know your views by emailing us at info@audit.wales or writing to us at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9LJ.

2015-16 performance audit work

- 5 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 the Council's own mechanisms for review and evaluation. For 2015-16, we undertook improvement assessment work under three themes: performance, use of resources and governance.
- 6 The work carried out since the last AIR, including that of the relevant regulators, is set out below.

Project name	Brief description
Wales Audit Office financial resilience	Further work on financial management arrangements following up our 2014-15 review, and looking forward to 2016-17 budget setting and savings proposals. The review also covered the Council's reserves position, policy and use of reserves.
Wales Audit Office annual improvement plan audit	Audit of the Council's published plans for delivering its improvement objectives.
Wales Audit Office annual assessment of performance audit	Audit of the Council's published performance assessment, including testing and validation of performance information.
Wales Audit Office performance assessment	Follow-up of the cost-effectiveness of the Council's secondary school system.
Wales Audit Office performance management: benchmarking social services costs against performance	A review across the six North Wales councils, exploring the value of current social services performance indicators and their links to service delivery costs.
Estyn desktop analysis	An overview of key issues at the Council, prepared by Estyn.
CSSIW annual report	Annual review and evaluation of performance of the Council's social services functions for 2014-15.
The Commissioner: review of the Council's Welsh language scheme	Assessing the effectiveness of the scheme in providing Council services to members of the public who prefer to communicate in Welsh.
Wales Audit Office corporate assessment	Review of the Council's capacity and capability to deliver continuous improvement.
Wales Audit Office follow-up work	To assess whether the Council has appropriate corporate processes for responding to reports, tracking implementation of recommendations and reporting this to the appropriate committee.

Project name	Brief description
Wales Audit Office national reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The financial resilience of councils in Wales • Community safety partnerships • Income generation and charging • Council funding of third sector services

Wrexham County Borough Council's vision and ambition are helping to deliver improved outcomes for citizens, but some outdated arrangements may limit the speed of progress

- 7 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 likely to comply with the requirements of the Local Government Measure 2009 and secure improvement during 2016-17. The Auditor General has reached this conclusion because:
- a the Council, in collaboration with its partners, continues to improve performance and outcomes across most of its priority areas and to comply with the Local Government Measure 2009;
 - b arrangements to manage Council resources are not consistently robust, with strengths undermined in some area by outdated approaches and capacity challenges; and
 - c governance and accountability arrangements are generally strong, but better coordination between Executive Board and Scrutiny would bring benefits.

Recommendations

- 8 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:
- a 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;
 - b make formal recommendations for improvement – if a formal recommendation is made, the Council must prepare a response to that recommendation within 30 working days;
 - c conduct a special inspection, and publish a report and make recommendations; and
 - d recommend to Ministers of the Welsh Government that they intervene in some way.

- 9 During the course of the year, the Auditor General did not make any formal recommendations.
- 10 We make no new recommendations in this report and neither did we in our full corporate assessment reported in February 2016. However, we did make a number of proposals for improvement in the corporate assessment report that we will monitor as part of our ongoing work.
- 11 The Auditor General also makes recommendations that may be relevant to councils in his local government national reports. A list of relevant recommendations contained in reports issued in 2015-16 can be found in [Appendix 3](#).
- 12 In addition, CSSIW, Estyn and the Commissioner included areas for improvement in their inspection reports and letters issued to the Council during the year. These are available at www.cssiw.org.uk, www.estyn.gov.uk and www.comisiynyddygydraeg.org.

Detailed report



Performance

The Council, in collaboration with its partners, continues to improve performance and outcomes across most of its priority areas and to comply with the Local Government Measure 2009

- 13 The Council has complied with the Local Government Measure 2009. We issued compliance certificates for the Council Plan 2015 to 17 (the Council Plan) in June 2015 and for the annual performance report (Focused on our Performance 2014 to 2015) in November 2015.

The Council has adequate arrangements for responding to reports and recommendations from external regulators

- 14 During 2015, the Council formalised its arrangements for responding to reports produced by the Auditor General. The arrangements ensure that all reports – including corporate, sector- and service-specific national reports – are appropriately reviewed. Where necessary, the Council develops an action plan and reports progress against the actions to relevant committees. This systematic approach helps to provide the Council with reassurance where it already fully complies with report recommendations and a mechanism to track and report progress against any areas of non-compliance.
- 15 Since the Council's last AIR was published, a further five national reports with recommendations that may be relevant to the Council have been published. A list of recommendations contained in reports issued during 2015-16 is included in [Appendix 3](#).

The Council, in collaboration with partners, continues to improve performance and outcomes across most of its priority areas

- 16 During 2014-15, the Council continued to make progress against its planned improvements in performance and outcomes. During 2014-15, the Council improved or maintained its performance for 29 of the 44 national indicators – a 26 per cent improvement on 2013-14. The Council also increased the number of indicators with top quartile¹ performance from 8 to 11 and reduced the number of indicators in the bottom quartile² from 16 to 13. This progress is encouraging and includes indicators covering some service areas that are not priorities within the Council Plan. The Council has also maintained its track record of making good progress against the priority outcomes within the Council Plan. [Exhibit 1](#) summarises the Council's own evaluation of progress against the 15 priority outcomes since 2012-13. As in previous years, our own assessment of progress during 2014-15 confirms that the Council's evaluation is fair and balanced.

¹ Top quartile: the five best-performing councils in Wales, out of 22 councils.

² Bottom quartile: the five worst-performing councils in Wales, out of 22 councils.

Exhibit 1: The number of priority outcomes where the Council assessed progress as either green, amber or red

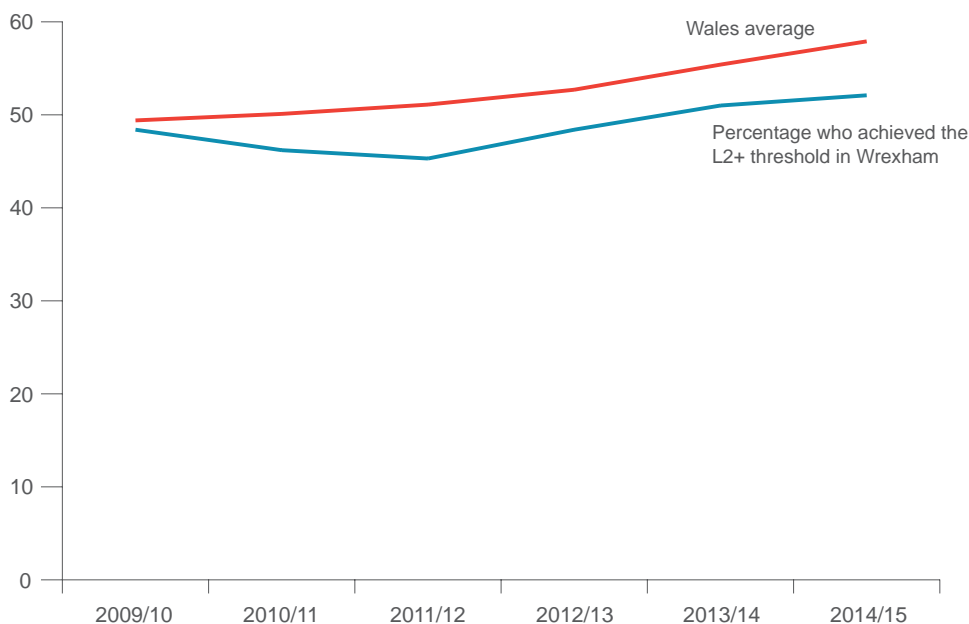
Year of delivery	Green: good progress is being made and outcomes are improving	Amber: progress is being made but not yet impacting on outcomes	Red: performance is off-track and outcomes are not improving
2012-13	9	5	1
2013-14	10	5	0
2014-15	12	3	0

- 17 The three priority outcomes where progress has consistently been assessed as amber (or red) since 2012-13 are:
- a all children and young people have positive aspirations, learn and achieve their potential – in particular, to raise the level of academic achievement;
 - b all people are enabled to make healthy choices – in particular, to reduce obesity; and
 - c homes that meet people’s needs and aspirations – in particular, to increase the number of affordable homes in the county borough.
- 18 The Council has made good progress against individual elements within the three priority outcomes. However, the actions taken have had a limited overall impact. For example, the Council has made it harder for underage customers to purchase alcohol; the diet of school-age children is improving; and more of Wrexham’s citizens are adopting healthier lifestyles by reducing smoking, increasing physical activity and eating more healthily. However, despite a suite of successful initiatives that contributed to these improvements, the number of overweight or obese adults and reception age children in Wrexham has not reduced as fast as the average for Wales. Not enough of Wrexham’s citizens are making healthy choices.
- 19 The Council Plan notes that the Council has limited control over some of the priority outcomes in its plan – such as those concerned with reducing obesity or increasing the supply of affordable homes. Instead, the Council focuses on tackling some of the underlying issues – such as influencing the diets of children when they are at school or ensuring an adequate supply of sites suitable for affordable housing development. The vision and priority outcomes underpinning the Council Plan were agreed in 2012, to cover the period 2012-2017. When the Council Plan is next refreshed, the Council may find it useful to identify additional outcome measures, over which it has more control and for which it can be more directly accountable.

The secondary school system remains less cost-effective than it should be and GCSE results in secondary schools are lower than might be expected

- 20 The Council has had a limited impact on the level of academic achievement in its schools. Despite some noteworthy one-off improvements, such as a significant improvement for pupils achieving the level 2+ threshold in summer 2014, academic attainment within the Council's schools remains below the Wales average and is not improving as fast as elsewhere in Wales. Although the Council set some challenging targets for its schools during 2015-16, the results from summer 2015 only improved marginally. The analysis of schools' performance by Estyn, later in this report, provides additional commentary on performance.
- 21 We reported in our AIR for 2013-14, that GCSE results improved in 2014 compared with the previous year but also that results remained in the lowest quartile for councils in Wales. **Exhibit 2** shows the percentage of pupils in Wrexham schools that achieved five or more good GCSE grades, including English or Welsh (first language) and mathematics (the level 2+ threshold). Results for 2015 showed a further small improvement in Wrexham, but results across Wales improved by more, widening the attainment gap.

Exhibit 2: Schools in Wrexham lost ground against the Wales average in 2015



Source: StatsWales

The cost of running the secondary school system is well above average

- 22 An analysis of 2015-16 revenue account³ forms – focusing on the overall schools budget – shows that the Council apportioned £35.243 million to expenditure in, or on behalf of, its secondary schools. This represents £5,613 per pupil – the fourth highest in Wales and some 7.6 per cent higher than the average. **Exhibit 3** breaks down the gross planned schools budget for secondary schools in Wrexham into its constituent parts.

Exhibit 3: Gross planned expenditure on secondary schools (2015-16)

Category	£ per pupil		Wrexham rank (out of 22)
	Wrexham	Wales average	
Individual schools budget	£4,954	£4,888	11th
Additional learning needs	£215	£163	n/a
Inter-authority recoupment	£154	£32	n/a
Staff	£62	£9	n/a
Other schools budget	£228	£128	n/a
Capital expenditure charged to the revenue account	£0	£7	n/a
Total: schools budget (secondary)	£5,613	£5,227	4th

Source: revenue account form

- 23 **Exhibit 3** shows that the individual schools budget⁴ delegated to secondary schools is only slightly above average. However, planned expenditure in most other categories within the schools budget is well above average – leading to a total schools budget for secondary schools that is among the highest in Wales.

³ Revenue account forms are completed and submitted annually to Welsh Government by all councils in Wales. The forms provide details of planned expenditure on education and other services, and are prepared to a consistent format.

⁴ The individual schools budget is funding delegated to schools and controlled by the governing body. The remainder of the schools budget is not delegated and is managed by the Council.

- 24 We have not investigated why the figures in **Exhibit 3** are as they are. We have previously suggested to the Council that the cost of surplus places in secondary schools contributes to the system's high running costs. However, since schools' delegated budgets will bear the bulk of the costs associated with surplus places there is scope for the Council to explore the factors that contribute to the high non-delegated budgets within the schools budget. That analysis would help the Council to understand the potential for reducing costs – or whether the associated expenditure could be managed more effectively by schools.
- 25 Since expenditure per pupil is relatively high, the Council's inability to consistently match the average pace of improvement seems unlikely to be caused by a lack of resources. However, below-average improvement in academic attainment might be linked to the way those resources are utilised. In contrast to most service areas that had their budgets reduced, the Council increased the budgets for its schools by 0.6 per cent in 2015-16 to reflect the stretch attainment targets it had set. Despite recent incremental improvements in performance, the Council may need to consider more innovative solutions to encourage a step change in academic attainment.

Estyn's evaluation of school performance

- 26 The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in Wrexham is a little lower than the Wales average. This is taken into account when evaluating the performance in the authority.
- 27 In primary schools, performance in 2015 has improved in both the foundation phase indicator and the key stage 2 core subject indicator. However, performance in both of these indicators remains well below that in similar authorities. Performance in the core subject indicator at key stage 3 has shown similar improvement, but also remains well below that in similar authorities.
- 28 At key stage 4, performance in the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and mathematics has improved slightly in 2015. However, performance for this and all other main indicators at key stage 4 is well below the average for Wales, and that in similar authorities, for the fourth successive year. Wrexham has failed to meet any of the key stage 4 benchmarks for performance set by the Welsh Government for the third successive year.
- 29 In 2015, the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals in the main indicators at all stages is below the Wales average and that of similar authorities.
- 30 Attendance in primary and secondary schools has generally been at, or near, the average for Wales for the last three years.

Social services continued to develop during 2014-15, with progress against most the areas for improvement previously identified and enhanced arrangements for engaging with the public and service users

- 31 CSSIW published its **Performance Evaluation Report 2014-15** for Wrexham in October 2015. This section of the report provides a short summary of key findings in the CSSIW annual review; the full report is available online at www.cssiw.org.uk.
- 32 CSSIW found that the Council has continued to reshape its services in response to both financial pressures and the Social Services Well-being (Wales) Act which continues to drive change and provide the strategic direction for services. The social services department has continued to develop its services with a firm commitment to prevention and early intervention, with the aim of supporting independence and social inclusion and reducing dependence on services.
- 33 The development of commissioning strategies and market position statements in children's and adult services has given greater definition to the strategic direction for service development. The Council demonstrates its commitment to the needs of children and young people by including them as a cross-cutting theme within all Council priorities. The safety, health, independence and well-being of vulnerable older people is also a key priority in the Council Plan. The Council has been proactive in driving the preventative and early intervention agenda in its contracts with the third sector and with independent providers. Strategic plans in some service areas such as mental health and carers services need to be completed or updated and supported by implementation action plans.
- 34 The Council has made progress against most of the improvement areas identified by CSSIW last year. In some cases, this continues to be work in progress and further improvement is needed. The Council has introduced major organisational service changes in the access arrangements to adult services during the year, in preparation for the introduction of a single point of access consistent with the integration agenda, and also to improve practice in relation to adult safeguarding referrals.
- 35 In children's services, good performance has been sustained in many areas measured by performance indicators and has improved in some areas where performance was weaker. Although the timeliness of assessments has continued to improve, it remains an area for improvement in comparison to other Welsh counties, and the rise in the re-referral rate this year is a disappointing development. Other factors such as the steep rise in the number of children on the child protection register, the considerable fall in the numbers of children looked after, and the interface between statutory services and preventative services are areas the Council monitors and is giving careful consideration to.

- 36 The Council has worked hard to increase engagement with the public and service users. The engagement has been led by the reshaping consultations but there are also examples of the Council using a variety of measures to gain feedback and input from service users and families. The Council recognises that this is a progressive agenda and that improvement needs to continue.
- 37 As part of the Wales Audit Office social services sustainability work across the six North Wales councils, we produced a document for the Council that presented:
- a future demand for social services in Wrexham through benchmarking population projections for children and older people; and
 - b a suite of graphical analyses that combined financial and performance data for social services in Wrexham over multiple years, and which also placed the Council within the context of the other 21 Welsh councils.
- 38 There were no recommendations or conclusions arising from this work. Each council received a data pack containing value-for-money data and we facilitated a North Wales-wide workshop for directors of social services and other key senior managers. We received positive feedback on the output and await to see how the Council uses this approach going forward.

Use of resources

Arrangements to manage Council resources are not consistently robust, with strengths undermined in some areas by outdated approaches and capacity challenges

- 39 A summary of our assessment of the Council's use of resources is included here. Further detail is available in the Council's [Corporate Assessment Report 2015](#).
- 40 We concluded that the Council has a track record of prudent financial planning and strong budgetary control that provides strong foundations for its far-reaching change programme. We came to this conclusion because the Council has:
- a a good track record of operating within its budget, supported by effective budget setting and budget monitoring arrangements;
 - b a history of managing financial resources well, with a strong and valuable financial perspective within the senior leadership team;
 - c a good track record of delivering its savings plans;
 - d recently adopted a policy on income and charging aims to reduce the costs of service delivery;
 - e a formal reserves strategy, regularly reviews its level of reserves and has not needed to use reserves to balance its budget;
 - f recruited a reshaping partner to add pace and additional expertise, to identify improved ways of working to achieve savings over the life of the current medium-term financial plan; and
 - g recognised the need to continue strengthening its procurement capacity and expertise to promote effective contract monitoring and management, as the reshaping programme matures.
- 41 We also found that the Council's:
- a workforce planning arrangements are well-integrated but outdated people management systems, capacity and capability pressures, and cultural issues may slow progress;
 - b strategic asset management is generally sound, but is undermined by performance management and database arrangements which are not fully effective; and
 - c information technology and information management functions are supporting services but the Council is not getting full value from these enabler functions.

The Appointed Auditor issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounts with key matters to be addressed reported to the Audit Committee in December 2015

- 42 On 27 November 2015, the Auditor General issued an Annual Audit Letter to the Council. The letter summarises the key messages arising from his statutory responsibilities under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 as the Appointed Auditor and his reporting responsibilities under the Code of Audit Practice. The Auditor General issued an unqualified opinion on the Council's financial statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council's financial position and transactions.
- 43 A copy of the Annual Audit Letter is in [Appendix 2](#) of this report.

Governance

Governance and accountability arrangements are generally strong, but better coordination between Executive Board and Scrutiny would bring benefits

- 44 A summary of our assessment of the Council's governance arrangements is included here. For more detail, please refer to the Council's [Corporate Assessment Report 2015](#).
- 45 We concluded that the Council's governance and accountability arrangements are generally strong. We came to this conclusion because:
- a clear roles and responsibilities, supported by appropriate values and behaviour, promote good governance and strong accountability;
 - b arrangements to support members have been strengthened, but the quality of a minority of reports and minutes has the potential to reduce member efficiency and effectiveness;
 - c decision making across the Council is generally robust and effective;
 - d scrutiny arrangements are being strengthened, but better coordination between Executive Board and Scrutiny would bring benefits; and
 - e the Council's engagement with its stakeholders promotes good accountability.

Appendix 1 – Status of this report

The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) requires the Auditor General to undertake an annual improvement assessment, and to publish an annual improvement report, for each improvement authority in Wales. This requirement covers local councils, national parks, and fire and rescue authorities.

This report has been produced by staff of the Wales Audit Office on behalf of the Auditor General to discharge his duties under section 24 of the Measure. 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.

Improvement authorities are under a general duty to ‘make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of [their] functions’. Improvement authorities are defined as local councils, national parks, and fire and rescue authorities.

The annual improvement assessment is the main piece of work that enables the Auditor General to fulfil his duties. The improvement assessment is a forward-looking assessment of an authority’s likelihood to comply with its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement. It also includes a retrospective assessment of whether an authority has achieved its planned improvements in order to inform a view as to the authority’s track record of improvement. The Auditor General will summarise his audit and assessment work in a published annual improvement report for each authority (under section 24).

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 Mark Pritchard – Leader
Dr Helen Paterson – Chief Executive
Wrexham County Borough Council
The Guildhall
Wrexham
LL11 1AY

Dear Councillor Pritchard and Dr Paterson

Annual Audit Letter – Wrexham County Borough Council 2014-15

This letter summarises the key messages arising from the Auditor General for Wales' 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 and use of resources

It is the Council's 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;
- review the Council's 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 30 September 2015, I issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council'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 24 September 2015, and a more detailed memorandum was reported in November 2015.

I issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts has been completed on 30 September 2015.

I am satisfied that the Council has appropriate arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources

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 as part of the Improvement Assessment under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009.

My team completed the fieldwork for a corporate assessment during October 2015, focusing on the Council's track record of performance and outcomes as well as the key arrangements that are necessary to underpin improvements in services and functions. I anticipate providing the Council with a draft corporate assessment report during January 2016.

My Annual Improvement Report will highlight areas where the effectiveness of these arrangements has yet to be demonstrated or where improvements could be made.

My work to date on certification of grant claims and returns has not identified significant issues to date

My ongoing work on the certification of grants claims and returns has not identified any significant issues to date in relation to the accounts or the Council's key financial systems. I will report any key issues to the head of Finance once this year's programme of certification work is complete.

The financial audit fee for 2014-15 is currently expected to be in line with the agreed fee set out in the Annual Audit Outline.

Yours sincerely

Derwyn Owen

For and on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales

Appendix 3 – National report recommendations 2015-16

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
April 2015	<p>The Financial resilience of Councils in Wales</p>	<p>R1 Councils should ensure that their corporate plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is the core driver for the service plans and other supporting strategies including workforce, information technology and capital expenditure; • maintains at least a three to five year forward view and is aligned with the medium term financial plan and other supporting strategies; and • should clearly articulate the desired role of the council in five years - the model for delivering priority services and the infrastructure and resources needed to deliver future priorities within available finances. <p>R2 The medium term financial plan should identify the major financial risks and key assumptions and senior officers and councillors should subject them to effective scrutiny and challenge before adopting the plan.</p> <p>R3 Councils need to ensure that funding deficits are accurately projected and fully reconciled to detailed savings plans for each year over the life of the medium term financial plan.</p> <p>R4 Councils should review the adequacy of the financial assurance arrangements that underpin the delivery of annual savings plans, including the level of scrutiny and challenge provided by councillors.</p> <p>R5 Councils should ensure that they have a comprehensive reserves strategy that outlines the specific purpose of accumulated useable reserves as part of their Medium term Financial Plan.</p> <p>R6 Councils should develop corporate wide policies on income generation with a view to increasing revenue streams and relieving financial pressures.</p> <p>R7 Councils should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strengthen budget setting and monitoring arrangements to ensure financial resilience; and • review the coverage and effectiveness of their internal and external assurance financial systems and controls to ensure they are fit for purpose and provide early warning of weaknesses in key systems.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
April 2015	<p>The Financial resilience of Councils in Wales</p>	<p>R8 Councils must review their finance teams and ensure that they have sufficient capacity and capability to meet future demands.</p> <p>R9 Council officers need to equip councillors with the knowledge and skills they need to deliver effective governance and challenge by extending training opportunities and producing high quality management information.</p>
June 2015	<p>Achieving improvement in support to schools through regional education consortia – an early view.</p>	<p>R1 To clarify the nature and operation of consortia. We found there to be continuing uncertainty about some aspects of the nature of regional consortia and their present and future scope (paragraphs 2.2 to 2.20). We therefore recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local authorities should clarify whether consortia services are jointly provided or are commissioned services (services provided under joint-committee arrangements are jointly provided services and are not commissioned services). <p>R2 To focus on outcomes through medium-term planning. We found that the development of effective regional consortia was hindered by a focus on short-term actions and uncertainty about the future of consortia (paragraphs 2.33 to 2.36; 3.16 to 3.17). We therefore recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As any possible local authority reorganisation will not be fully implemented until 2020, the Welsh Government and regional consortia should develop three-year plans for the further development, scope, and funding of regional consortia linked to appropriate strategic objectives.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
June 2015	<p>Achieving improvement in support to schools through regional education consortia – an early view.</p>	<p>R3 To develop more collaborative relationships for the school improvement system. The development of the National Model for Regional Working involved many school improvement partners but we found that this had not led to the development of sufficiently collaborative relationships (paragraphs 2.25 to 2.32). We therefore recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional consortia should develop improved arrangements for sharing practice and supporting efficiency (for example, one consortium could take the lead on tackling an issue or have functional responsibility for the development of a policy). • The Welsh Government, local authorities and regional consortia should recognise the interdependency of all partners fulfilling their school improvement roles and agree an approach to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – information sharing and consultation about developments related to school improvement; – developing collaborative relationships of shared accountability; and – undertaking system-wide reviews, and an alignment of the understanding and position of regional consortia across all Welsh Government relevant strategies. <p>R4 To build effective leadership and attract top talent. Regional consortia, local authorities and the Welsh Government have all found difficulties in recruiting to senior leadership for education and we found there had been limited action to address this (paragraphs 2.37 to 2.40). We therefore recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Welsh Government and local authorities should collaborate to improve the attractiveness of education leadership roles to attract the most talented leaders for the school improvement system; and • local authorities should collaborate to support the professional development of senior leaders and to ensure appropriate performance management arrangements are in place for senior leaders.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
June 2015	<p>Achieving improvement in support to schools through regional education consortia – an early view.</p>	<p>R5 To improve the effectiveness of governance and management of regional consortia. Whilst continuing progress is being made, we found that regional consortia have not yet developed fully effective governance and financial management arrangements (paragraphs 3.2 to 3.36). We therefore recommend that local authorities and their regional consortia should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improve their use of self-evaluation of their performance and governance arrangements and use this to support business planning and their annual reviews of governance to inform their annual governance statements; • improve performance management including better business planning, use of clear and measurable performance measures, and the assessment of value for money; • make strategic risk management an integral part of their management arrangements and report regularly at joint committee or board level; • develop their financial management arrangements to ensure that budgeting, financial monitoring and reporting cover all relevant income and expenditure, including grants funding spent through local authorities; • develop joint scrutiny arrangements of the overall consortia as well as scrutiny of performance by individual authorities, which may involve establishment of a joint scrutiny committee or co-ordinated work by local authority scrutiny committees; • ensure the openness and transparency of consortia decision making and arrangements; • recognise and address any potential conflicts of interest; and where staff have more than one employer, regional consortia should ensure lines of accountability are clear and all staff are aware of the roles undertaken; and • develop robust communications strategies for engagement with all key stakeholders.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
July 2015	<p>Review of Corporate Safeguarding Arrangements in Welsh Councils</p>	<p>R1 Improve corporate leadership and comply with Welsh Government policy on safeguarding through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the appointment of a senior lead officer who is accountable for safeguarding and protecting children and young people with corporate responsibilities for planning improvements; • the appointment of a lead member for safeguarding; and • regularly disseminating and updating information on these appointments to all staff and stakeholders. <p>R2 Ensure there is a corporate-wide policy on safeguarding covering all Council services to provide a clear strategic direction and clear lines of accountability across the Council.</p> <p>R3 Strengthen safe recruitment of staff and volunteers by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring that Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks and compliance with safe recruitment policies cover all services that come into contact with children; • creating an integrated corporate compliance system to record and monitor compliance levels on DBS checks; and • requiring safe recruitment practices amongst partners in the third sector and for volunteers who provide services commissioned and/or used by the Council which are underpinned by a contract or service level agreement. <p>R4 Ensure all relevant staff, members and partners understand their safeguarding responsibilities by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring safeguarding training is mandated and coverage extended to all relevant Council service areas, and is included as standard on induction programmes; • creating a corporate-wide system to identify, track and monitor compliance on attending safeguarding training in all Council departments, elected members, schools, governors and volunteers; and • requiring relevant staff in partner organisations who are commissioned to work for the Council in delivering services to children and young people to undertake safeguarding training.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
July 2015	<p>Review of Corporate Safeguarding Arrangements in Welsh Councils</p>	<p>R5 In revising guidance, the Welsh Government should clarify its expectations of local authorities regarding the roles and responsibilities of the designated officer within education services, and the named person at senior management level responsible for promoting the safeguarding.</p> <p>R6 Improve accountability for corporate safeguarding by regularly reporting safeguarding issues and assurances to scrutiny committee(s) against a balanced and Council-wide set of performance information covering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • benchmarking and comparisons with others; • conclusions of internal and external audit/ inspection reviews; • service-based performance data; • key personnel data such as safeguarding training, and DBS recruitment checks; and • the performance of contractors and commissioned services on compliance with Council safeguarding responsibilities. <p>R7 Establish a rolling programme of internal audit reviews to undertake systems testing and compliance reviews on the Council's safeguarding practices.</p> <p>R8 Ensure the risks associated with safeguarding are considered at both a corporate and service level in developing and agreeing risk management plans across the Council.</p>

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
October 2015	<p>Supporting the Independence of Older People: Are Councils Doing Enough?</p>	<p>R1 Improve governance, accountability and corporate leadership on older people's issues through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the appointment of a senior lead officer who is accountable for coordinating and leading the Council's work on older people's services; • realigning the work of the older people's strategy coordinators to support development and delivery of plans for services that contribute to the independence of older people; • the appointment of a member champion for older people's services; and • regularly disseminating and updating information on these appointments to all staff and stakeholders. <p>R2 Improve strategic planning and better coordinate activity for services to older people by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring comprehensive action plans are in place that cover the work of all relevant council departments and the work of external stakeholders outside of health and social care; and • engaging with residents and partners in the development of plans, and in developing and agreeing priorities. <p>R3 Improve engagement with, and dissemination of, information to older people by ensuring advice and information services are appropriately configured and meet the needs of the recipients.</p> <p>R4 Ensure effective management of performance for the range of services that support older people to live independently by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting appropriate measures to enable Members, officers and the public to judge progress in delivering actions for all council services; • ensuring performance information covers the work of all relevant agencies and especially those outside of health and social services; and • establishing measures to judge inputs, outputs and impact to be able to understand the effect of budget cuts and support oversight and scrutiny.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
October 2015	Supporting the Independence of Older People: Are Councils Doing Enough?	<p>R5 Ensure compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty when undertaking equality impact assessments by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting out how changes to services or cuts in budgets will affect groups with protected characteristics; • quantifying the potential impact and the mitigation actions that will be delivered to reduce the potentially negative effect on groups with protected characteristics; • indicating the potential numbers who would be affected by the proposed changes or new policy by identifying the impact on those with protected characteristics; and • ensuring supporting activity such as surveys, focus groups and information campaigns includes sufficient information to enable service users to clearly understand the impact of proposed changes on them. <p>R6 Improve the management and impact of the Intermediate Care Fund by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting a performance baseline at the start of projects to be able to judge the impact of these overtime; • agreeing the format and coverage of monitoring reports to enable funded projects to be evaluated on a like-for-like basis against the criteria for the fund, to judge which are having the greatest positive impact and how many schemes have been mainstreamed into core funding; and • improving engagement with the full range of partners to ensure as wide a range of partners are encouraged to participate in future initiatives and programmes.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
December 2015	Delivering with less - leisure services	<p>R1 Improve strategic planning in leisure services by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting an agreed council vision for leisure services; • agreeing priorities for leisure services; • focusing on the Council's position within the wider community sport and leisure provision within the area; and • considering the potential to deliver services on a regional basis. <p>R2 Undertake an options appraisal to identify the most appropriate delivery model based on the Council's agreed vision and priorities for leisure services which considers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the availability of capital and revenue financing in the next three-to-five years; • options to improve the commercial focus of leisure services; • opportunities to improve income generation and reduce council 'subsidy'; • a cost-benefit analysis of all the options available to deliver leisure services in the future; • the contribution of leisure services to the Council's wider public health role; • better engagement with the public to ensure the views and needs of users and potential users are clearly identified; • the impact of different options on groups with protected characteristics under the public sector equality duty; and • the sustainability of service provision in the future.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
December 2015	Delivering with less - leisure services	<p>R3 Ensure effective management of performance of leisure services by establishing a suite of measures to allow officers, Members and citizens to judge inputs, outputs and impact. This should cover council-wide and facility specific performance and include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • capital and revenue expenditure; • income; • council 'subsidy'; • quality of facilities and the service provided; • customer satisfaction; • success of 'new commercial' initiatives; • usage data – numbers using services/facilities, time of usage, etc; and • impact of leisure in addressing public health priorities. <p>R4 Improve governance, accountability and corporate leadership on leisure services by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regularly reporting performance to scrutiny committee(s); • providing elected Members with comprehensive information to facilitate robust decision-making; • benchmarking and comparing performance with others; and • using the findings of internal and external audit/inspection reviews to identify opportunities to improve services.

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