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Mr Colin Everett
Chief Executive
Flintshire County Council
County Hall
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Pages 1 of 9

Dear Colin

Improvement Assessment

I am required, under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) to report my audit and assessment work in relation to whether Flintshire Council (the Council) has discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure.

This letter summarises:

- my views on whether the Council has discharged its statutory duties in respect of improvement planning;
- my views on the Council's compliance with requirements to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement, based on work carried out to date by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators, including:
 - the Council's progress on areas for improvement and recommendations identified in my previous assessments;
 - any relevant issues that may have emerged since my last report, including comments on how the Council is addressing financial challenges; and
 - a brief summary of any reports of relevant regulators issued since my last report.
- my further proposals for improvement and/or recommendations; and
- updates to the Wales Audit Office work plan and timetable for delivering my Improvement Assessment work.

I shall update my views during the year and will provide a further letter by the end of November 2013.

The Council has discharged its improvement planning duties under the Measure but it should ensure that it acts more in accordance with Welsh Government guidance

I have reached this conclusion because:

- the 2013-14 Improvement Plan meets the requirements of the Measure;
- the presentation and content of the Improvement Plan enable public engagement with the Council's priorities far more effectively than in the past; although,
- the Council's approach to improvement planning does not fully comply with the Welsh Government guidance.

The Council approved its Improvement Plan (the Plan) for 2013-14 on 25 June 2013 and published it on its website in late July. Each of the 24 Improvement Objectives addresses one or more of the seven aspects of improvement as defined in the Measure.

This year's Plan reflects the Council's new and improved approach to the setting of Improvement Objectives compared with previous years. Prior to 2012, the Council's Improvement Plan consisted of several related documents. This year, in contrast, senior officers and Members have developed annual Improvement Objectives that are set out in a single, concise Plan. The Council has, this year, focused clearly on those elements of its five-year corporate priorities that will receive special attention during 2013-14. This approach has begun to sharpen the Council's own focus on the challenging agenda it has set itself, as well as making a clearer commitment to the citizens of Flintshire in terms of the Council's intentions for the year ahead.

Alongside taking a new approach to selecting its Improvement Objectives, the Council has also revamped the structure and presentation of its Plan. The Plan is much shorter than before and now communicates clearly and succinctly how each of the Improvement Objectives relates to the Council's eight medium-term corporate priorities and to those of partners in the Local Service Board. The well-judged use of colour, diagrams and photographs all contribute well to improving the Plan's accessibility and its overall effectiveness in communicating the Council's priorities for the year. The language used is mostly straightforward and helpful glossaries explain many of the more technical terms used in describing each Improvement Objective. Together, these changes make this Plan a more engaging document than has previously been the case and increase the Plan's accessibility to a wider readership.

As a document, the Plan represents a significant improvement on previous years. For each Improvement Objective, the Plan helpfully sets out a few key actions under the heading, 'What we will do in 2013-14' and, for each action, the Plan describes how achievement will be considered. In total, the Plan includes 131 descriptors covering the 24 Improvement Objectives. Though a fairly large number in total, the descriptors include a well-balanced selection of:

- 'task completion measures', such as, 'plans to support carers are agreed and implemented';
- qualitative measures that will require a degree of analysis and evaluation, such as, 'customer feedback'; and
- quantitative measures such as 'reducing the percentage of 16-24 year olds claiming job seeker's allowance'.

Despite the Council's improvements to its improvement planning process, there are aspects of the process that do not yet meet the Welsh Government guidance. In particular, the Plan lacks clear reference to any consultation on the improvement objectives, or the outcomes from any consultations. The Improvement Objectives are nevertheless drawn from previous objectives within the five-year plan, several of which are consistent with the Community Strategy. The Council has previously consulted with a range of stakeholders about many of these Objectives

In addition, we have reservations about compliance with the Welsh Government guidance in terms of how the Council intends to demonstrate whether or not it has achieved its Improvement Objectives.

We estimate that about 35 per cent of the descriptors that the Council says it will use to judge whether or not it has achieved its Improvement Objectives are quantitative. However, the Plan includes no information about current performance in relation to these descriptors, or to any targets for the year-end. The Plan states that this information is available in a linked document, but the Council has not yet produced this document. Some of this target information is available in other Council documents such as Directorate Plans and service strategies. However, it is not easy for the public, elected members or other interested parties to fully appreciate the targets the Council has set itself because of the dispersed nature of this information.

The Council intends to bring together baseline data and to set targets or reconsider existing targets in October 2013, half way through the year to which the Plan relates, alongside the reporting of progress to date. However, this will be too late to influence, for example, the detailed prioritisation of work streams and resources within services during the year.

The delay in describing baselines and year-end targets detracts from the Plan's value as a basis for elected Members to assess progress during the year and as a means by which the public might hold the Council to account for its performance. This year's Improvement Planning process represents an important and productive transitional step for the Council. The Council acknowledges that the development of the targets needs to occur at a similar time to the production of the Improvement Plan, and it is considering how this can be achieved in the future.

Based on, and limited to, work carried out to date by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators, I believe that the Council is likely to comply with the requirement to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement during this financial year, although aspects of these arrangements are underdeveloped

I have reached this conclusion because:

- aspects of the arrangements underpinning the Plan remain underdeveloped and this undermines our confidence in the Council's ability to deliver its Improvement Objectives;
- the Council has improved its processes for developing its Annual Governance Statement but recognises that there is more to do;
- the Council engaged well with other councils in North Wales and with the Wales Audit Office during our recent Improvement Study on the effectiveness of scrutiny; and
- the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) reported many positive aspects in the Council's safeguarding arrangements and identified a small number of areas where further improvements are needed, which the Council is addressing.

Aspects of the arrangements underpinning the Plan, remain underdeveloped, and this undermines our confidence in the Council's ability to deliver its Improvement Objectives

Seven of the Council's Improvement Objectives relate to the priority that it should be a 'modern and efficient Council'. Several of these relate explicitly to major and complex projects, some of which have been underway for some time and whose pace has sometimes flagged. These are areas about which we have previously expressed concern, and we welcome the Council's commitment to address these key issues during 2013-14. For example, the Council has committed itself in the Plan to 'achieving a fair and affordable pay and grading structure' which includes 'agreeing and implementing a legal, affordable, acceptable and workable Single Status Agreement' and 'meeting any liability for equal pay claims'. The Council has also committed itself to 'producing a sustainable

four year financial plan which meets the funding gap and supports investment needs' and to 'producing an annual plan for 2014-15 within the larger four-year plan'.

However, the financial outlook has worsened significantly following the UK government's comprehensive spending review. The level of savings required in 2014-15 and beyond may well be much higher than had been foreseen. At present, plans which identify, in sufficient detail, the sources of efficiency savings or service cuts to meet the funding gap are not in place. The Council intends to update its medium-term financial plan and set out clearly its intentions by October 2013. However we have reservations about the Council's capacity to achieve this in enough detail to set the 2014-15 budget and beyond, particularly as plans which require, for instance, wide-scale service review often have considerable lead-in time between the decision and the savings realisation.

The Council has acknowledged in the Plan that many of the change programmes within its 'Organisational Change' Improvement Objective require investment, political support and staff engagement, all of which will take time to deliver. These programmes are therefore unlikely to deliver significant savings in time for 2014-15. It is nevertheless important for the realisation of future savings that the Council develops the detail of these medium-term programmes as soon as possible, establishing realistic timescales for their delivery and clear estimates of the extent of the savings that they will deliver. Further information about our findings in some of these areas is provided separately in interim updates where appropriate.

The Council has improved its processes for developing its Annual Governance Statement but recognises that there is more to do

The Council has established a Corporate Governance Working Group (CGWG) to drive forward the annual task of producing a governance statement and to gather and collate the evidence that supports it. The CGWG is made up of officers with key responsibilities for controls and processes that relate to governance issues, using a 'roadmap' to ensure that relevant actions are carried out on time. The Council, through the work of the CGWG, takes robust additional steps to obtain officer perspectives on the effectiveness of its governance arrangements.

The Council has been open to learning as demonstrated by the improvements it has made to the arrangements for drafting its Annual Governance Statement. However, there are no elected Members on the CGWG, and the focus on obtaining officer perspectives is not balanced by a comparable approach for Members. The Council has committed itself to the greater involvement of Members in future and is continuing to explore ways of making further improvements in its arrangements for drafting its Annual Governance Statement.

The Council engaged well with other councils in North Wales and with the Wales Audit Office during our recent Improvement Study on the effectiveness of scrutiny

During the autumn of 2012 and spring of 2013, the Council took an active part in our all-Wales Improvement Study into the effectiveness of councils' scrutiny arrangements. We shall be reporting the results of this work later in 2013 and hosting a shared learning event in November 2013.

During the study, the Council's Peer Learning Exchange Team, consisting of both Members and officers:

- took part in two regional workshops along with Peer Learning Exchange Teams from other North Wales councils;
- observed two scrutiny committee meetings at Denbighshire Council, providing feedback to committee members;
- discussed the way that scrutiny works in Denbighshire Council with a group of committee chairs and vice-chairs; and
- drawing on its discussions and observations, provided an external perspective to Denbighshire Council by evaluating its scrutiny function against criteria developed jointly by the Wales Audit Office, the Welsh Local Government Association, Welsh Government and the Scrutiny Officers' Network.

A Peer Learning Exchange Team from Wrexham Council also conducted similar work in Flintshire.

Before undertaking the activities set out above, the Council had evaluated the effectiveness of its own scrutiny function. After the Peer Learning Exchange Team had visited Denbighshire Council and received Wrexham Council's evaluation, the Council re-evaluated the quality of its own scrutiny, drawing on what it had learned.

We have provided the Council with an analysis of its two self-evaluations, and how they compare with those in other councils throughout Wales. We expect the Council to consider these and decide how it is to further improve its scrutiny arrangements. We will comment on the Council's final self-evaluation and action plan for improving scrutiny, once they have been agreed by the Council, as part of our on-going Improvement Assessment work.

The CSSIW reported many positive aspects in the Council's safeguarding arrangements and identified a small number of areas where further improvements are needed, which the Council is addressing

The CSSIW undertook a site visit in January 2013 which focused on the safeguarding arrangements in Flintshire. The findings indicate many areas of good practice and a

limited number of areas where performance could be improved. The Council recognised many of the areas that needed development and was, at the time of the fieldwork, taking steps to improve the service.

There are areas where performance is of a good standard, and these include:

- the timeliness of response, the initial alerts being appropriately managed and afforded high priority;
- strategy discussion and meetings routinely take place, and there is an increasing focus on zero tolerance of all forms of abuse;
- there was evidence of good partnership working arrangements, which focused on securing positive outcomes for service users; and
- the contracts team were particularly effective at identifying and monitoring safeguarding risks in care settings.

However, the fieldwork also found that areas for improvement remained, and these include:

- all contacts need to be consistently captured within the core electronic system, and there needs to be more accurate alignment between electronic and paper recording systems;
- strategy meetings need to be convened more promptly in some cases;
- risk, and how this will be managed, needs to be recorded consistently, and formally reviewed at the end of any intervention; and
- senior managers need to be assured that routine monitoring of safe outcomes are sufficiently established, recorded and reported before safeguarding interventions are concluded.

At the time of the inspection, the Council had recognised and begun to take action to address many of the areas for improvement, including:

- as a result of a review of capacity, they are investing in three new posts to strengthen safeguarding systems; and
- taking steps to improve the timeliness of strategy meetings.

Further proposals for improvement/recommendations

No proposals for improvement are being suggested in this letter, as previous proposals and recommendation for improvement are still in place, and reflect the areas for improvement the Council needs to address. We will continue to monitor and report on the progress made by the Council in implementing the proposals set out in my previous reports and letters.

Updates to the work plan and timetable

My Improvement Assessment Team will keep the Council informed of the detailed arrangements for the delivery of my assessment work.

The regularly updated work plan and timetable provides more detail on the work being delivered during this year's assessment and in particular, how we will add value by focusing on jointly identified areas or services.

The work plan and timetable takes account of my consultation with improvement authorities over my proposals for 2013-14 performance audit work.

I am grateful to the Council for the way in which it has helped to facilitate our work and hope to see even more effective and efficient arrangements between the two organisations developing over time. I remain committed to providing appropriate levels of public assurance while supporting you in mitigating the inevitable risks to services and accountability that stem from reducing resources and consequential change.

I will publish this Letter on the Wales Audit Office website as soon as the Letter has gone through the Council's democratic process, or two months after the Letter is issued, whichever is the sooner.

Yours sincerely



HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS

AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES

CC: Lesley Griffiths, Minister for Local Government and Government Business

Huw Lloyd Jones – Manager

Karen Lees – Performance Audit Lead