

Wales Audit Office Annual Improvement Report

May 2014

Executive Response

The Wales Audit Office's Annual Improvement Report is, overall, a fair and positive summary of the position of the Council. The report is a welcome endorsement of a full year of improved improvement reporting following the introduction of this year's Improvement Plan.

There are no new statutory recommendations or proposals for improvement.

In our response we set out how we will make improvements to ensure full compliance with the spirit and detail of the national guidance.

Listed below are the principal topics within the letter along with our response.

| Issue | Response |
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| <i>In summary the report:</i> | |
| Performance Evaluation "The Council has strengthened its approach to performance evaluation, underpinned by better improvement planning arrangements, but the changes are not yet fully embedded" | This was a transitional year in which the measures and targets the Council set were not published alongside the Improvement Plan for 2012/13 but were reported alongside progress in the mid year report. The Improvement Plan for 2014/15 is now fully aligned and accompanied by the more detailed 'Measures of Success' document which will continue to be monitored and reported against each quarter as a practice. |
| Improvement Plan – compliance with Welsh Government guidance "The Council has strengthened its approach to improvement planning but further action is needed to fully comply with Welsh Government guidance" (in respect of consultation) | This is a specific comment on limited reference in the Improvement Plan 2013/14 to consultation undertaken. The priorities set for the Improvement Plan were, from the outset, based on a wide range of previous consultations in service areas with both partners and representative groups (e.g. community safety, anti-poverty, education, economic development) and, in some cases, service users directly (e.g. housing). There has been no one intensive consultation exercise on the Plan itself, by local choice, given this background. A local decision has been made by elected members to use their representative role to test the relevance of the priorities of Plan against local public opinion as explained in the Plan. The Council remains open to feedback on the plan and amending it following new service based consultations at any time. This explanation is given in the Improvement Plan for the clarity of the reader. |
| Response to change – financial planning "The Council has developed a more detailed plan to manage its | The Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy and Plan is under constant review and improvement. Under the newly adopted Corporate Operating Model the new Chief Officer Team will have a strengthened |

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| <p>challenging financial position, but success relies on timely and effective implementation and monitoring”</p> | <p>collective role on priority led budget planning to meet the corporate sub-priorities in the new version of the Improvement Plan. Strengthening of the roles, systems and organisational disciplines which underpin robust planning, implementation and tracking of financial planning and efficiency planning is advancing and continues to be work in progress.</p> |
| <p>Schools maintenance backlog “The Council does not have a good track record of maintaining its school buildings; by the end of 2012-13, there was still a significant backlog of repairs and maintenance. However, the Council has secured Welsh Government support to enable it to invest £64 million in schools in the Deeside and Holywell areas. This funding will make the schools concerned fit-for-purpose and help to reduce the maintenance backlogs. The Council recently announced that the schools maintenance backlog has reduced from £35 million to £23.6 million since 2010.”</p> | <p>The £35m figure relates to 2009-2010 and includes cyclical maintenance (i.e. items that are repeated every 5 years - electrical testing and repainting).</p> <p>From 2011/12 onwards the backlog calculated for this has excluded the cyclical maintenance items. This is the figure quoted for 2012/13 of £23.6m in the AIR report. This figure has subsequently increased to £25.8m for 2013/14 following resurvey of 75% of primary schools.</p> |
| <p>Out of County places “The Council spends more per pupil than any other council in Wales, on placing pupils with additional learning needs in schools outside Flintshire. For 2013-14, the Council set a budget of almost £3.5 million for this item, representing £152 for each pupil in the County compared with an average across Wales of just £35 per pupil. It is very likely that there will always be a few young people living in Flintshire whose educational needs are so complex that they cannot be met by schools within the County. However, Flintshire’s expenditure on school places outside the county has been very high for several years and further reduces what is already a low level of expenditure on pupils in Flintshire schools.”</p> | <p>This needs to take into account Flintshire's geography and historic inheritance of provision from Clwyd i.e. we would not recreate specialist provision when it is provided just across the border in Denbighshire (i.e. YsgolPlasBrondyfryn). The location of the provision means that Flintshire is an unusually high contributor to inter-authority recoupment, whilst Denbighshire is a high beneficiary through the same mechanism.</p> <p>The creation of a duplicate Autistic spectrum residential facility in the county would have a significant unnecessary capital cost for the Council, whilst Denbighshire would face a significant unnecessary revenue reduction if Flintshire withdrew from the present joint provision. The overall cost to the public purse of a duplicate facility would then be both the capital outlay plus an increased subsidy from Denbighshire County Council to continue the currently shared facility.</p> <p>Inter authority collaboration and the wider issues in public sector funding need to be taken into account.</p> <p>The small number of pupils that need other more specialist provision have their provision efficiently procured following the innovative value for money project undertaken with Commercial and Clinical Solutions - so much so that our approach has been adopted regionally in the hub commissioning model.</p> |