

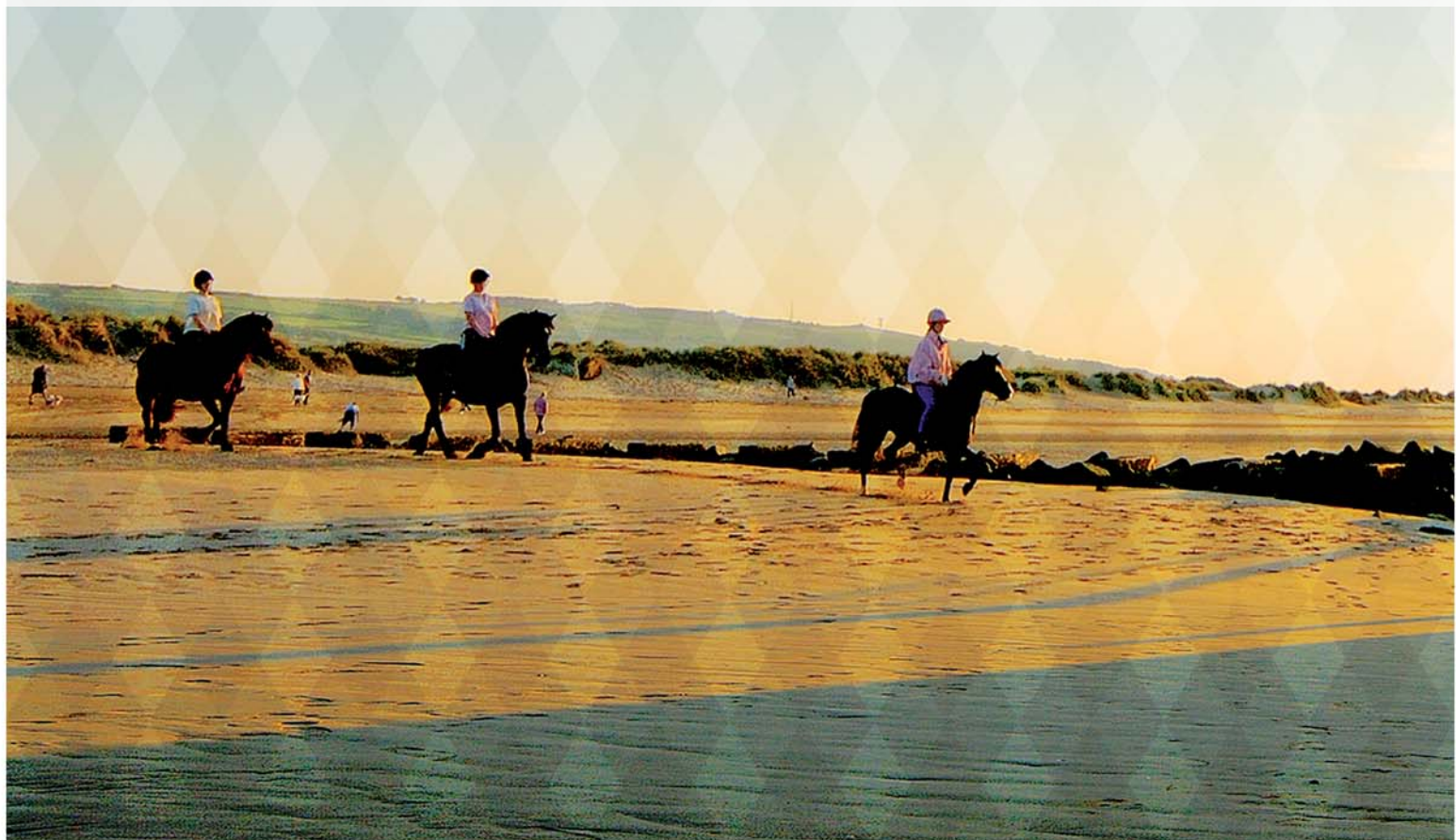


Annual Improvement Report

Flintshire County Council

Issued: June 2014

Document reference: 263A2014



About the Auditor General for Wales

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 National Assembly.

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.

This Annual Improvement Report has been prepared on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales by Huw Lloyd Jones and Paul Goodlad under the direction of Alan Morris.

Contents

Summary report and recommendations	4
Detailed report	
Introduction	6
The Council made good progress against the improvement priorities we looked at and improved its overall performance against the national indicators	7
The Council has taken action to strengthen its approach to performance evaluation, but further work is required to harmonise its improvement planning and performance reporting arrangements	17
The Council has enhanced its arrangements for planning and supporting improvement, but further action is required to provide the rigour necessary to cope with the challenges ahead	19
The Council is likely to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2014-15	24
Appendices	
Appendix 1 Status of this report	25
Appendix 2 Useful information about Flintshire and Flintshire County Council	26
Appendix 3 Annual Audit Letter	28
Appendix 4 Flintshire County Council's improvement objectives and self-assessment	31
Appendix 5 Previous recommendations or proposals for improvement made to the Council	33

Summary report

Summary

- 1 Each year, the Auditor General must report on how well Welsh councils, fire and rescue authorities and national park authorities are planning for improvement in delivering their services. This report sets out the findings of the work undertaken on behalf of the Auditor General by the staff of the Wales Audit Office and also draws on the work of the relevant Welsh inspectorates. The report covers the delivery and evaluation of services at Flintshire County Council (the Council) in relation to 2012-13 (updated, where possible, to reflect more recent developments), its planning of improvement for 2013-14 and, taking these into account, concludes whether the Auditor General believes that the Council will make arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2014-15.
- 2 We found that, in 2012-13, the Council made good progress against the improvement priorities we looked at and improved its overall performance against the national indicators. We reached this conclusion because:
 - overall performance against the national indicators improved slightly, with some strong performance across several service areas;
 - the Council is making good progress at implementing initiatives to improve access to services;
 - the Council is making progress against its five-year affordable homes target and is on schedule to achieve the Welsh Housing Quality Standard by 2020, but performance at preventing homelessness has been inconsistent;
 - Social Services performance has continued to improve across a range of areas, particularly the support provided for adults; some aspects of both children's and adult services are performing strongly;
 - Flintshire schools provide good value for money but there is scope for even greater efficiency within the education system; and
 - the Council is taking action to strengthen its arrangements for implementing its Welsh Language Scheme, but has made limited progress in some areas.
- 3 We also found that the Council has taken action to strengthen its approach to performance evaluation, but further work is required to harmonise its improvement planning and performance reporting arrangements. The Council has acknowledged this need, and is taking action to strengthen its arrangements. We reached this conclusion because:
 - the Council has strengthened its approach to performance evaluation, underpinned by better improvement planning arrangements, but the changes are not yet fully embedded; and

- the Council complied with its responsibilities for financial reporting but there is further scope to strengthen its financial controls in a number of areas.

4 Finally, we found that, during 2013-14, the Council has enhanced its arrangements for planning and supporting improvement, but further action is required to provide the rigour needed to cope with the challenges ahead. The Council has acknowledged this need and is taking action to strengthen its arrangements. We reached this conclusion because:

- the Council has strengthened its approach to improvement planning but further action is needed to fully comply with Welsh Government guidance;
- the Council has developed a more detailed plan to manage its challenging financial position, but success relies on timely and effective implementation and monitoring; and
- the Council has strengthened planning, management and evaluation arrangements that were previously underdeveloped, but there is scope to reinforce some of the improvements already made.

5 Taking the above into account, the Auditor General believes that Flintshire County Council is likely to meet the requirements of the Measure in making arrangements to secure continuous improvement.

Recommendations

6 We do not intend to make any new recommendations or proposals for improvement. [Appendix 5](#) summarises the status of our previous recommendations and proposals for improvement.

Detailed report

Introduction

- 7 Under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure), the Auditor General must report each year on how well Welsh councils, fire and rescue authorities and national park authorities are planning for improvement in delivering their services. **Appendix 1** provides more information about the Auditor General's powers and duties under the Measure. With help from Welsh inspectorates, Estyn (for education), the Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales (CSSIW), and the Welsh Language Commissioner, we have brought together a picture of what the Council is trying to achieve, how it is going about it, and the progress the Council has made since the Auditor General published his last annual improvement report. The report also draws on the Council's own self-assessment. Finally, taking all this into account, the report concludes whether the Auditor General believes that the Council is likely to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2014-15.
- 8 We do not undertake a comprehensive annual review of all Council arrangements or services. The conclusions in this report are based on our cumulative and shared knowledge and the findings of prioritised work undertaken, which, this year, included an assessment of the Council's progress against two of its improvement priorities:
- to achieve the highest standards of customer services and care through our Customer Service Strategy; and
 - to meet housing need in the county and to work with partners to ensure a sufficient supply of quality and affordable homes and housing services in the social, mixed tenure and private sector housing markets.
- 9 Given the wide range of services provided and the challenges facing the Council, it would be unusual if we did not find things that can be improved. The Auditor General is able to:
- 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;
 - make formal recommendations for improvement – if a formal recommendation is made the Council must prepare a response to that recommendation within 30 working days;
 - conduct a special inspection and publish a report and make recommendations; and
 - recommend to Ministers of the Welsh Government that they intervene in some way.
- 10 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 e-mailing us at info@wao.gov.uk or writing to us at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9LJ.

The Council made good progress against the improvement priorities we looked at and improved its overall performance against the national indicators

Overall performance against the national indicators improved slightly, with some strong performance across several service areas

- 11 We reviewed the Council's performance for 2012-13 against the average for Wales across a basket of 44 national indicators¹. Based on this data, the Council's overall performance has improved slightly, with strong performance in several areas, but deteriorating performance in others. For example:
- performance for two thirds of the national indicators (28 out of 44) was above the Welsh average, a slight improvement on 2011-12;
 - the Council achieved top quartile performance for 15 national indicators, compared with 11 in 2011-12;
 - the 2012-13 performance for 19 national indicators improved; and
 - the 2012-13 performance for 14 indicators deteriorated.
- 12 The Welsh Government's Local Authority Services Performance Report², which uses a different set of indicators, identified little change in the Council's overall performance during 2012-13.
- 13 The Council uses a mixture of national and local indicators to monitor performance against its improvement priorities. It classified 42 of these indicators as Improvement Targets – areas where the Council aimed to improve on its previous performance. For 2012-13, the Council reported that performance in just over half (51 per cent) of its improvement targets improved and a further two indicators maintained optimum performance. The performance in seven indicators (17 per cent) deteriorated significantly; the remainder showed a marginal decline in performance.
- 14 The Council's 2012-13 Improvement Plan contained 10 improvement priorities and 66 secondary priorities. It reported good progress against just over half (56 per cent) of the secondary priorities³ and satisfactory progress against the remaining 44 per cent. The Council's self-assessment concludes that none of its secondary priorities made less-than-satisfactory progress during 2012-13.
- 15 Each year the Welsh Government undertakes a national survey to obtain the views of the people of Wales on a range of issues including health, education and local services. In the 2012-13 survey, 58 per cent of respondents agreed that the Council provided high quality services. This was slightly better than the Welsh average and ranked the Council 10th out of 22 unitary authorities in Wales.

¹ 30 National Strategic Indicators (NSIs) and 24 Public Accountability Measures (PAMs), of which 10 are classified as both NSIs and PAMs

² Local Authority Services Performance Report 2012-13 brings together the latest performance data available that can be used to support the accountability and scrutiny of public services in Wales. The service areas included are Social Care, Education, Leisure and Culture, Housing, Environment, Transport, Community Safety and Wellbeing. <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/improving-services/publication-events/publications/la-service-performance-2012-13/?lang=en>

³ The Council's 2012-13 Improvement Plan was structured around 10 improvement Priorities and 66 sub-priorities.

The Council is making good progress at implementing initiatives to improve access to services

- 16 The Council reported good progress during 2012-13 against its improvement priority 'to achieve the highest standards of customer service and care through our Customer Services Strategy'. The Council was also confident of achieving the outcomes associated with this priority as the new initiatives matured. The sub-priorities underpinning this improvement priority focused on opening a network of one-stop-shops, encouraging customers to use self-service facilities and improving customer service by establishing a Customer Contact Centre. To secure the investment required, the Council produced a detailed business plan, which explained how it intended to achieve its ambitions in a cost-effective way. It is still too early to assess the full impact of these new initiatives, particularly in relation to the anticipated annual efficiency savings of £0.3 million. Progress within some areas was initially slower than expected, but momentum is growing. The Council met, or exceeded, some of the 2013-14 access-to-services targets associated with its new initiatives well before the end of the year.
- 17 The first phase of the Flintshire Connects (Customer Access Points) programme is on schedule; the first Connects Centre opened in Holywell, during November 2012. A second centre in Flint opened in early 2014, with work already underway to develop centres in Connah's Quay and Buckley. The Council expects to have five centres

operating across the County by 2016. The Council's vision for Flintshire Connects is to improve customer service by providing simpler and more integrated access to Council and other public sector services in a modern and welcoming environment. The shared accommodation approach appears to be working well; the Council shares the Holywell Centre with JobCentre Plus and North Wales Police and with a range of third-sector partners on an ad-hoc basis. This one-stop-shop partnership model is beneficial for customers and helps to maximise the use of the facilities. Similar arrangements are in place for the new centre in Flint and the Council expects to replicate these arrangements as other centres open.

- 18 The Council's justification for investing in the Connects Centre concept was to reduce costs at the same time as improving local access to services for residents. The concept promotes flexible working and the decentralisation of Council staff and services to locations that improve the support available locally to customers. The Council expects to save costs by developing generic job roles for customer-facing staff, reducing staff journey times (and the corresponding cost of those journeys) and sharing the cost of running the centres with partner agencies. A further objective of locating the centres within town centres is their contribution to regeneration. The Council anticipates that some of the customers who visit the centres will use the opportunity to shop locally. This will support the sustainability of local retailers and contribute to the vibrancy of the area.

- 19 The Holywell Centre initially received fewer visitors than anticipated, but visitor numbers steadily increased and are now ahead of schedule. During the first nine months of 2013-14, the Council reported that visitor numbers were already 50 per cent higher than the annual target. This is good news and helps the Council remain optimistic of meeting or exceeding its original projections for 2016. The Council also reports 100 per cent satisfaction ratings from visitors to the centre. This is also good news. However, it is unusual to achieve such a high satisfaction score. The Council should satisfy itself that the visitor survey results are representative and that the survey explores the issues that matter most to customers.
- 20 The Council's Channel Shift project is helping it to capitalise on the significant savings available when customers switch to ways of contacting the Council that cost it less to deal with. For example, Council research suggests that the cost of dealing with customers online is around 10 per cent of the cost of dealing with customer telephone calls and about five per cent of the cost of face-to-face contact. Encouraging customers to change their habits is not easy; the secret is to make the lower-cost options for contacting the Council simple to access and effective. Some people will still need, or prefer, to use traditional ways of contacting the Council. The Council's approach involves striking a balance between reducing its transaction costs and providing a mix of conventional and electronic channels that meet the different needs of its citizens. For example, the contact centres also provide online facilities for customers to use and staff provide support where needed. The Council hopes that this will encourage more people to access its online services, once they experience how easy the process is.
- 21 Encouraging more people to access services online will only work if their experience is positive, trouble-free and secure. Since 2012, the Council has procured a new system to manage its web-content and launched a new website and mobile 'App'. During 2013-14, the Council has focused on increasing the range, and publicising the availability, of digital services and increasing its use of social media to communicate with citizens. By the end of December 2013, the number of visitors to the Council's website had already exceeded the annual target for 2013-14. This is encouraging, but does not necessarily mean that the Council's approach to channel shift is working.
- 22 User satisfaction information – whether visitors to the website found what they were looking for – is not yet available for 2013-14. During 2012-13, around 75 per cent of online visitors found what they were looking for on the Council's website. The Council's target for 2013-14 is to increase satisfaction to 80 per cent and, ultimately, to 85 per cent by 2016. Despite the targeted increase in user satisfaction, these projections do not seem particularly ambitious. Website user expectations – particularly amongst younger people – are high. To avoid dissatisfied customers, the Council will need to ensure that its online user satisfaction ratings are on a par with popular commercial websites. It will also need to ensure that arrangements to capture user feedback provide sufficient information to identify and resolve any weaknesses in the online service.

- 23 The third strand of this improvement priority focuses on improving the standard of customer service provided by telephone and includes the development and implementation of a Customer Contact Centre. Despite some initial delays, the Council launched the Streetscene and Housing Contact Centres and a new customer-relationship-management system during 2012-13. Call handling times initially deteriorated as the new arrangements bedded in, but have subsequently improved.
- 24 The combined efficiency target for all three sub-priorities is £300,000. To make savings of this level, the Channel Shift, Customer Contact Centre and Flintshire Connects projects will need to achieve the levels of activity originally projected. Despite the lack of baseline data in some areas, the performance improvements already achieved are encouraging. However, the Council has recognised the need for robust data collection and monitoring arrangements to help it demonstrate the impact of these initiatives.

The Council is making progress against its five-year affordable homes target and is on schedule to achieve the Welsh Housing Quality Standard by 2020, but performance at preventing homelessness has been inconsistent

- 25 The Council's housing improvement programme is on target to meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard⁴ (WHQS) by 2020. Although only 24 Council homes (out of over 7,400 homes) in Flintshire were fully WHQS compliant by the end of 2012-13, the Council's performance against individual elements of the housing improvement programme has been much better. Many more homes are partially compliant because of the work already completed, allowing a lot of the Council's tenants to benefit from homes that are more comfortable to live in and cheaper to run. For example, by the end of 2012-13, 40 per cent of kitchens, 47 per cent of bathrooms, 64 per cent of heating systems and 70 per cent of windows and external doors in the Council's housing stock met the standard.
- 26 The Council estimates that an investment of around £103 million is required to complete its housing improvement programme by 2020. This is less than originally anticipated because the Council was able to revise some of its earlier assumptions. It also saved about £8 million by demolishing over 200 maisonettes where the improvement works required would not have been cost-effective. The site is being redeveloped with new affordable homes in partnership with a local housing association. The Council's

⁴ To meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard, social housing must satisfy a range of criteria. For example, homes must be in a good state of repair, be safe and secure, have up to date kitchens and bathrooms and be adequately heated, fuel efficient and well insulated. All elements must meet the minimum acceptable standard for a house to be classified as WHQS-compliant.

housing capital programme for 2013-2020 takes account of the investment needs of its housing stock and the money available for improvements from the Housing Revenue Account.

27 In addition to the schedule of planned improvements, the Council also has to deal with unscheduled repairs to its housing stock. During 2012-13, the Council significantly improved its response times for dealing with urgent and non-urgent repairs. For example, the response time to deal with non-urgent repairs to Council houses reduced from 63 to 44 days. The length of time that Council-owned properties remained empty also improved – down from 69 to 47 days in 2012-13. This helps the Council to maximise the income it receives from tenants and supports its wider efforts to reduce homelessness. Performance has continued to improve; the Council expects its 2013-14 performance for these indicators to show similar levels of improvement.

28 The Council's improvement priority for housing is wider than just improving the quality of Council-owned stock. The Council also works with partners to ensure a sufficient supply of quality affordable homes, and to support people who are, or who are about to become, homeless.

29 Across Wales, councils are accepting fewer households as homeless. The situation in Flintshire reflects this trend, despite an increase in the number of people seeking assistance since 2012. During 2012-13, the number of households accepted by the Council as homeless and in priority need was one of the lowest in Wales. On average,

fewer than 50 homeless households in the County were in temporary accommodation. However, the Council's performance for taking action to prevent homelessness has continued to decline. During 2012-13, the Council helped 83 per cent of potentially homeless households from becoming homeless, compared to 86 per cent in 2011-12 and 95 per cent in 2010-11. The Council's performance ranking for this indicator has dropped from third to 14th out of 22 since 2010-11. Council reports during 2013-14 indicate that performance has subsequently improved but year-end performance data is not yet available to confirm this.

30 The Council set itself a challenging target that, by 2016, no homeless person will be in temporary accommodation for more than 12 months. The average time homeless households spent in temporary accommodation in Flintshire increased from 208 days in 2011-12 to 280 days in 2012-13. The Council attributes some of this deterioration to an increased demand for homes with fewer bedrooms from existing social housing tenants anxious to avoid rent arrears arising from cuts to their housing benefit (the so-called 'bedroom tax'). This reduces the supply of smaller properties, which are also in demand from homeless households. The Council estimates that about 1,300 tenants in Flintshire will be affected by housing benefit cuts. In a related exercise, during April 2014, the Council began piloting the introduction of Universal Credit, which merges six working-age benefits and tax credits into one monthly payment. Some benefit recipients in Flintshire will be the first in Wales to move over to the new system.

31 The Council is taking action to ensure a sufficient supply of quality and affordable homes. It set a target of 740 new affordable home completions between 2012 and 2017, including 170 new homes to replace the 214 maisonettes that were demolished. The County benefitted from 57 new affordable homes during 2012-13 compared with 71 in 2011-12; this was fewer than the Council had anticipated. However, the Council is optimistic of meeting its 2013-14 target of 128 affordable homes, given the recent completion of an extra-care housing scheme, and is confident of meeting its 2012-2017 target. In addition to its own efforts to provide affordable homes, the Council is working closely with partners to identify opportunities for increasing the future supply of affordable housing. In particular, the Council has recently established a Housing Company to help it meet its local housing strategy targets across a range of tenures.

Social Services performance has continued to improve across a range of areas, particularly the support provided for adults; some aspects of both children's and adult services are performing strongly

32 Social Services-related issues feature strongly in the Council's improvement plan, reflecting the important contribution these services make to the health and welfare of people and families. About half of the Council's improvement priorities for 2012-13 are directly or indirectly associated with the social services department. In addition, about a quarter of the Council's secondary priorities are closely linked to the work of its social services teams. The Council has evaluated its 2012-13 progress against the majority (12 out of 16) of these secondary priorities as good – the planned activities were either delivered on time or were on schedule. Although a few of the planned activities experienced some delay, the Council reported that none were significantly behind schedule by the end of the year.

33 The Council performed well against the seven national indicators used to monitor adult services. Performance for five of the seven indicators improved during 2012-13 and six of the seven were in the top quartile. The Council performed better than the Welsh average for eight of the 13 indicators used to monitor children's services; five of these were in the top quartile. However, performance for six out of 10 indicators (where comparisons with 2011-12 were possible) deteriorated.

- 34 CSSIW's annual evaluation of the Council's provision of social care services describes positive changes across both adult and children's services during 2012-13. The CSSIW evaluation concluded that the Council was forward-looking and innovative; it benefits from strong leadership and clear vision and has continued to make progress in a number of key areas. CSSIW noted the Council's clear intention to put people in control of the services they receive and to support more people to live independent lives. The Council is also seeking to reduce dependency on its services by strengthening the support available within communities and by using new technology.
- 35 The Council's emphasis on prevention has helped more adults to lead independent lives. This means that fewer adults need residential care support. Its reablement service has been particularly successful in helping people regain independence; the majority of users do not require further services following reablement support. The Council identified the need to strengthen its adult safeguarding arrangements and has taken action to improve the way it manages risk. However, the Council has raised concerns over the arrangements for joint working with the Local Health Board in order to improve community health services.
- 36 CSSIW noted that the Council's 2012-13 performance against a significant range of national indicators for children's services remained amongst the best in Wales. The Council provides an effective response to incoming referrals and performs well against its responsibilities for child protection and looked-after-children, but there is scope to improve placement stability. The Council has developed a range of preventative services, provides good support to young people leaving care and has improved their access to accommodation. The Director of social services annual report has been restructured to reflect the key components of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Bill. This promotes better public scrutiny against the key areas of leadership, commissioning, improvement, voice for citizens, safeguarding and integrating services.
- 37 The CSSIW has identified a range of good practice, such as the development of a second extra-care scheme that incorporates 15 purpose-built dementia apartments – the first in Wales. It also identified a few potential risks, such as the sustainability of the Council's medium-term financial planning and its ability to influence locality- focused strategic planning with the Local Health Board. The Council did not robustly address some of the key areas for development previously identified by CSSIW. The Council acknowledged this and prioritised those areas where it had made insufficient progress. For example, the Council is continuing to invest resources to improve its arrangements for adult safeguarding. Although the Council has made some progress, CSSIW noted that further action was needed to secure consistently robust outcomes.

38 In April 2014, CSSIW issued a report focusing on the Council's commissioning arrangements for the care and support for people with dementia and their carers. Overall, the report presents a very positive assessment of the Council's arrangements. For example, CSSIW found that the Council's 'commissioning strategy for long-term placements for older people with dementia is a comprehensive document which considers current and future demand, and links this to budget information and the state of the market-place. The analysis and conclusions drawn are sophisticated and nuanced, and puts the local authority in the position of making sound long-term decisions and managing the market rather than working in a reactive way. They also have a very detailed commissioning strategy for carers.'

39 CSSIW also identified strong interdepartmental working within the Council. Housing is within the same community directorate as social care; this creates good linkages across policy areas and service developments. For example, the Council is planning to introduce 'step down' beds within its sheltered housing schemes and there is no waiting list for housing adaptations.

40 The Council has consulted extensively with users and carers about its commissioning plans for services. Feedback from the families and carers of service users is very complimentary about their experiences of dealing with the Council and about the effectiveness of its engagement arrangements. CSSIW made three recommendations to improve the service provided to people with dementia and their carers; the recommendations focused

on developing more integrated support arrangements between the Council and its partners, particularly with the Local Health Board.

Flintshire schools provide good value-for-money but there is scope for greater efficiency within the education system

41 The Council's improvement plans for education focused on four priority areas during 2012-13. These were to implement organisational change under the School Modernisation Strategy and the national 21st Century Schools programme; to improve learner outcomes in Flintshire schools; to complete reviews of the school funding formula and delegation of funding; and to review the range of services offered to schools and issue a revised partnership agreement and compendium of Service Level Agreements.

42 The Council successfully delivered some important elements of its 2012-13 plans, but its overall progress against the education-related sub-priorities was not so positive. For example, 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.

- 43 The Council evaluated its 2012-13 progress against each of the four sub-priorities as satisfactory, with some delays to scheduled activity, but broadly on track. The Council remained confident of achieving the outcomes for three of the four sub-priorities, but was uncertain about its ability to deliver organisational change under the School Modernisation Strategy and the national 21st Century Schools programme.
- 44 Results in Flintshire primary schools improved significantly in 2013. In contrast to 2012, the proportion of seven-year olds and 11 year-olds achieving the expected standards both exceeded the Wales average. A comparison of performance in Flintshire primary schools with that in schools situated in areas with similar levels of deprivation suggests that Flintshire schools performed broadly at the levels that might be expected.
- 45 In secondary schools, 62.2 per cent of 16 year-olds gained five or more good GCSE grades that included the important subjects of mathematics and English or Welsh (first language). This result was the highest of all councils in Wales and almost 10 percentage points above the average for Wales. The number of 16 year-old school leavers in Flintshire who are not in employment, education or training has continued to reduce; in 2012, the proportion fell to 2.3 per cent, second lowest of all councils in Wales.
- 46 The Council is responsible for ensuring an adequate supply of school places in an efficient manner. In January 2013, there were some 4,000 surplus places in Flintshire schools (15.4 per cent of the total) distributed across the 83 primary and secondary schools. Though higher than Welsh Government target of 10 per cent, this is a little better than the Wales average of 17.4 per cent. The Council continues to address the modernisation of its schools estate.
- 47 Despite the surplus capacity, the schools system in Flintshire costs less to run than in most councils in Wales. For 2013-14, the Council set an education budget (excluding specific grants) that amounted to £4,803 per pupil compared with an average across Wales of £4,992. Given the broadly positive outcomes outlined above, the low costs suggest that the schools service is providing good value for money.
- 48 Within this low total, however, 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.

The Council is taking action to strengthen its arrangements for implementing its Welsh Language Scheme, but has made limited progress in some areas

- 49 The role of the Welsh Language Commissioner was created by the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. It is expected that new powers to impose standards on organisations will come into force through subordinate legislation by the end of 2014. Until that time, the Commissioner will continue to review Welsh language schemes by virtue of powers inherited under the Welsh Language Act 1993.
- 50 The Commissioner works with all councils in Wales to inspect and advise on the implementation of language schemes. It is the responsibility of councils to provide services to the public in Welsh in accordance with the commitments in their language schemes. Every council is committed to providing an annual monitoring report to the Commissioner outlining its performance in implementing the language scheme. The Commissioner analyses every monitoring report, provides a formal response and collects further information as required.
- 51 The Commissioner reported that the Council acknowledges the need to ensure that the Welsh and English languages have equal status. The Council has undertaken to strengthen the link between its Improvement Plan and the Welsh Language Scheme and has developed a formal monitoring

scheme, which is now an integral part of its business planning process. Although the Council did not report comprehensively on the number of its staff who can speak Welsh during 2012-13, it gave a commitment that its entire workforce would complete a language skills self-assessment by March 2014. The Council subsequently issued a self-assessment questionnaire to all staff, although not all staff had responded to the survey by the end of March.

- 52 The number of staff who received Welsh language training during 2012-13 reduced considerably. The Council has now developed a Welsh Language Skills Strategy to offer Welsh language training to its staff in a more strategic and targeted way. The Council expects to launch the strategy during 2014-15, following a period of consultation with staff. Since opportunities to increase the proportion of Welsh-speaking staff through recruitment are currently limited, the Council will need to invest more in Welsh language training and plan its delivery effectively.

The Council has taken action to strengthen its approach to performance evaluation, but further work is required to harmonise its improvement planning and performance reporting arrangements

The Council has strengthened its approach to performance evaluation, underpinned by better improvement planning arrangements, but the changes are not yet fully embedded

- 53 The Auditor General's Improvement Assessment Letter of December 2013 concluded that the Council had discharged its improvement reporting duties under the Measure. The Letter highlighted opportunities for the Council to strengthen its arrangements. For example, we found scope to improve the transparency of the Council's conclusions about its progress and to provide more details about the impact of collaborative initiatives. The Council's evaluation of its performance and progress during 2012-13 was hindered by the need to reflect progress against its 2012-2017 Improvement Plan - which did not clearly define the Council's ambitions for 2012-13. This made it more difficult for the Council to report its annual progress.
- 54 In February 2013, the Auditor General reported that the Council's 2012-2017 improvement plan did 'not include enough information about current performance to enable councillors and readers of the Plan to hold the Council to account for its performance at the end of the year'. As a result, the Council has unable to evaluate progress against its ambitions for 2012-13 as clearly as it should. However, the situation has improved. The Council responded to our earlier concerns by transforming the style and content of its subsequent improvement plan for 2013-14.
- This should help the Council to evaluate its annual performance more effectively, when it produces an annual performance report in October 2014.
- 55 Our 2013 review of the Council's approach to data quality identified good progress in tackling the data-related weaknesses we identified in 2012. The Council's calculations for the performance indicators we sampled in 2013 were accurate, and based on accurate data. The systems we reviewed were progressing satisfactorily, but we found scope to strengthen the Council's local guidance arrangements. Taking action to address this will ensure that performance data used to inform Council decisions is recorded and reported in a consistent way.
- 56 The Council has strengthened its approach to project evaluation. For example, the implementation plans for the Councils access to services projects include a post-project evaluation stage. The Council expects this process to help it understand what went well and where changes are needed, so that similar projects in the future can benefit. Although some information about activity levels was available prior to the changes, the Council's focus during 2013-14 was on assembling detailed baseline data for the projects. By the end of 2014-15, the Council expects to be in a stronger position to assess the initial impact of these initiatives and to demonstrate whether the investment involved has been worthwhile.

- 57 To inform our analysis of the Council's evaluation arrangements, we looked at its arrangements for promoting equality and diversity. We found that the Council has continued to strengthen its approach, but that its arrangements are not fully embedded. For example, the Council did not set success measures for its Strategic Equality Plan, because it did not have any baseline data. This makes it more difficult for the Council to evaluate compliance with the Plan; the Council has now taken action to address this. In addition, although the Strategic Equality Plan includes well-defined objectives, it does not always have clear links to the Council's individual service plans. This increases the risk that decisions are taken without a clear understanding of the implications on equality and diversity.

The Council complied with its responsibilities for financial reporting but there is further scope to strengthen its financial controls in a number of areas

- 58 The auditor appointed by the Auditor General recently gave his opinion on the Council's accounts. Based on this opinion, the Appointed Auditor's view is that the financial statements were generally satisfactory, but there was scope to improve some aspects of the Council's financial control arrangements. For example, the Council needed to do more to understand the functionality of the fixed asset register and to improve the quality of the accounting statements. Appendix 3 provides more detail.

The Council has enhanced its arrangements for planning and supporting improvement, but further action is required to provide the rigour necessary to cope with the challenges ahead

The Council has strengthened its approach to improvement planning but further action is needed to fully comply with Welsh Government guidance

- 59 The Auditor General's Improvement Assessment Letter, September 2013, reported that the Council had discharged its improvement planning duties under the Measure but it should ensure that it acts more in accordance with Welsh Government guidance. The Council's 2013-14 Improvement Plan (the Plan), reflects the Council's new and improved approach to setting improvement objectives. Prior to 2012, the Plan consisted of several related documents. For 2013-14, the annual improvement objectives are described in a concise Plan that focuses on individual aspects of the Council's five-year corporate priorities. This approach has helped to sharpen the Council's own focus on the challenging agenda it has set itself. It has also provided a clearer commitment to improved outcomes for the citizens of Flintshire, during 2013-14 and beyond.
- 60 The Council has improved the layout of the Plan; it is much shorter than before, but 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, straightforward language, diagrams and photographs all help to communicate the Council's priorities for the year. Together, these changes make this version of the Plan a more engaging document and increase the Plan's accessibility to a wider readership.
- 61 Despite this progress, the Plan does not fully comply with Welsh Government guidance. In particular, the Plan lacks clear reference to any consultation on the improvement objectives, or the outcomes from any consultations. However, the Improvement Objectives do echo earlier objectives within the Council's 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.
- 62 At the time the Auditor General issued his improvement assessment letter, the Council's Plan did not include any information on outcome targets for 2013-14. This made it difficult for readers of the Plan to understand the scale of the Council's ambitions for the year. Halfway through 2013-14, the Council published an Annex to the plan that provides baseline data, performance outturn data for 2012-13 and targets for 2013-14. The delay in publishing year-end targets made it harder for officers to monitor progress during the first half of the year. The Council acknowledges that target setting should be an integral part of the improvement planning processes and is taking action to streamline its arrangements.
- 63 The Auditor General's September 2013 Letter raised concerns that some aspects of the Council's improvement arrangements - particularly a lack of clarity over how the Council intended to meet a significant funding gap - remained underdeveloped. These concerns undermined our confidence in the Council's ability to deliver its improvement objectives. Six months later, there are clear signs of the Council taking action to strengthen its improvement

arrangements, including the development of a medium term financial plan that explains how the Council expects to balance its budgets.

64 Nearly a third of the sub-priorities that the Council decided to focus on during 2013-14 relate to becoming a 'modern and efficient council'. Several of these sub-priorities are associated with major and complex projects, some of which were long-standing projects where progress was behind schedule. In the past, we have expressed concern about this lack of progress – concerns that were shared by the Council.

65 During 2013-14, the Council has made steady progress against several of these sub priorities. For example, access to Council services is improving, and work to match resources to priorities has contributed positively to the Council's latest medium-term financial plan. The Council also made significant progress with delivering its 2009-2014 people strategy, which included a range of projects that supported the Council's organisational change agenda. The people strategy included actions to address concerns previously raised by the Auditor General; for example, implementation of the Single Status agreement is now on target and almost complete. During 2014-15, we intend to review the Council's progress against some of the other sub-priorities. We are currently reviewing the Council's approach to asset management and we will continue to monitor implementation of the organisational change programme, which is, arguably, the most radical of its sub-priorities. During autumn 2014, we will also complete a corporate assessment to provide a comprehensive

position statement of the Council's capacity and capability to deliver continuous improvement. The assessment will examine the Council's track record of performance and outcomes as well as evaluating the key arrangements necessary to underpin improvements in services and functions.

66 In common with councils throughout Wales, Flintshire County Council faces significant financial challenges, now and for the foreseeable future. The Council's response has been to develop a detailed organisational redesign and change programme that prioritises the protection of local services, targets efficiency savings and reduces workforce costs.

67 The risks associated with implementing the organisational change programme – such as the need for significant investment, political support and staff engagement – have been managed effectively. The investment required has been agreed, there is strong political support for the programme and staff engagement is underway. The Council has designed its new senior management structure to meet its changing circumstances, to save money and use its senior talent more effectively to modernise the organisation. As a result, the Council anticipates that services will be improved and transformed at a faster pace and that its ability to respond to changes in the external environment will be enhanced.

68 The capacity and capability of the new senior leadership team will be critical to the change process. The changes include the creation of a leaner senior management structure - a single tier of senior officers, instead of the existing two tiers of directors

and heads of service. The new structure contains two corporate roles, five service roles and two transformation roles alongside the position of Chief Executive – a reduction from 18 to 10 senior management posts. The Council recognises that the new operating model is not without risk, but is confident that it can manage those risks effectively. The Council expects the two transformation roles to play a key part in tackling our shared concerns about the slippage of key projects and programmes. The two new Heads of Transformation will provide dedicated capacity to lead and support both service change and internal change.

The Council has developed a more detailed plan to manage its challenging financial position, but success relies on timely and effective implementation and monitoring

- 69 The Auditor General's September 2013 Letter expressed reservations about the Council's capacity to develop plans that identified, in sufficient detail, the sources of efficiency savings or service cuts needed to achieve a balanced budget for 2014-15 and beyond.
- 70 Since then, the Council has updated its medium term financial plan. In October 2013, it identified a budget gap of £16.5 million for 2014-15. The budget gap subsequently reduced to £15.5 million, following adjustments announced in the Welsh Government's Local Government Settlement for 2014-15.

71 Proposals for achieving a balanced budget for 2014-15 were approved in February 2014. The Council's budget plans reflect its overarching priority of protecting front-line services as far as practicable, by focusing on further reductions to operating costs and overheads, reducing overall workforce costs (including a senior management restructure) and remodelling some Council functions. The Council's budget strategy is based on generating significant organisational efficiency savings during 2014-15, followed by a broader regime of service reform and prioritisation from 2015-16 onwards.

72 The 2014-15 revenue budget includes a one-off cost of £6.25 million (funded from reserves) to cover up-front investment and transitional funding costs. The budget also assumes efficiency savings of £12 million during 2014-15. The Council acknowledges the scale of this challenge and understands that effective implementation of its major organisational change programmes will significantly influence the outcome. The Chief Executive's report to Cabinet, supporting the budget proposals, stated that '...the efficiency targets are achievable subject to the organisation meeting the deadlines set, and being decisive at each step'. The Council's Chief Financial Officer, also noted, in the same report, that '... effective and disciplined in-year financial management will be key to ensuring that budgets are managed effectively and prompt action taken to mitigate the impacts should variances occur'. Making sure that these critical factors are addressed robustly will be a high priority for, and an early test of, the Council's restructured senior management team.

- 73 Furthermore, it will be essential that the new senior management team quickly turns its focus to the financial challenges of 2015-16 and beyond, which will require a more fundamental review of the models for future service delivery. As we have highlighted in the past, the lead-in time for such complex changes can be lengthy; there is therefore a risk that anticipated efficiency savings might not be realised as quickly as is necessary.
- 74 Delivery of the Council's organisational change programme, together with the increasing financial challenges faced by all councils, will inevitably put significant pressure on both officers and members. The Council's ability to identify early signs of slippage and to respond flexibly to problems or opportunities will influence the scale of its success.
- 75 The Council set a capital budget for 2014-15 to meet core priorities and urgent needs. In doing so, the Council took a prudent view on the level of expected capital receipts in order to reduce the risk of income not materialising and to introduce certainty to this capital funding stream for future years. Work in developing its capital strategy, which will include member consideration and public consultation, is still underway. The Council recognises that this needs to be fully integrated with revenue financial planning.
- 76 We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the Council's approach, further development of its medium term financial planning and capital strategy and its implementation of the 2014-15 budget plans.

The Council has strengthened planning, management and evaluation arrangements that were previously underdeveloped, but there is scope to reinforce some of the improvements already made

- 77 In his letter of September 2013, the Auditor General concluded that, based on, and limited to, work carried out to date by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators, he believed that the Council was likely to comply with the requirement to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement during this financial year, although some aspects of these arrangements were underdeveloped. Since September 2013 we have continued to review the Council's progress against recommendations and proposals for improvement arising from our earlier work.
- 78 The Auditor General's February 2013 Letter listed eight long-standing recommendations and proposals for improvement, which the Council had not fully addressed. We have grouped these into five broad areas for improvement for the purposes of this report. Progress against these areas is discussed below and summarised in [Appendix 5](#):
- **Evaluation:** The Council responded to our concerns about the robustness of its evaluation arrangements by providing a more balanced narrative in its 2012-13 performance report. The Council also increased the use of data to support its evaluation of progress and impact, but its approach is not yet fully developed.

The Council will need to demonstrate that its evaluation arrangements match the improved rigour of its improvement planning arrangements. This improvement proposal remains open.

- **Performance Management:** During 2013, the Council enhanced the way it defines its annual ambitions. However, scope remains for the Council to make wider use of quantitative as well as qualitative success measures that will help councillors and other stakeholders hold it to account for its performance. This improvement proposal remains open.
- **Engagement:** Although the Council has made some progress against this proposal, its arrangements for engaging with stakeholders are not yet robust. The Council has a wide range of systems for consulting and engaging with groups with protected characteristics, but these systems are not always used by services. We identified some missed opportunities for engagement. For example, during a review of public conveniences, the Council did not engage with local disability access groups or the 50+ forum even though both groups had raised concerns about the issue at a national level. This improvement proposal remains open.
- **Business planning:** The Council developed and agreed a detailed business plan for improving customer access. This improvement proposal is now closed. However, the Council should

continue to strengthen its arrangements for evaluating the success of this initiative – particularly the scale of the efficiency savings achieved. The scheduled post-project evaluation for improving customer access should help the Council to understand what it could do differently or better, and increase confidence in its ability to deliver further invest-to-save projects.

- **Financial Planning:** The Council completed the work required to establish the funding gap and identify ways of balancing the budget. This specific recommendation is now closed. However, as with all councils in Wales, Flintshire County Council will continue to face significant financial pressures for the foreseeable future. The assurance provided by robust arrangements for developing and delivering a balanced budget means that this will remain a high-priority for the Council.

The Council is likely to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2014-15

- 79 Based on the conclusions outlined in the previous sections of this report the Auditor General for Wales believes that Flintshire County Council is likely to meet the requirements of the Measure in making arrangements to secure continuous improvement.

Appendices

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 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 Wales Audit Office 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

Useful information about Flintshire and Flintshire County Council

The Council

The Council spends approximately £318 million per year (2013-14 budget), including specific Welsh Government grants. This equates to about £2,083 per resident. In the same year, the Council also planned to spend £40.9 million on capital items.

The average band D council tax for Flintshire in 2012-13 was £1,184 per year. This has increased by 3.14 per cent, to £1,221 per year for 2013-14. 68.4 per cent of Flintshire's housing is in council tax bands A to D.

The Council is made up of 70 elected members who represent the community and make decisions about priorities and use of resources. The political make-up of the Council is as follows:

- 31 Labour
- 10 Independent Alliance
- 8 Conservatives
- 7 Welsh Liberal Democrats
- 7 New Independents
- 6 Independents
- 1 vacant seat, pending a by-election in May 2014

The Leader is Councillor Aaron Shotton

The Council's Chief Executive is Colin Everett. He is supported by: to be confirmed, following April 2014 recruitment for new SLT

Other information

The Assembly Members for Flintshire are:

Sandy Mewies, Delyn, Labour Party
Carl Sargeant, Alyn and Deeside, Labour Party
Llyr Huws Gruffydd, North Wales Region, Plaid Cymru
Mark Isherwood, North Wales Region, Welsh Conservative Party
Aled Roberts, North Wales Region, Welsh Liberal Democrat
Antoinette Sandbach, North Wales Region, Welsh Conservative Party

The Members of Parliament for Flintshire are:

David Hanson, Delyn, Labour Party
Mark Tami, Alyn and Deeside, Labour Party

For more information, see the Council's own website at www.flintshire.gov.uk or contact the Council at Flintshire County Council, County Hall, Mold, Flintshire, CH7 6NB. Telephone: 01352 752121

Appendix 3

Annual Audit Letter

Councillor Aaron Shotton – Leader
Colin Everett - Chief Executive
Flintshire County Council
County Hall
Mold
CH7 6NB

Dear Councillor Shotton and Colin

Annual Audit Letter

This letter summarises the key messages arising from my statutory responsibilities under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 as the Appointed Auditor and my reporting responsibilities under the Code of Audit Practice.

The Council complied with its responsibilities relating to financial reporting and use of resources but there is further scope to strengthen its financial controls in a number of areas and the Council faces significant financial challenge which needs to be addressed

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 2013, I issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council's and the Pension Fund'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 and Council in my Audit of Financial Statements report on the 25 September 2013 and are summarised below:

- There were a number of amendments in relation to the accounting of fixed assets. The Council had treated non-enhancing capital expenditure incorrectly and an adjustment of £13.8 million was required to restate asset values as a result of having to impair assets. In addition, not all assets were recorded in the asset register resulting in inconsistencies with the financial ledger, which could lead to errors in accounting treatment. Further work also needs to be done to understand the functionality of the fixed asset register and embed consistent working practices.
- Despite some improvements, in particular the clearance of long standing 'balancing items' in the accounts, there is further scope to improve the quality of the accounting statements.
- Based on legal advice available to it, the Council did not fully recognise a liability for pension contributions on its equal pay liabilities. This is contrary to legal advice received by the Appointed Auditor, which suggests that pension contributions should be paid on payment to resolve equal pay claims. Given the diverging legal views and uncertainty regarding the need to recognise a provision, the Appointed Auditor concluded that he would not take any further action as part of the 2012-2013 audit of accounts.
- In September 2013, the liquidation of AD Waste was finalised. In accounting terms this was an adjusting event after the balance sheet date and between the draft accounts preparation and finalisation, the Council therefore adjusted the final version of the accounts to reflect the post liquidation position. All accounting transactions relating to ADW being brought in-house have been completed and were satisfactory.

The following issue was identified regarding the Clwyd Pension Fund accounts:

- The accounts contained an uncorrected misstatement, although it was not material. Investments were recorded in the accounts based on valuation reports available at the time of preparation. Prior to the conclusion of the audit, more up to date valuation reports became available which showed that investments at 31 March 2013 had been understated by £0.9 million. However, as this was a timing issue, the Council provided management representations, which we accepted, to explain the reason for not amending.

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. Overall, I am satisfied that the Council has appropriate arrangements in place. The Auditor General will highlight areas where the effectiveness of these arrangements has yet to be demonstrated or where improvements could be made when he publishes his Annual Improvement Report.

The Council updated its medium term financial plan in October 2013. The plan identified a budget gap of £16.5 million for 2014-15 and £47.8 million over the coming five years. Since then, the provisional Local Government Settlement for 2014-15 was announced by Welsh Government. This included a number of adjustments, which had the effect of reducing the budget gap to £15.5 million for 2014-15. The plan sets out the organisational change strategy to meet the efficiency and savings targets over the next five years. The major structural review will consist of: corporate efficiency; functional efficiency; organisational design – structure and operating models; and, organisational design – workforce.

The scale of change facing the Council to deliver the financial savings is considerable although we understand that the Council is well on its way to identifying how the financial gap in 2014-15 is to be met. Nonetheless, there is still significant work required to set a balanced budget for 2014-15 and to meet the financial challenges in 2015-16 and beyond.

The Council is close to finalising its single status agreement, which sees 84.5 per cent of staff set to stay the same or gain on base pay. The proposed agreement also aims to provide a modern and positive solution for low pay. The Council is confident that it strikes the balance of acceptability and affordability and the financial implications have been built into its financial planning.

I issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts has been completed on 30 September 2013.

The financial audit fee for 2012-13 is currently expected to be in line with the agreed fee set out in the Annual Audit Outline.

Yours sincerely

John Herniman

For and on behalf of the Appointed Auditor
29 November 2013

Appendix 4

Flintshire County Council's improvement objectives and self-assessment

The Council's improvement objectives

The Council is required by the Welsh Government to make plans to improve its functions and the services it provides. Each year it must publish these plans along with specific 'improvement objectives' that set out the key things that the Council intends to do to improve. The Council must do this as soon as possible after 1 April each year.

The Council published its improvement objectives for 2013-14 in its Improvement Plan 2013-14, which can be found on the Council website at www.flintshire.gov.uk.

The Council restructured the ten priorities in place for 2012-13 into eight thematic priorities, underpinned by areas where the Council expected to make a positive impact during 2013-14. The table below illustrates the restructured priorities.

Improvement Priorities 2012-13	Improvement Priorities 2013-14
To be a modern, efficient and cost effective public organisation through our four resources strategies - the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, the People Strategy, the Asset Management Strategy and the ICT Strategy - whilst ensuring our local taxes and fees and charges are fair and affordable	Modern and efficient council <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving customer services Protecting local front-line public services through the best use of our resources Having the right buildings in the right places for the right uses Making our money go further through smart procurement Achieving a fair and affordable pay and grading structure Managing services well to achieve our priorities
To achieve the greatest possible cost efficiencies through regional and sub-regional collaboration to reinvest in local public services	
To be a modern, caring and flexible employer with fair and equal pay and terms and conditions of employment under a Single Status Agreement	
To achieve the highest standards of customer service and care through our Customer Services Strategy	
To make our communities safe and to safeguard the vulnerable with children and older people being priority Groups	Safe communities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving road safety Keeping people and communities safe

Improvement Priorities 2012-13	Improvement Priorities 2013-14
To protect and grow the local and regional economy, to be a prosperous County and to provide help and support for those vulnerable to poverty	<p>Poverty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protecting people from poverty <p>Economy and enterprise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making local communities viable Creating jobs and growing the local economy Supporting and creating new forms of local business
To promote independent, healthy and fulfilled living in the community with the highest quality personalised and supportive social and health care services	<p>Living well</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helping more people to live independently and well at home Improving people's quality of life
To meet housing need in the County and to work with partners to ensure a sufficient supply of quality and affordable homes and housing services in the social, mixed tenure and private sector housing markets	<p>Housing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helping more people to live independently and well at home Improving quality of life for our tenants through improved housing Improving the choice and quality of local housing
To secure a modern and high performing range of learning, cultural, play and leisure opportunities for all ages with our schools, colleges and other partners	<p>Skills and learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving standards in schools to get the best learner outcomes Improving places of learning to get the best learner outcomes Meeting the skills and employment needs of local employers
To protect, plan and develop sustainable natural and built environments	<p>Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> People being able to access employment, local services and facilities Reducing our carbon impact on the natural environment

The Council's self-assessment of performance

The Council's self-assessment of its performance during 2012-13 is set out in its Annual Performance Report 2012-13. This can be found on the Council's website at www.flintshire.gov.uk.

Appendix 5

Previous recommendations or proposals for improvement made to the Council

Over the course of our work since 2010, we have made recommendations or proposals for improvement. The Council has satisfactorily addressed or made progress against, most of these. The status of earlier recommendations or proposals for improvement, not previously identified as complete, is set out below. We will continue to monitor and report on the progress made by the Council in implementing the remaining improvement proposals or recommendations under our future programme of work.

Corporate assessment update letter 2011	Current Status
P3: Develop an improved corporate approach to engagement with communities and users of services including arrangements to enhance the contribution of elected members.	While the Council has made some progress against this proposal, it remains an area for improvement; the improvement proposal remains open.

Annual Improvement Report 2012	Current Status
R2: The Council needs to complete its work in quantifying the financial benefits of its programme of efficiencies and organisational change by mid 2012-13, to determine the remaining funding gap (shortfall or surplus) and then establish clear plans to identify further savings and/or redirect resources to priorities.	The Council completed the work required; this recommendation is now closed. However, councils in Wales will continue to face significant financial pressures for the foreseeable future. The need for robust arrangements to develop and then deliver a balanced budget and to meet cost-saving targets means that this remains a live, high-priority issue.
P1: Complete the work in progress to set clear success measures for all improvement objectives and ensure regular, clear reporting.	The Council improved the clarity of some success measures within its 2013-14 Improvement Plan. It also improved the clarity of its progress reporting against that Plan. However, scope remains to expand the Council's use of quantitative as well as qualitative success measures, to support a more objective evaluation and reporting of progress and success. This improvement proposal remains open.
P2: Develop and agree a detailed business plan for improving customer access showing how success measures will be achieved and offer value for money.	The Council did develop and agree a detailed business plan for improving customer access. This improvement proposal is now closed. Nevertheless, the Council should ensure that its arrangements for demonstrating the efficiency gains arising from its investment in improving customer access are robust.

Letter 2: February 2013	Current Status
<p>P1: Within the context of its medium-term corporate planning, the Council should define a set of annual Improvement Objectives that encapsulates its ambitions for the year and communicate them in a form that enables the public to hold the Council to account for its performance.</p>	<p>The Council responded to this improvement proposal within its 2013-14 Improvement Plan. The Plan contained a restructured set of Improvement Priorities that more clearly defined the intended impact for the year, within a more reader-friendly format. However, scope remains for the Council to make wider use of quantitative success measures that would help the public to hold the Council to account for its performance. The improvement proposal remains open.</p>
<p>P2 : Ensure that the Improvement Plan available to the public on the Council's website reflects any changes resulting from reviews during the year, and that any revised Plan includes a record of any such changes.</p>	<p>The Council did not need to revise its 2013-14 Improvement Plan during the year (but did not publish its success measures until mid-year). This improvement proposal is now closed. However, the Council should ensure that any changes to subsequent Improvement Plans are clear and well documented.</p>
<p>P3: Increase the use of relevant data to support the Council's evaluation of outcomes in relation to its Improvement Objectives</p>	<p>The Council has increased the use of data to support its evaluation of outcomes. However, there is still significant scope to enhance the Council's approach to evaluation, by including the use of freely available data. This improvement proposal remains open.</p>
<p>P4: Improve the balance of the narrative supporting each assessment, drawing out the lessons learned from particularly successful work and from work that has not gone as well as intended.</p>	<p>The Council's 2012-13 Annual Performance Report provides a more balanced narrative; the Report evaluates what went well and what went less well, for every sub-priority. This improvement proposal is now closed.</p>

Wales Audit Office
24 Cathedral Road
Cardiff CF11 9LJ

Tel: 029 2032 0500

Fax: 029 2032 0600

Textphone: 029 2032 0660

E-mail: info@wao.gov.uk

Website: www.wao.gov.uk

Swyddfa Archwilio Cymru
24 Heol y Gadeirlan
Caerdydd CF11 9LJ

Ffôn: 029 2032 0500

Ffacs: 029 2032 0600

Ffôn Testun: 029 2032 0660

E-bost: info@wao.gov.uk

Gwefan: www.wao.gov.uk