

# Annual improvement Report incorporating the Corporate Assessment Report 2015

## Summary report

1. Each year, the Auditor General must report on how well Welsh councils, fire and rescue authorities, and national parks 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 in Flintshire County Council (the Council) and also draws on the work of the relevant Welsh inspectorates. The report summarises the assessments undertaken since the Auditor General published his last annual improvement report in June 2014 and includes the findings of the Auditor General's Corporate Assessment, undertaken in September 2014. Taking all these findings into account, the report records the Auditor General's conclusion on whether he believes that the Council will make arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2015-16.

2. This conclusion should not be seen as a definitive statement of organisational health or as a prediction of future success. Rather, it should be viewed as providing an opinion on the extent to which the arrangements currently in place are reasonably sound insofar as can be ascertained from the work carried out.

3. 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](mailto:info@wao.gov.uk) or writing to us at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9LJ.

4. The Auditor General has concluded that **the Council's track record suggests that it is likely to respond positively to the internal and significant external challenges it faces and make arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2015-16.** This judgement reflects the conclusions of his corporate assessment, that **the Council has made significant progress in a number of difficult areas during the last year; although it needs to strengthen aspects of its arrangements, the Council is reasonably well placed to continue to deliver its priorities in the face of further financial challenges.**

5. The audit team found that, **despite some strengths and areas of progress, aspects of the Council's arrangements are not fully supporting decision making and the delivery of the Council's agreed priorities.** We reached this conclusion because:

- a the Council has established a wide-ranging set of clearly-stated priorities that have a broad base of support within the Council and among partners;
- b the Council's corporate planning and reporting of performance have improved year-on-year but plans at service level are of inconsistent quality; and
- c sound governance structures are mostly in place but some aspects are not working as effectively as they might.

6. We also found that **the Council has taken significant strides forward in its use of resources and now needs to co-ordinate the elements more systematically in the face of future financial challenges.** We found that:

- a improvements in financial planning have the potential to support the Council in maintaining its recent track record of financial savings in the face of increasing austerity, but difficult decisions lie ahead;
- b the successful completion of the Council's Single Status agreement and Equal Pay Review has been highly demanding and other Human Resources priorities have therefore made slower progress than intended;
- c the Council has a clear vision for its land and buildings, but the links between asset management and the planning of revenue expenditure are not explicit enough; and
- d despite delivering significant improvements in a number of areas, the ICT function has struggled to prioritise its work in the face of increasing demand.

7. Finally, we found that, during 2013-14, **the Council made good progress against the improvement priorities we looked at but its performance against the national indicators declined slightly.**

8. We concluded that:

- a Flintshire schools continue to provide good value for money and the Council is seeking further efficiency within the education system;
- b there has been good progress in adult social services but the performance of children's services has been less consistent in the face of increasing demand;
- c overall performance against the national indicators declined slightly, but with some strong performance across several service areas;
- d the Council is making good progress in implementing initiatives to help mitigate the impact of cuts to welfare benefits and to reduce fuel poverty;

e the Council's performance in preventing homelessness has improved but there has been little progress in the length of time people spend in temporary accommodation; and

f the Council continues to make progress in improving the Welsh language capability of its staff but it recognises that progress is not consistent across the whole Council.

## **Recommendations and proposals for improvement**

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:

a make proposals for improvement – if proposals are made to the Council, we would expect it to do something about them and we will follow up what happens;

b make formal recommendations for improvement – if a formal recommendation is made the Council must prepare a response to that recommendation within 30 working days;

c conduct a special inspection and publish a report and make recommendations; and

d recommend to Ministers of the Welsh Government that they intervene in some way.

10. We have made no statutory recommendations during previous work this year and we make none in this report. The following proposals for improvement stem from our corporate assessment work in September 2014.

## **Proposals for Improvement**

**P1** The Council should develop and implement a consistent approach to business planning that promotes the ownership by staff of key objectives and targets.

**P2** The Council should improve the quality of its reports to committees and Cabinet to ensure that:

- where necessary, reports enable councillors to refer easily to relevant policies and previous decisions and discussions;
- key messages and recommendations are clear and succinct; and
- reports to scrutiny committees include recommendations or options that committees might endorse.

**P3** The Council should ensure that, in implementing its revised strategies for People, ICT and Asset Management:

- their financial implications feed into the medium-term financial plan; and
- the links between the strategies are fully considered so that specialist staff are available when required.

**P4** Group Leaders should strongly encourage members to take advantage of the Member Development Scheme.

**P5** The Council should take the opportunity of its review of scrutiny structures to ensure that Overview and Scrutiny Committees can add real value to Council decision-making by aligning agendas more explicitly to Council priorities and risks.

**P6** The Council should:

- adopt a consistent approach to managing risk, ensuring that all staff involved use a similar approach to record impact, likelihood and mitigating actions; and
- apply this approach to its future savings plans.

**P7** The Council should ensure a consistent approach to workforce planning and use the results to inform future reductions in staff.