



WALES AUDIT OFFICE
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

Corporate Assessment Report 2015

Wrexham County Borough Council

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Together with appointed auditors, the Auditor General audits local government bodies in Wales, including unitary authorities, police, probation, fire and rescue authorities, national parks and community councils. He also conducts local government value for money studies and assesses compliance with the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009.

Beyond local government, the Auditor General is the external auditor of the Welsh Government and its sponsored and related public bodies, the Assembly Commission and National Health Service bodies in Wales.

The Auditor General and staff of the Wales Audit Office aim to provide public-focused and proportionate reporting on the stewardship of public resources and in the process provide insight and promote improvement.

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Summary report

Summary

- 1 In 2013-14, staff of the Wales Audit Office began a four-year cycle of Corporate Assessments of improvement authorities in Wales. This means that, in addition to an annual programme of improvement studies and audits of councils' approaches to improvement planning and reporting, each authority will receive an in-depth Corporate Assessment once during a four-year period. In the intervening years, we will keep track of developments through progress updates.
- 2 Our fieldwork for the Corporate Assessment focused on the extent to which arrangements are contributing to delivering improved service performance and outcomes for citizens. The Corporate Assessment sought to answer the following question: 'Is the Council capable of delivering its priorities and improved outcomes for citizens?'
- 3 The Auditor General has concluded that: Wrexham County Borough Council's vision and ambition are helping deliver improved outcomes for citizens but some outdated arrangements may limit the speed of progress. He came to this conclusion because:
 - the Council's inclusive leadership has established a clear vision and strategic direction that is effectively supporting improvement;
 - governance and accountability arrangements are generally strong, but better co-ordination between Executive Board and scrutiny would bring benefits;
 - arrangements to manage Council resources are not consistently robust, with strengths undermined in some areas by outdated approaches and capacity challenges:
 - a track record of prudent financial planning and strong budgetary control provides strong foundations for the Council's far-reaching change programme;
 - workforce planning arrangements are well-integrated, but out-dated people management systems, capacity and capability pressures and cultural issues may slow progress;
 - strategic asset management is generally sound, but is undermined by performance management and database arrangements which are not fully effective; and
 - information technology and information management are supporting services, but the Council is not getting full value from these enabler functions;
 - the Council has an established and effective approach to partnership working which delivers improved performance and outcomes;
 - arrangements for improvement planning, performance reporting and risk management are generally sound but lack consistency in some areas; and
 - the Council, in collaboration with partners, continues to improve performance and outcomes across most of its priority areas.

Proposals for Improvement

Proposals for Improvement	
P1	<p>Governance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure that reports to Members, particularly those involving data analysis, are worded clearly, to promote informed decision-making.• Ensure that public meeting minutes clearly explain and record decisions made during the meeting.• Co-ordinate forward work programmes more effectively so that scrutiny and Executive Board meetings work seamlessly together.
P2	<p>Use of Resources – People:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure sufficient capacity to provide effective HR support for both the Reshaping Programme and for routine workforce-related issues.• Ensure that all line managers have the capacity and capability to deal with routine workforce-related issues, particularly those related to staff sickness absence.• Ensure that systems and processes for notifying, monitoring, recording and reporting sickness absence are efficient, effective and able to provide timely and accurate data.
P3	<p>Use of Resources – Assets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strengthen asset performance management arrangements and support the arrangements with a fit-for-purpose database.
P4	<p>Use of Resources – ICT and Information Management:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop and implement an ICT Strategy that complements the Information Management Strategy, covers current and medium-term business needs and is clearly aligned to the Council's strategic priorities.• Refresh the Information Management Strategy:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– align the Strategy to the Council's strategic priorities; and– clarify arrangements for effectively implementing the Strategy.
P5	<p>Improvement Planning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure a consistent and robust approach to risk management across all service areas.

Introduction

- 4 In 2013-14, staff of the Wales Audit Office began a four-year cycle of Corporate Assessments of improvement authorities in Wales. This means that, in addition to an annual programme of improvement studies and audits of councils' approaches to improvement planning and reporting, each council will receive an in-depth Corporate Assessment once during a four-year period. In the intervening years, we will keep track of developments and focus further assessment work on a number of key themes, developed in discussion with each council.
- 5 We undertook our Corporate Assessment fieldwork at Wrexham County Borough Council (the Council) during October 2015. The Corporate Assessment does not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the performance of all of the Council's services. Instead, it reports on the Council's track record of performance and outcomes as well as the key arrangements that are necessary to underpin improvements in services and functions.
- 6 This work has been undertaken by staff of the Wales Audit Office, on behalf of the Auditor General. 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 it has made.
- 7 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.
- 8 Our fieldwork for the Corporate Assessment focused on the extent to which arrangements are contributing to delivering improved service performance and outcomes for citizens. The Corporate Assessment sought to answer the following question: **'Is the Council capable of delivering its priorities and improved outcomes for citizens?'**

9 The Corporate Assessment covers the following:

Vision and strategic direction:

- ‘Does the Council’s vision and strategic direction support improvement?’

Governance and accountability:

- ‘Do the Council’s governance and accountability arrangements support robust and effective decision-making?’

Use of resources:

- ‘Is the Council managing its resources effectively to deliver its planned improvements in performance and outcomes?’

Collaboration and partnerships:

- ‘Are the Council’s collaboration and partnership arrangements working effectively to deliver improved performance and outcomes?’

Managing improvement:

- ‘Is the Council effectively managing its improvement programme?’

Performance and outcomes:

- ‘Is the Council making progress on achieving its planned improvements in performance and outcomes?’

10 The conclusions in this report are based on the work carried out and, unless stated otherwise, reflect the situation at the point in time they were concluded.

11 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 – we make such proposals in this report 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. We find no reason to make such recommendations;
- conduct a special inspection and publish a report and make recommendations. We find no reason to conduct such an inspection; and
- recommend to Ministers of the Welsh Government that they intervene in some way. We find no reason to make such a recommendation.

12 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@audit.wales or writing to us at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9LJ.

Detailed report

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



The Council's inclusive leadership has established a clear vision and strategic direction that are effectively supporting improvement

The Council has a clear vision and strategic direction that are informed by local and regional stakeholder priorities and promote improved outcomes for local people

- 13 The Council's vision is to be a strong community leader that supports and enables the county borough and its people to fulfil their potential and prosper. The Council Plan 2015-17, which has three inter-connected strategic themes and a corporate theme, is the overarching plan that helps the Council to focus its resources and drive improvement.
- 14 The strategic themes align with, and contribute to, shared priorities in the Single Integrated Plan (Our Wrexham Plan 2013-24) developed by the Council and its partners on the Local Service Board (LSB). The strategic themes are:
 - Economy: creating a vibrant, diverse and inclusive economy;
 - People: raising aspirations, creating confidence and promoting opportunity; and
 - Place: investing in attractive, safe and inclusive communities.
- 15 The Council Plan, originally developed in 2012, is refreshed annually, in response to the changing local, regional and national context. The strategic and operational themes in the Plan are supported by 15 priority outcomes that clearly describe what the Council wants to achieve. The 2015-16 Plan also defines the Wrexham Way, which is the framework by which the Council intends to achieve its vision. This framework focuses on building trustworthy relationships, efficiently improving outcomes and reframing its relationship with the public.
- 16 The Council's vision reflects a clear commitment to continuous improvement and high-quality, efficient and effective services. The Council listens and responds to issues raised by stakeholders. Their needs and aspirations influence the Council's vision and its strategic planning. For example, the 2015-17 priority outcomes were influenced by two public consultation exercises that explored service priorities and proposals to meet the growing budget pressures. The results of the consultation informed Member target-setting workshops and led to increased budget allocations for some priority service areas.
- 17 The Council aims to maximise the benefits of partnership working to promote improvement. It has defined criteria under which it will collaborate, based on the anticipated benefits from collaboration, for both the Council and for the county borough.
- 18 The Council is making fundamental changes to its operating model to make it fit for the future. It is re-engineering the way it operates, with the help of a Reshaping Partner, appointed to add pace, expertise and capacity.

The Council's leadership is open, inclusive and champions continuous improvement across all activities

- 19 Members and officers clearly articulate and promote the Council vision, and provide a consistent, visible, and shared leadership message to staff and partners. Leadership and management arrangements are generally good, but with a few inconsistencies, such as a variable commitment to tackling sickness absence. One of the Council's drivers for developing a new operating model is to promote effective leadership and management.
- 20 The Council understands the importance of establishing a strong organisational culture, underpinned by appropriate capacity and capability. In response to constructive feedback from staff, the Council is investing in this area, for example, specialist input from its Reshaping Partner provides additional capacity and expertise to drive changes to the operating model. The Council also expects this approach to act as a catalyst for cultural change.
- 21 Efforts to strengthen the organisational culture of the Council have had a positive effect. Arrangements for communicating information about the reshaping programme with stakeholders are more comprehensive than previous, less ambitious change programmes. The Council acknowledges that there is more to do and that the arrangements are not yet fully effective. It is taking further steps to raise staff awareness and reduce their anxiety about the changes.
- 22 Lead Members have welcomed a transition from silo working towards a more interdependent approach, and a wider understanding about the impact of budget pressures. Lead Members also report a greater willingness by Members and officers, to consider a wider range of service delivery options, as their understanding of the Reshaping programme improves.
- 23 The Council's approach to prioritisation and target setting is open, inclusive and informed by consultation with stakeholders. The Council's vision reflects a clear commitment to continuous improvement. Half of all targets within the Council Plan are set at levels intended to either improve, or stretch performance¹.
- 24 All Members have opportunities to contribute to the development and review of Council priorities. These opportunities include participating in all-Member workshops, the scrutiny process and raising questions during Executive Board meetings. However, the pace and scale of the reshaping programme present a risk which the Council has recognised. Opportunities to robustly review and challenge proposals for new service delivery models may be constrained by the volume of the work involved over a short time. The Council is addressing this risk, using all-Member workshops to take Members through the service models before they go to the Executive Board, together with focused input from scrutiny committees.

¹ The Council sets outcome indicators at one of four levels: **Sustain** – match the previous years' performance; **Improve** - in line with current national trends; **Stretch** – achieve a significant improvement; or **Minimum** – the standard below which performance should not fall.

- 25 The Council has a corporate approach to the delivery of priorities; the Council Plan focuses on the achievement of priority outcomes, not on the contribution of individual departments. Inter-departmental collaboration is widely encouraged. For example, initiatives that support the economic strategic theme rely on joined-up working between planning, environment, business support, and culture and heritage services.
- 26 Council staff demonstrate good awareness of the Council's priorities and a commitment to achieving them. The Council has established a culture that promotes performance and accountability, with comprehensive arrangements to raise staff awareness. For example, the 'performance review and competency development' (PRCD) framework creates links between personal objectives, departmental priorities and wider strategic priorities. This approach helps front-line staff to understand how their contribution supports the Council's vision.

Governance and accountability arrangements are generally strong, but better co-ordination between Executive Board and scrutiny would bring benefits

Clear roles and responsibilities, supported by appropriate values and behaviour promote good governance and strong accountability

- 27 The Council's Constitution clearly defines Member roles and responsibilities, underpinned by values covering trust, respect, innovation, flexibility, integrity and commitment. This clarity helps to promote good governance and strong accountability. A politically balanced Constitution Working Group supports the Monitoring Officer in his responsibility to regularly monitor and review the Constitution, the most recent update was in September 2015.
- 28 Member conduct in meetings is invariably professional and constructive. Members and officers consistently demonstrate appropriate values and behaviour and relationships between Members and officers are good. There is a culture of mutual respect and trust between Members across political groups and with senior officers, which promotes productive and professional working relationships. Lead Members regularly meet the Senior Leadership Team, recognise the pressures they and their staff are under, and have a high regard for their professionalism and accessibility.
- 29 Lead Members consistently demonstrate ownership and knowledge of their portfolios and collective accountability for decisions made at Executive Board. Lead Members present reports and respond to most questions; officers in attendance provide responses of a technical nature, when necessary.
- 30 Lead Members have limited delegated powers, an arrangement which could be perceived as undermining their accountability. However, officers and the Executive recognise that increased delegation could reduce the volume of 'routine' decisions that need to go to committee. This would allow Members to focus their capacity on high priority issues. The Council intends to review delegation levels during 2016.

Arrangements to support Members have been strengthened, but the quality of a minority of reports and minutes has the potential to reduce Member efficiency and effectiveness

- 31 Arrangements to support Members to be effective in their role are adequate. Members can access a comprehensive training and development package. A newly appointed Member Development Champion meets Members and Group Leaders to discuss and promote the Member Development Strategy and Annual Member Development Programme. The Council expects this new approach to make it easier to anticipate new or emerging training and development needs.
- 32 The Council encourages each Member to publish an Annual Report outlining their role, responsibilities, key activities and training completed during the year. The proportion of Members who publish Annual Reports has gradually increased since 2012-13. However, only just over half (28) of the Council's 52 Members produced Annual Reports for 2014-15. For some, this was a missed opportunity to demonstrate their involvement and contribution to the county borough, to their constituents.
- 33 A minority of papers are not clearly drafted, making it difficult for Members, and other stakeholders, to fully grasp the issues, or make an effective contribution to meetings. In particular, committee papers containing data occasionally lack the clarity or quality of data analysis necessary to promote constructive challenge or support effective decision-making. At best, this leads to additional questions seeking clarity and lengthier meetings, at worst, papers have to be re-drafted and re-presented, which causes frustration and delays.
- 34 There is also scope to improve the clarity of some committee meeting minutes. For example, the extent of challenge and debate prior to some decisions is difficult to assess when minutes state that the Lead Member 'responded to questions accordingly'. Anyone not present at the meeting would have little idea about the challenges raised and responses provided, based on the minutes produced, although this is partially mitigated where meetings are web cast.

Decision making across the Council is generally robust and effective

- 35 In late 2014, the Council amended the Constitution, removing the requirement to operate with a politically balanced Executive. This altered the political dynamic, creating a coalition Executive of three political groups, with three groups in opposition. The constitutional change has created a more formal opposition structure that was absent from the previous regime and has increased the likelihood of challenge.
- 36 Executive Board meetings are business-like, but the level of debate in public Board meetings is, at times, very limited. In most cases, requests for clarification or challenge to the reports come from non-Executive Members in attendance. To support openness and transparency, members of the public are allowed to ask questions at meetings. When citizens do participate in meetings, they are treated with respect and courtesy.
- 37 Regular informal meetings of the Executive Board with chief officers provide valuable opportunities for Executive Board Members to discuss and become familiar with the content of reports prior to final publication. When there is a heavy agenda, this helps to keep the meeting length manageable. However, prior discussion can detract from the quality of debate in the public forum.

Scrutiny arrangements are being strengthened, but better co-ordination between Executive Board and scrutiny would bring benefits

- 38 Most Members appreciate that scrutiny has the potential to support effective decision-making. However, a minority of Members do not fully value or understand the contribution that good scrutiny can make. The Council is refreshing the scrutiny function to reflect feedback from a 2014-15 review it commissioned from the Centre for Public Scrutiny. Members have responded positively to the feedback. The Council has agreed a vision and purpose for scrutiny, these are:
- scrutiny is equally valued by all because it is an integral element of the decision-making process; and
 - scrutiny in Wrexham will contribute to transparent, inclusive and accountable decision-making, which will lead to better outcomes for local people.

- 39 The Council also agreed five key areas for scrutiny development. These are:
- review the role of Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs to enable them to take greater responsibility and effective leadership of the scrutiny process;
 - more effective/structured communication arrangements between scrutiny, Lead Members and Officers;
 - more effective work programme planning by both scrutiny committees and the Executive Board to enable scrutiny to focus on the 'big' issues';
 - identify and develop more innovative ways to raise awareness of scrutiny and promote public engagement; and
 - support the continued development of scrutiny members' skills and capacity.
- 40 Executive Board and scrutiny agendas are not always co-ordinated effectively. This can lead to unnecessary friction, particularly if scrutiny committees miss opportunities to challenge proposals or to hold the Executive Board to account. The ability to prioritise and make informed decisions about what, and when to scrutinise, will become increasingly important as the pace of the Reshaping programme accelerates.
- 41 The Council has recognised that good work planning can help scrutiny committees to prioritise and focus their capacity more effectively. Scrutiny committees recently reviewed and updated their forward work plans, informed by key documents such as the internal audit work programme, the corporate risk register and the Executive Board forward work plan.
- 42 The Audit Committee continues to improve its effectiveness and makes appropriate linkages with scrutiny committees. The recently appointed Lay Member Chairman of the Audit Committee now attends the regular Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs meeting. This demonstrates a commitment to strengthen links and develop a wider understanding across the whole governance processes. However, the anticipated reduction in management capacity is likely to leave some managers with new and unfamiliar responsibilities. This, together with limited capacity within internal audit, may increase the risk of non-compliance with key controls and policies. The Council will need to remain alert to this increased risk.

The Council's engagement with its stakeholders promotes good accountability

- 43 The Council engages with its stakeholders in a range of open and transparent ways that support accountability. For example:
- Live and recorded webcasts of Council, Executive Board and Planning Committee meetings, supported by progress reports on social media, allow stakeholders to follow the discussions online. The Council is keen to extend these arrangements to cover all public meetings, but financial pressures may limit its ability to widen accessibility.
 - The Council's approach to engagement and consultation provides the public with opportunities to shape its services; public consultation on options for the 2016-17 budget generated a good response. The Council has recognised the need to improve the way it seeks views from some harder-to-reach groups and communities and is developing a targeted approach to engage with them.
 - Scrutiny has engaged with local community groups, listening to the views of Senedd yr Ifanc² and meeting representatives from the Health Board and North Wales Police.
 - The Council has engaged effectively with the North Wales Area Planning Board and its partners and has helped to influence the Board's vision and priorities.

Proposals for Improvement

P1 Governance:

- Ensure that reports to Members, particularly those involving data analysis, are worded clearly, to promote informed decision-making.
- Ensure that public meeting minutes clearly explain and record decisions made during the meeting.
- Co-ordinate forward work programmes more effectively so that scrutiny and Executive Board meetings work seamlessly together.

² Senedd yr Ifanc: Wrexham's Youth Parliament, which works on Borough County-wide issues that affect the young people of Wrexham.

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

A track record of prudent financial planning and strong budgetary control provides strong foundations for the Council's far-reaching change programme

- 44 A financial perspective features strongly within the senior leadership team. This helps to ensure that planning and decision-making are firmly grounded. Medium-term financial planning is clear and concise. The three-year plan is updated annually, supported by detailed analysis and reasonable assumptions about costs, income and inflationary pressures.
- 45 Like all local authorities in Wales, the Council depends heavily on Revenue Support Grant (RSG)³ to pay for the services it delivers. For 2015-16, RSG accounts for almost 60 per cent of the Council's planned £225 million revenue expenditure. Although the level of RSG awarded to councils in Wales has reduced in recent years, demographic trends in Wrexham have meant a smaller reduction than in most councils. Nevertheless, uncertainty about future levels of RSG introduces a significant risk into the Council's financial planning. The Council made prudent assumptions about future levels of RSG, originally estimating that it needed to reduce expenditure by £45.5 million over the three years beginning in 2015-16. The Council subsequently updated its assumptions (reflecting the December 2015 provisional settlement announced by the Welsh Government) to reduce expenditure by £27 million over the three years beginning 2016-17.
- 46 Budget setting is timely. It reflects the medium-term plan and is consistent with the Council Plan. In recent years, Wrexham citizens have responded in increasing numbers to the Council's budget consultation, providing valuable feedback on the public perception of where budget cuts should and should not fall. The Council took account of citizens' views in setting its budget for 2015-16. However, the public consultation for 2016-17 included a number of proposals at an early stage of development, influenced by the timescales associated with the funding settlement for 2016-17, which were particularly challenging for both Welsh Government and Local Government consultation. The Council's consultation process provided limited guidance about the likely impact of budget cuts on service quality and accessibility.

³ The level of Revenue Support Grant allocated to councils is influenced by factors such as population, numbers of children and elderly people, road lengths, rurality and sparsity.

- 47 The Council has a good record of delivering its savings plans. In 2015, we reported that the Council had accurately identified its annual budget shortfall between 2011-12 and 2013-14 and had developed a range of savings to meet the gap. The Council's savings plans for 2014-15 were fit for purpose and well managed. All departments returned slight underspends against their budgets in 2014-15, reflecting the effectiveness of budget monitoring and control during the year. However, there was a significant variance between the projected out-turn for schools, reported to Members early in 2015, and the final out-turn at the end of the financial year. Although there are some mitigating circumstances outside the Council's control, such variance is unhelpful to Members (most of whom are school governors) in monitoring the financial position of schools.
- 48 By meeting overall savings targets, the Council has not needed to draw on reserves to balance its budget. The use of reserves is clear and transparent, with earmarked reserves covering clearly identified risks and commitments. The Council's General Fund is increasing slowly to the agreed and prudent level of five per cent of net expenditure, excluding schools expenditure.
- 49 Increasing the levels of income from fees and charges represents an important strand in reducing the costs of service delivery. In the past, proposed increases in charges – and parking charges in particular – have been controversial and the subject of much debate within the Council. The Council has very recently adopted a policy on income and charging intended to guide such debate. The policy was informed by a comprehensive analysis of the costs of discretionary services and the extent to which those costs are met by the income they generate. This information provides a sound basis for the implementation of the new policy. The Council's HR and finance staff provide support to other services without charging for their services in a way that reflects the level or complexity of the service provided. As they are unaware of the true cost of this support, managers are not encouraged to question the extent to which they buy specialist support and to become less dependent on that support in terms of managing people and budgets.

The Council continues to strengthen its procurement arrangements to better support the emerging Reshaping programme

- 50 The Council has recognised that an incremental approach to making savings, which it had relied on in previous years, is not sustainable. Four key principles that have wide Member support underpin a transformational programme of change in the way that the Council delivers services. The involvement of a private sector partner in this reshaping programme is intended to add pace to the change process and bring with it experience of alternative models of service delivery. Following a scoping exercise, Members have agreed the first phase of the programme, involving the restructuring of the top five tiers of management, which will save about £2.2 million in 2016-17. Development of the second phase, involving the re-design of over 30 service areas, is underway; the Council expects this phase to generate nearly £9 million of savings, when fully implemented.
- 51 As the reshaping programme gathers momentum, the Council continues to streamline and strengthen its procurement arrangements. The principles guiding the reshaping programme recognise that the Council is likely to depend increasingly on external suppliers to provide some services on its behalf. The Council acknowledges that it will need to increase its procurement capacity and the skills and knowledge at its disposal, to monitor and manage the contracts that will support these changes.

Workforce planning arrangements are well-integrated, but out-dated people management systems, capacity and capability pressures and cultural issues may slow progress

People Management capacity is under pressure from the emerging Reshaping Programme and an over-reliance by a minority of managers

- 52 The Council has strengthened its approach to workforce planning in response to an earlier Wales Audit Office proposal for improvement. The new arrangements are now embedded; this helps managers to identify skills gaps during annual service planning.
- 53 The Council maintains a suite of workforce-related plans and strategies that take account of, and support, its strategic priorities. Council managers are encouraged to deal with routine workforce and human resource (HR) matters, effectively supported by HR Business Partners. However, a minority of managers over-rely on that support and are reluctant to deal directly with some routine, but challenging staff issues.

- 54 The Council's HR team plays an important role in the development of new service delivery models emerging from the reshaping programme and it will continue to be involved throughout the reshaping period. This involvement places a high demand on departmental capacity affecting its ability to provide routine HR support.
- 55 The reshaping programme will have consequences for some Council staff; some will require retraining for a new role, some may transfer to new organisations and some will leave the Council. These and other changes affecting the workforce will place further significant demands on the HR team as the reshaping programme gathers pace and subsequently as changes are implemented. Capacity pressures within the HR team represent a risk to progress.

Inefficient systems undermine the effectiveness of workforce management arrangements

- 56 The Council has relied on its current HR/Payroll IT system since 2002. However, the system is under-developed and efforts to upgrade it have not always been successful. This adversely affects the efficiency and effectiveness of the HR department and other members of staff. Some key HR-related processes remain paper-based, the system does not fully support a staff self-service module and unreliable data quality frustrates efforts to monitor and report basic information such as staff sickness absence. Although the Council expects to address some of the weaknesses, such as further rolling out the self-service module during early 2016, there is a risk that internal capacity pressures will delay progress.
- 57 The Council has been slow to address delays in administering Disclosure and Barring Service⁴ (DBS) checks on behalf of schools recruiting new staff – concerns originally raised by the Internal Auditor in 2013. By September 2015, the internal auditor reported his sixth follow-up of DBS compliance, having identified limited progress at each earlier follow-up. The Council is now exploring the procurement of an online DBS checking process. The Council expects this to significantly improve the speed and efficiency of administering DBS checks and support its safeguarding responsibilities.

⁴ The Disclosure and Barring Service helps employers make safer recruitment decisions and prevents unsuitable people from working with vulnerable groups, including children.

Efforts to address high sickness absence are undermined by unreliable data and inconsistent management practices

- 58 The Council's average level of sickness absence has continued to increase⁵; in 2014-15, it was the worst performing Council in Wales. Staff absenteeism has significant cost and capacity implications for the Council, particularly when financial pressures are increasing. When members of staff are unavailable for work, service delivery may be less responsive or of a lower quality. For some essential services, it may be necessary to pay overtime or employ agency workers to cover for staff absences, increasing the overall cost of delivery.
- 59 Long-term sickness absence levels at the Council are particularly acute, accounting for three quarters of all days lost during the first quarter of 2015-16⁶. Some managers have not managed attendance or dealt with sickness absence effectively and have over-relied on HR business partners to deal with difficult staffing issues. Since 2013-14, the Council has taken a series of actions to improve the way staff attendance is managed. These actions have had a limited impact. Although short and medium-term sickness levels improved during early 2015-16, long-term sickness levels increased at a faster rate. Overall, sickness absence levels continued to increase during 2015-16⁷.
- 60 The Council recognises that its sickness absence data may be unreliable. This makes it harder for Lead Members and senior officers to review, and proactively manage, staff sickness levels within their portfolio. Managers do not always report sickness absence promptly or consistently, the reporting process relies on paper-based or email notifications and the lack of integration between payroll and HR processes introduces delays and the potential for further inaccuracy. The Council is now taking action to introduce more efficient and effective arrangements for managing, recording and reporting sickness absence.

5 The average number of days absent due to sickness per employee (FTE) at the Council has deteriorated from 9.9 days in 2012-13, 11.6 days in 2013-14, to 11.9 days in 2014-15. Source: Wrexham County Borough Council.

6 Long-term sickness (21 days +) represented 13,874 out of 18,876 sickness days (74 per cent) between April 2015 and July 2015. Source: CPRG Scrutiny Committee October 2015.

7 Total reported sickness days: April to July 2014: 17,895 days, April to July 2015: 18,876 days. Source CPRG Scrutiny Committee October 2015.

Efforts to improve staff engagement and promote staff welfare are having a positive impact

- 61 The Council has responded positively to concerns raised in the 2015 staff survey about the level of engagement on recent and planned organisational changes. To supplement existing internal communications, the Council now publishes a fortnightly bulletin to keep staff informed about progress on the reshaping programme. Members of staff have also had opportunities to listen to and question the Chief Executive and the Leader about the future of the Council. Although these new initiatives were well received, the Council recognises the need to continue strengthening its staff engagement arrangements.
- 62 The Council met the Gold Corporate Health Standard⁸ in 2015, following a review of its arrangements for promoting the health and wellbeing of staff. The assessors complemented the Council for 'caring for the people they serve and for the people providing the services'.

Proposals for Improvement

P2 Use of Resources – People:

- Ensure sufficient capacity to provide effective HR support for both the Reshaping Programme and for routine workforce-related issues.
- Ensure that all line managers have the capacity and capability to deal with routine workforce-related issues, particularly those related to staff sickness absence.
- Ensure that systems and processes for notifying, monitoring, recording and reporting sickness absence are efficient, effective and able to provide timely and accurate data.

⁸ The Corporate Health Standard, run by Welsh Government, and delivered by Public Health Wales is the quality mark for workplace health promotion in Wales.

Strategic asset management is generally sound, but is undermined by performance management and database arrangements that are not fully effective

Leadership and management arrangements promote effective strategic asset management

- 63 The Council has a clear vision and sense of purpose for its land and building assets⁹. It approved a new Corporate Land and Buildings Strategy (CLBS) 2015-20 in mid-2015 that includes clear links to key corporate plans and strategies, including the Council Plan. The CLBS does not explicitly refer to the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), but in practice, the links between strategic asset management and finance are robust. Although the CLBS provides an up-to-date corporate perspective, most service-level asset management plans have not yet been revised to reflect the strategic update.
- 64 The CLBS includes comprehensive acquisition and disposal policies and guidelines, including an Asset Transfer Policy (ATP). This policy stipulates that the Council 'will only retain property where it supports delivery of the Council's statutory duties and the Council Plan'. The ATP also outlines the Council's approach to community asset transfer (CAT), the process for assessing whether an asset is suitable for CAT and emphasises the need for CAT proposals to be 'sustainable in the longer term'. The Council's approach to CAT is supportive as it helps organisations to demonstrate a viable and sustainable business case for managing assets, after transfer.
- 65 The Council has tried, unsuccessfully, to develop a joint asset planning approach with other public sector partners. However, the Council does informally liaise with public sector partners and ad hoc discussions take place particularly about the potential acquisition or disposal of key strategic sites.
- 66 Roles and responsibilities for the Council's property assets are well defined. A joint Member/Officer Working Group, chaired by the Leader, provides oversight of the CLBS delivery plan and makes recommendations to the Executive Board on amendments or alterations to the plan. Operationally, the Head of Assets and Economic Development has overall responsibility for corporate strategic asset management and clear delegated powers. The Council's management structure also promotes effective asset management. The Asset Management Implementation Group, involving representatives from all departments, promotes compliance with the Council's property procedures.

⁹ The Corporate Assessment focused on the Council's operational land and property assets – an estate of around 300 sites, valued at nearly £300 million. It did not cover highways, residential property or related assets, which have separate management arrangements.

Asset performance management is under-developed and constrained by database arrangements that are not fully effective

- 67 Although the Council recognises the interdependencies between workforce planning and asset management, the associated plans are not strategically aligned. However, the Council's Agile Working initiative is a good example of joined-up working between service, asset management and HR staff. The project is increasing the proportion of Council staff able to work flexibly from a range of locations; this reduces the permanent desk and office space required. When complete, the Council expects the project to reduce the office space needed by a third and to halve the cost of operating the remaining offices. The Council can then let, sell or redevelop the surplus offices, generating income or capital receipts, or releasing sites for strategic development.
- 68 Performance management arrangements for land and property assets are under-developed, constrained by the systems in use and by capacity pressures. The Council collects data and participates in a national benchmarking project but does not routinely monitor or report the performance of its non-commercial assets. This limits the opportunity to challenge and compare the performance of, or make informed decisions about, individual assets.
- 69 The Council uses a bespoke database to maintain its asset records. The database is incompatible with other software used by the Council and does not support robust performance management. Technical support for the database is procured externally. The Council recognises that these inter-related weaknesses represent a risk. A CLBS delivery plan priority for 2015-16 is to procure an alternative database able to meet current and future needs and interface with other systems in use. Capacity pressures and a review of asset management arrangements, via the reshaping programme, have subsequently delayed progress.
- 70 The Council actively manages its maintenance budget by prioritising work. However, the available budget limits the progress of lower priority work, creating a repairs backlog of around £27.5 million in 2015. The Council expects the CLBS delivery plan to reduce the backlog, by accelerating the transfer and disposal of surplus property.

Proposals for Improvement

- P3 Use of Resources – Assets:
- Strengthen asset performance management arrangements and support the arrangements with a fit-for-purpose database.

Information technology and information management are supporting services, but the Council is not getting full value from these enabler functions

The ICT Strategy is out of date and is not clearly aligned to Council Plan priorities

- 71 In 2012, we reviewed the Council's use of information technology (IT/ICT). Our report, published in March 2012, concluded that the current arrangements for developing and using technology were likely to support continuous improvement (to services) but the Council lacked a strategic approach and technology plans needed to better align and support the delivery of the Council's improvement objectives.
- 72 In response, the Council developed an ICT Strategy to cover the period 2012-2016. The implementation of the ICT Strategy has promoted wider and more effective use of technology across the Council. However, the Strategy is now four years old and has not been periodically reviewed. As such, the ICT strategy is dated, from both a technology and business alignment perspective. This reduces the potential for ICT to contribute effectively to the Council's efficiency agenda or to the priorities in the Council Plan.
- 73 A key aim of the Council's 2012-2016 ICT Strategy was to 'support the Customer Focus and Channel Shift Strategies by providing more self-service facilities via the web'. The Council has achieved this and has provided more, better quality, information on its services, through online and social media channels. The main sources of the Council's online/digital service information are its website, Facebook and Twitter accounts. The Council has significantly improved the service and general information and transactional facilities available to website users. The website is clear and easy-to-use, and received positive feedback from a recent survey of users.
- 74 Another key element of the ICT Strategy is to 'deliver new business applications to meet the improvement plans of key services and provide appropriate interfaces between applications'. However, the Council has experienced problems and delays in the acquisition, implementation and upgrade of some key IT systems, such as Northgate Resource Link – the Council's combined HR/Payroll system. It is critical that the ICT service responds effectively to business needs; to support service improvement, the Council must have an effective and efficient business core. ICT is a key part of this core. It is reassuring that proposals for the future delivery of the ICT service are included in the reshaping programme.

Recent developments and appointments have increased the overall profile and effectiveness of information governance, but the focus remains traditional and is not aligned to Council priorities or needs

- 75 The Council has improved its information governance arrangements through the recent appointment of the Corporate Information Manager, the production of the 2013 - 2016 Information Management Strategy and the transfer of responsibility for information to the Corporate and Customer Services Department.
- 76 A Corporate Director is appropriately the Council's Senior Information Risk Owner (SIRO) and the Deputy SIRO heads the Corporate Information Management Group. The introduction of an annual Information Management Report, in May 2015, has helped to increase the overall profile of information governance across the Council.
- 77 Despite the recent improvements, some aspects of the Council's approach to information management are too traditional and too focused on compliance with statutory duties, such as the Freedom of Information Act and the Data Protection Act. To be fully effective the Council has to broaden its approach and deliver against its Information Management Strategy. For example, the Information Management Strategy refers to 'the need for information to be used more effectively in helping to plan and deliver improved services' and the requirement to 'manage information so that the Council is better able to deliver its objectives'. However, the Council does not clearly explain how it intends to achieve this.
- 78 The Information Management Strategy is also not aligned to the strategic themes in the Council Plan. This lack of alignment overlooks opportunities to support the Council Plan priorities with arrangements and processes capable of providing high-quality, accurate and timely information. Again, however, the inclusion of information issues within the reshaping programme provides some assurance.

Proposals for Improvement

- P4 Use of Resources – ICT and Information Management:
- Develop and implement an ICT Strategy that complements the Information Management Strategy, covers current and medium-term business needs and is clearly aligned to the Council's strategic priorities.
 - Refresh the Information Management Strategy:
 - align the Strategy to the Council's strategic priorities; and
 - clarify arrangements for effectively implementing the Strategy.

The Council has an established and effective approach to partnership working which delivers improved performance and outcomes

The Council uses collaboration to support its vision and wider shared objectives

- 79 In 2012, the Council agreed a Compact, which reinforced its commitment to work collaboratively. The Compact identified four key criteria for collaboration, particularly the need to make a sustainable contribution to the Council's vision for the county borough.
- 80 The Council is realistic about the challenges ahead and about the need to deliver services with reduced budgets. It has a clear view on the future of partnership and collaborative arrangements and recognises that the way some services have traditionally been delivered will need to change. The Council Plan is closely aligned to the Wrexham Single Integrated Plan, 'Our Wrexham Plan', which is overseen by the Local Service Board (LSB). The Council and its LSB partners have agreed the three priorities for the 'Our Wrexham Plan', reflecting individual priorities that are consistent with the partner organisations' objectives and outcomes.
- 81 The Council's senior leadership team is committed to, and actively involved in, a range of partnerships that contribute to the Council's vision. For example:
- Senior managers represent the Council on the LSB and are actively involved in the three Partnership Delivery Boards that are accountable to the LSB;
 - The Joint Safer Communities Unit – a tactical sub group of the Partnership Delivery Board – was established to address safety-related issues within communities and neighbourhoods. The Unit contains staff from North Wales Police, Police Community Safety Officers, and Council officers from a range of service areas including Trading Standards, Licensing, Housing, and Social Services.
 - The Council's Lead Member for Communities and Partnerships chairs the North Wales Safer Communities Board – a partnership between statutory authorities across the region, along with the voluntary sector, the Welsh Government, and the Police and Crime Commissioner.
- 82 The Council recently restated its commitment to regional and sub-regional collaboration where there are demonstrable benefits. As well as participating in or leading, regional initiatives – such as the regional safeguarding boards, the North East Wales Emergency Duty Team and the regional adoption service, the Council uses its geographic location to forge wider links. For example, the Council is an active partner in the Mersey Dee Alliance (MDA), a partnership that supports strategic economic activity across the North Wales/North West England border. Participation in the MDA provides the Council with opportunities to promote and raise the profile of the county borough, both regionally and nationally.

- 83 The Council's approach to collaboration and partnership working promotes resilience and sustainability. For example, the Council transferred its statutory community safety function to the Partnership Delivery Board. This ensures that the associated delivery plan is aligned with the LSB's objectives. It also takes account of the wider priorities of the North Wales Police and Crime Commissioner and the North Wales Safer Communities Board (NWSCB). The Council and its partners expect this approach to promote greater consistency and improve overall efficiency and effectiveness.

Effective collaboration is helping the Council to maximise its use of resources

- 84 Partnership and collaboration initiatives are helping the Council to manage its resources more effectively. For example, when the Joint Safer Communities Unit was established, operational members of the team were co-located. This, supported by a shared calendar of events to co-ordinate the partners' activities, and more effective sharing of information and local intelligence, promotes a responsive and joined-up approach.
- 85 The Council's approach to partnership and collaboration is supported by clear performance management arrangements. During 2014, we reviewed the effectiveness of the LSB's arrangements to promote improved outcomes for local people – focusing on the role of the Council and its contribution to the Partnership. We made four proposals for improvement, covering partnership scrutiny, delivery plans, performance management and engagement. The Council and its partners have responded positively to our findings, and are making good progress against the issues we raised. For example, the LSB has adopted the Council's performance management framework. With support from a Council officer, the LSB receives regular performance and progress reports.
- 86 With support from the Council, the LSB has also strengthened its arrangements for engaging with stakeholders by developing an Engagement Hub – 'Your Voice-Wrexham'. This provides people working, living, receiving or delivering services in the county borough with an opportunity to have their say and influence local services. The Hub also allows the Council and its partners to engage in a more transparent and consistent way, at both partnership and an individual level.

Collaborative initiatives are helping to deliver improved outcomes for local people

- 87 Partnership and collaboration initiatives are supporting the Council's efforts to improve outcomes for the citizens of Wrexham. The LSB and Partnership Delivery Board's framework provides networking opportunities and a better understanding of each partner's organisational priorities. This helps to stimulate wider collaboration, encouraged by the impact of earlier, successful initiatives. For example, in 2014 LSB partners developed a temporary Wrexham Alcohol Treatment and Welfare Centre to tackle the anti-social and health problems caused by excessive alcoholic consumption during the Christmas and holiday periods.
- 88 Fewer people attended the Accident and Emergency ward at Wrexham Maelor Hospital and the number of anti-social incidents reduced, whenever the Centre operated. This success prompted the partners to establish a permanent Centre in December 2015. It also motivated the Council to establish closer links with licensees in Wrexham town centre – who benefit from, and can contribute towards, a safer night-time economy.
- 89 The 2014-15 annual review and evaluation of Social Services produced by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) identified improved outcomes arising from a range of collaborative initiatives that encouraged capacity building within the community. For example, the Council piloted a community agent's scheme in partnership with community councils, and continued its support to luncheon clubs. The Council has also improved community understanding of dementia in partnership with the Alzheimer's Society and supported small-scale community-based projects such as befriending and peer mentoring schemes from its community small-grants scheme. Collaborative initiatives such as these tap into local expertise and latent enthusiasm, and help the Council to focus its resources on schemes which service users are more likely to understand and value.
- 90 CSSIW has also acknowledged the Council's progress, together with statutory, third and independent sector partners, at integrating health and social care services for older people with complex needs. Service users now benefit from a range of new developments including an enhanced intermediate care service and community-based preventative services. The CSSIW complimented the Council on the joint delivery of some innovative and creative service development and on the Council's willingness to learn from its experiences of collaboration, when it develops new initiatives. However, the CSSIW also encouraged the Council to look for further efficiency savings by adopting a more proactive approach to collaboration with other councils.

Arrangements for improvement planning, performance reporting and risk management are generally sound, but lack consistency in some areas

Improvement planning arrangements support the Council's vision and improvement agenda

- 91 The Council's corporate leadership articulates a clear and consistent shared vision, and the improvements they aspire to. Members of staff share this vision. We spoke to a wide range of staff at all levels of seniority; they consistently understood how their contributions directly or indirectly support the Council's strategic objectives. In many cases, staff pointed to links between their personal objectives, set out in their annual PRCD, and both departmental and corporate objectives.
- 92 Corporate and departmental planning arrangements promote the development of dynamic business plans that support the strategic priorities, drive improvement and are owned by staff. Service plans are appropriately structured and explicitly support the Council's improvement objectives. The Council introduced a new three-tiered approach to target setting during 2013-14 to provide greater clarity about its aspirations. This helps the Council to define, and stakeholders to recognise, areas where significant improvement is expected.

Performance management arrangements are generally sound, but data is not always presented in a clear and consistent way

- 93 The Council routinely challenges poor performance. For example, the Council's ability to prevent homelessness improved significantly during 2013-14, following benchmarking and a period of focused performance management. Although performance subsequently dipped slightly during 2014-15, it was still considerably better than in previous years.
- 94 Performance reports to Members are generally clear and well presented, with a few exceptions, mainly in service-level rather than corporate reports. When data is not clear, Members routinely ask for clarification. Sometimes, this introduces delays and places additional pressure on officer and Member capacity.
- 95 The Council relies on its own performance management system, based on simple spreadsheets, rather than a proprietary software system as many other councils in Wales have done. The Council's system is basic and quite labour intensive and relies on some manual transfer of data. This arrangement does offer more scope for data error, but the information provided to officers and Members is generally comprehensive and robust. The Council recognises the constraints associated with these arrangements and continues to explore proprietary systems. However, in the meantime the existing arrangements remain workable.

The Council provides stakeholders with a clear understanding of its performance, across a range of channels

- 96 The Council's Annual Performance Reports (Focused on Our Performance) provide a balanced evaluation of its performance. A range of internal arrangements and business processes underpins production of the Annual Report. These arrangements help the Council to understand how well it is performing and to identify areas that need to improve.
- 97 The Council's improvement planning arrangements encourage input from the public to inform budget and target setting. Initiatives such as 'Your Voice Wrexham' and the 'You said, we did' scheme provide useful ways of strengthening stakeholder engagement and a consistent way of providing feedback to stakeholders.
- 98 The Council has significantly increased its use of social media to provide stakeholders with information about performance and other Council news. In 2014-15, it had 21,000 Twitter followers compared to only 3,100 in 2011-12.

The Council's principal risk management arrangements are generally fit for purpose but are not consistently applied

- 99 The Council understands the importance of managing risk effectively and has comprehensive risk management arrangements. A principal risk register focuses on key strategic risks, supported by a separate risk management policy that defines the overall approach and associated responsibilities of Members and officers.
- 100 The Senior Leadership Team is responsible for the corporate risk register, supplemented by service-level risk registers, which service managers maintain alongside their service improvement plans. A risk management group provides challenge centrally. The Council has a designated Officer whose responsibilities include the co-ordination of risk management arrangements across the Council; the post holder has accredited Registered Risk Practitioner status. The Council also provides training for those staff responsible for assessing service or project risks. The managers we spoke to have a good understanding of the Council's risk management arrangements.
- 101 Risks associated with significant individual projects are well managed – directly by the head of service, if there are also implications as a principal risk. The Council recognises that further work is required to establish a consistent and robust approach to risk management across all service areas. For example, the risk management policy does not define the minimum frequency for the review of service. This may encourage inconsistency, because registers may not be reviewed to the same standard, or with the same frequency.

Proposals for Improvement

P5 Improvement Planning:

- Ensure a consistent and robust approach to risk management across all service areas.

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

- 102 Despite increasingly challenging budget pressures facing the Council, it has continued to deliver improved outcomes for local people. During 2014-15, the Council improved or maintained its performance for 29 of the 44 national indicators – a 26 per cent improvement on 2013-14. The Council also increased the number of indicators with top quartile performance from eight to 11 and reduced the number of indicators in the bottom quartile from 16 to 13.
- 103 The Council has also increased the proportion of priority outcomes where it made good progress. In 2014-15, the Council assessed progress against 12 of its 15 priority outcomes as Good, with improving outcomes, compared to 10 out of 15 in 2013-14. The Council reported some progress against the remaining three priority outcomes, but no measurable impact on outcomes.
- 104 At a time of increasing austerity, involving tough spending decisions, these are encouraging results. Our next Annual Improvement Report – scheduled for publication in spring 2016 – will provide more detail about the Council's service performance.

Appendix 1 – Status of this report

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

This report has been produced by staff of the Wales Audit Office on behalf of the Auditor General to discharge his duties under section 24 of the Measure. The report also discharges his duties under section 19 to issue a report certifying that he has carried out an improvement assessment under section 18 and stating whether, as a result of his improvement plan audit under section 17, he believes that the authority has discharged its improvement planning duties under section 15.

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

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

The Auditor General may also in some circumstances carry out special inspections (under section 21), which will be reported to the authority and Ministers, and which he may publish (under section 22). An important ancillary activity for the Auditor General is the co-ordination of assessment and regulatory work (required by section 23), which takes into consideration the overall programme of work of all relevant regulators at an improvement authority. The Auditor General may also take account of information shared by relevant regulators (under section 33) in his assessments.

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