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Dear Ian

Arrangements for responding to the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021

What we did

Our Audit Plan identified ‘implications of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act’ as one in a series of in-year assurance and risk assessment reviews.

We undertook an assessment of the Council’s progress in responding to the key requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 (the Act) between April and August 2022. We gathered our evidence through document reviews and interviews. We also drew upon the relevant findings from our other ongoing and recent work at the Council. Our work looked at the arrangements the Council was putting in place in responding to the Act. The work was not an assessment of the effectiveness of these arrangements.

What we found

The Council has developed a three-stage approach for its annual self-assessment of performance and aims to present its findings at a full Council meeting in December 2022. The Council has not yet confirmed its plans for completing the required external panel performance assessment

- The Act requires councils in Wales to complete an annual self-assessment of their performance. Wrexham County Borough Council's self-assessment is structured around nine themes which were informed by the Act's statutory guidance:
 - Leadership and organisational culture
 - Corporate Planning
 - Financial Planning
 - Workforce planning
 - Procurement
 - Assets
 - Risk Management
 - Performance management
 - Performance outcomes

- The Council's process for self-assessment consists of three phases:
 - Phase 1 is the 'initial self-assessment review' completed by officers in May to August 2022. The Council has created templates for each theme which reference the lines of enquiry and suggested sources of evidence provided in the related Welsh Government statutory guidance. The completed templates represent the background evidence to inform its overall conclusions of its self-assessment.
 - Phase 2 is the 'challenge' element of the Council's self-assessment process. The Council will take the main messages and conclusions to a challenge panel of key council officers and members in September 2022. The Council will hold an all-member workshop in September 2022 to present the background to the self-assessment requirement and explain the Council's process, along with its key messages and conclusions. The Council plans to take its draft self-assessment report to the Customers, Performance, Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee in November, and the Executive Board in December 2022.
 - Phase 3 is the 'Approvals and Publication' element of the Council's self-assessment process. The Council's officers will present final reports to its Governance and Audit Committee in November 2022 and to full Council in December 2022.

- The Act also requires the Council to carry out an external, panel performance assessment once during the period between two consecutive ordinary elections. The Council's Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act Action Plan confirms it will report the draft assessment to the Governance and Audit Committee to allow it to make recommendations. The Council told us it has not yet confirmed its plans for completing the panel assessment. The Action Plan also identifies the need to develop an outline Terms of Reference document and to consider the composition of the panel. The Council is awaiting further guidance and templates from the WLGA to support this process.

The Council published its Participation Strategy and Petitions Scheme in March 2022

- The Council published a consultation document on its website for six weeks in January-February 2022 seeking the views of the public on how the Council plans to comply with the requirements of the Act. The public response rate was low (55). There was clear feedback to improve the information on the website about the democratic process and how the public could become involved in Council decision-making. In response to these two areas of feedback, the Council produced a detailed webpage on public participation.
- The Council has prepared its Participation Strategy and Petitions Scheme. The Participation Strategy sets out how the Council will consult with members of the public and how members of the public can engage with the Council's committees. The Petitions Scheme explains how the Council will handle and respond to any petitions from the public (including electronic petitions). The Council approved both documents in March 2022 and are available on the Council's website.

The Council has appointed four lay members and eight elected members to its new Governance and Audit Committee and has plans to create a Development Programme to build members' knowledge

- The Governance and Audit Committee approved the composition of the new Committee in October 2021. Under the new arrangements the Council's Governance and Audit Committee has 12 members comprising eight elected and four lay members.
- Full Council in May 2022 appointed three lay members to the Governance and Audit Committee. The lay member appointed in 2012 continues in his role.

- The Council has updated the Terms of Reference for its Governance and Audit Committee. It sets out the roles and responsibilities of the committee in relation to the Act.
- The Council held an induction session for all members of the Governance and Audit Committee in June 2022 to explain their roles and responsibilities. The Council has told us it is developing a Development Programme for its Governance and Audit Committee which will be considered by the Committee in the autumn. The Development Programme will comprise of 30-minutes sessions before each committee meeting and the content will be agreed with the Chair and Vice-Chair. Any topic requiring longer than 30 minutes will be delivered in a separately scheduled session. The Council also plans to run a Governance and Audit Committee member workshop following the October 2022 release of the latest CIPFA guidelines ('Audit Committees: Practical Guidance for Local Authorities'). This workshop will look at interactive appendices on 'Self-assessment of Good Practice' and 'Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Audit Committee'.

The North Wales Corporate Joint Committee (CJC) met for the first time in January 2022 and the six constituent councils are aiming to transfer the functions of the North Wales Economic Ambition Board to an empowered sub-committee of the CJC to streamline governance and avoid duplication between the two bodies

- The Welsh Government introduced regulations on 17 March 2021 to create four Corporate Joint Committees across Wales, and the North Wales Corporate Joint Committee (NWCJC) was established on 1 April 2021. The initial functions of the NWCJC came into force on 30 June 2022. Gwynedd Council, as the Host Authority for the North Wales Economic Ambition Board (NWEAB), leads on a project to respond to this new procedure, 'Collaborative Working of Principal Councils'.
- The partners involved in this committee are:
 - Conwy County Borough Council
 - Denbighshire County Borough Council
 - Flintshire County Borough Council
 - Gwynedd Council
 - Isle of Anglesey County Council

- Wrexham County Borough Council
- Snowdonia National Park Authority
- The six constituent councils agreed the NWCJC should continue the direction established by the NWEAB. In January 2022, a report was presented before the Cabinets/Executive Boards of all six member councils recommending that the functions of the NWEAB be transferred by way of a delegation agreement to an empowered sub-committee of the NWCJC. The proposed model sees an Economic Ambition Board Sub-Committee reporting to the NWCJC. This alteration was proposed to achieve a streamlined governance model and avoid any duplication between the two bodies.
- The Council is currently waiting on guidance and regulations on scrutiny arrangements, borrowing powers and VAT Status to develop the work of the NWCJC further.

The Council has no immediate plans to use the General Power of Competence

- The Council told us it had no immediate plans to use the General Power of Competence as set out in the Act.
- The Council's LG&E (Wales) Act 2021 Action Plan states that officers provided elected members with a briefing on the Power in March 2021, and officers provided a briefing to the Senior Leadership Team on 13 July 2022.

Yours sincerely

Alan Hughes

Audit Lead