

Driving Sustained Performance Improvement – Wrexham County Borough Council

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Summary report

Background

- 1 Performance management provides an opportunity to plan for improvements, measure success, learn from the experience and improve in future. Done well it is a positive experience – done badly it can promote blame and a culture where poor performance is hidden and kept from those who can support and drive improvement.
- 2 The Council's performance management framework aims to help managers and councillors deliver improvement, demonstrate that they are delivering efficient and effective services and use resources effectively. Performance management is an integral part of the Council's approach to driving sustainable improvement.
- 3 The Council's **Focussed on our Performance 2019-2020** report assesses performance against the six in-year priorities. It rated two priorities as green (good progress is being made and outcomes were improving), three as amber (progress is being made but not yet impacting on outcomes) and one as red (performance is offtrack and outcomes were not improving).
- 4 During 2019-20, Audit Wales and the Education and Training Inspectorate for Wales (Estyn) highlighted some issues around the effectiveness of Wrexham County Borough Council's (the Council) performance management arrangements as follows:
 - limited reporting of in-year performance and reports of external regulators and auditors to councillors suggested they were not always alerted to or able to scrutinise ongoing performance and officers were not always able to direct resources to areas where performance had started to dip;
 - our **Well-being of Future Generations: an examination of creating a digital Wrexham** review noted that the Council had not developed a long-term ambition with clear outcome measures for its digital strategy;
 - our 2019 Environmental Health follow-up review found that service plans and performance management arrangements needed strengthening;
 - the Estyn inspection of education services in October 2019 recommended the Council 'improve the quality of self-evaluation and improvement planning across all education services'; and
 - our review of the Human Resources and Organisational Development Service identified further areas for improvement including:
 - communication of objectives;
 - project and change management; and
 - use and reporting of performance data.

These issues suggest room for improvement in the Council's corporate performance management and reporting arrangements.

- 5 The impact on the Council's 'business as usual' because of the COVID-19 pandemic has been considerable. Many services changed and adapted in response to the pandemic. The Council has been redefining, 'business as usual' recognising that COVID-19 may also have changed demand for services and the ways in which the Council delivers them.
- 6 This review focused on key aspects of the Council's approach to performance management to determine whether it supports and informs recovery planning and delivery of continuous sustainable improvement. We sought to answer the question: **'Are the Council's performance management arrangements robust and likely to support continuous and sustainable improvement as it recovers from the impact of COVID-19?'**
- 7 Between February and April 2021, we undertook document reviews, interviews and focus groups with officers and councillors, and observed relevant meetings virtually. We sought evidence from across the Council but focused more detailed work in Children's Services and Planning and Regulatory Services to examine how corporate arrangements have supported improvement.
- 8 We found that the Council's performance management framework is likely to support delivery of its priorities but better communication and a clearer focus on performance will help the Council deliver sustained improvement. We came to this conclusion because:
- **the performance framework is likely to support delivery of corporate priorities.** The Council's delivery arrangement to achieve its corporate and partnership priorities is clear and by streamlining the number of priorities focuses action on improving the performance of those priorities which are set out clearly in the Council Plan.
 - **the Council has clear arrangements in place to support improvement but the data collation and recording process could be more efficient.** The Council has clear arrangements in place to support improvement. The performance monitoring and assessment processes support ongoing management and identification of areas where action is needed. However, performance data is collated and recorded using Microsoft Excel which does not provide an audit trail of changes and requires manual transfer of data which can be error prone.
 - **reporting cycles are in place, but these are not holistic or frequent enough; there are opportunities to further improve communication and to strengthen oversight and deliver a clearer focus on performance for councillors.** Reporting cycles are in place, but these are not comprehensive or frequent enough to provide clear oversight of performance. The Council's communication channels are improving, but there is room for improvement in cross-departmental communication and arrangements to learn as part of the performance management process are developing.

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

The table below sets out the areas where the Council should take action to improve its performance management arrangements.

Recommendations	
Performance data collation and recording	
R1	Review data collation and recording arrangements to improve their effectiveness, minimise risk of data errors and improve accessibility of information.
Reporting and effective challenge	
R2	Improve reporting arrangements to ensure that senior managers and councillors have access to comprehensive and up to date performance information to promote and facilitate effective challenge.
Communication	
R3	Review how performance management and monitoring processes engage more broadly across the Council to address cross cutting themes.

Detailed report

The Council’s performance management framework is likely to support delivery of its priorities but better communication and a clearer focus on performance will help the Council deliver sustained improvement

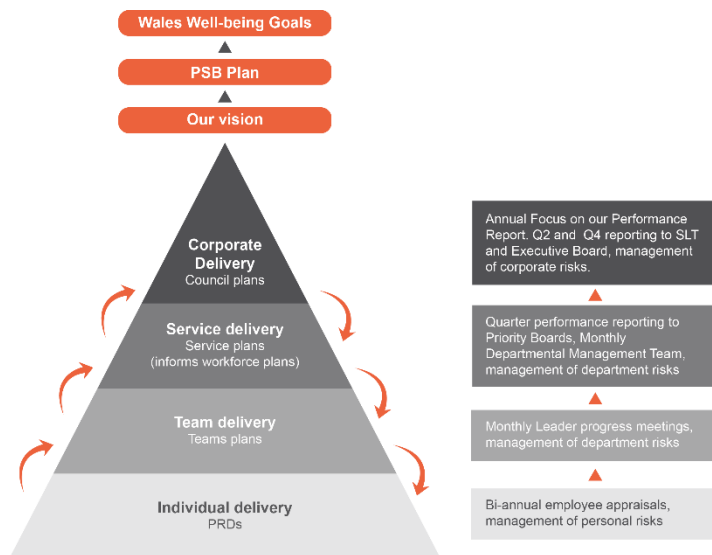
The performance framework is likely to support delivery of corporate priorities

The Council’s delivery arrangement to achieve its corporate and partnership priorities is clear

9 The following exhibit summaries the Council’s delivery arrangement to achieve its corporate and partnership priorities.

Exhibit 2: the Council’s delivery arrangement

Exhibit 2 illustrates the Council’s delivery arrangement.



10 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (the Act) requires public bodies in Wales to think more about the long term, work better with people and communities and each other, look to prevent problems and take a more joined-up approach. In terms of performance improvement this includes setting and

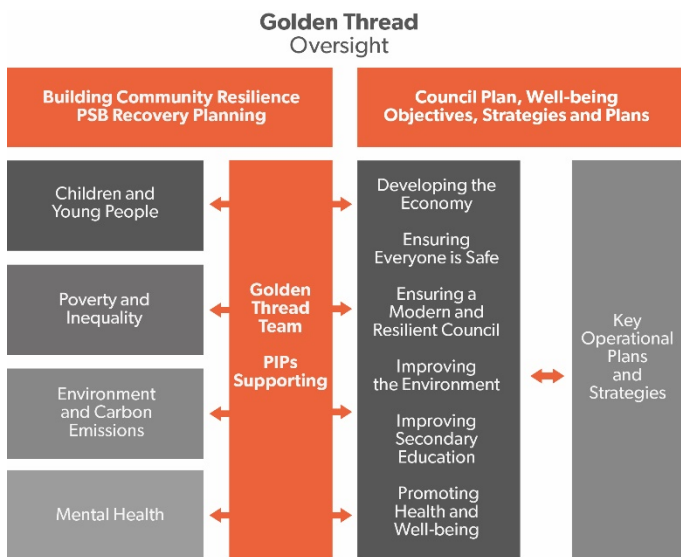
publishing well-being objectives and taking all reasonable steps to meet those objectives.

- 11 The Wrexham Council Plan 2020-2023 was approved by the Council in December 2020. The Plan sets out its vision for Wrexham for the next 10-15 years; outlines the six well-being objectives and improvement priorities and partnership priorities such as the Public Service Board (PSB) plans. It also reflects the reconsideration of its priorities in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 12 The six well-being objectives and improvement priorities are:
 - developing the economy;
 - ensuring everyone is safe;
 - ensuring a modern and resilient Council;
 - improving the environment;
 - improving secondary education; and
 - promoting good health and wellbeing (with a focus on improving children's services).
- 13 There are six Priority Boards that are each responsible for the delivery of one of the above priorities. The boards underpin the performance management framework, and their effectiveness is integral to driving sustainable performance improvement. The boards are accountable to the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT), Lead Members, Executive Board and Council. Priority Board membership includes:
 - Chief Officers
 - Priority Lead Members
 - Priority Co-ordinator
 - Service Leads/Project Managers (for key projects)
 - Other key officers and partners as required (eg ICT, finance, legal)
- 14 In addition to priority boards, the Council established an Accelerated Improvement Board (AIB) in October 2019 to drive improvement at pace in Children's Social Care following concerns raised by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). The AIB provides an intensive focus on achieving improvement and aims to stabilise delivery as well as embedding sustainable change in the longer term. It has a clear ambition and targets that provide an indication of where Children's Services intend to improve in line with the Council Plan priorities.
- 15 Actions to deliver Council's priorities and core activities are set out in service plans. There are four steps to the Service Planning Process:
 - Self-Assessment
 - Building the Service Plan
 - Establishing measures of success
 - Completion and Sign-off of Service Plans

- 16 The Council’s Strategic Equality Plan (SEP) and its objectives are fully embedded in the Council Plan and Service Plan templates along with supporting guidance. We saw examples where service plans support Council Priorities and show a clear link to PSB priorities and SEP objectives.
- 17 Individual responsibility for delivery of sustainable performance improvement is supported by the Performance, Review and Development (PRD) bi-annual appraisals process for employees and one to one meetings with managers where individual contributions to Council and departmental priorities are discussed.
- 18 ‘Golden Thread’ is a term found across many different organisations used to describe how the performance framework links organisational vision and goals to action and outcomes. The Council has established a virtual ‘Golden Thread Team’ of officers to link the themes set out in the PSB Community Resilience Plan and the Council’s Well-being Objectives including the key operational strategies and plans. The Council intends that the Golden Thread Team function will be embedded into the performance management framework to drive sustainable improvement.
- 19 The diagram in **Exhibit 3** illustrates how plans link together to achieve corporate and partnership priorities.

Exhibit 3: Golden Thread Oversight

Exhibit 3 illustrates how plans link together to achieve corporate and partnership priorities.



The Council has clear arrangements in place to support improvement but the data collation and recording process could be more efficient

The Council has clear arrangements in place to support improvement

- 20 The Council recognises that it cannot improve every service, at the same time, and that it needs to prioritise its efforts. To do this it sets targets of 'sustain' or 'improve' outcome measures to illustrate the intended level of improvement. In considering the impact that the pandemic has had on its performance, officers told us that they did not expect targets to 'Stretch to achieve a significant improvement' as sustaining performance in the current circumstances would still be challenging and ambitious.
- 21 During 2020 the Council sought to improve the quality of self-assessment across all services. It revised its self-assessment process and developed a toolkit to support continuity across the Council. The self-assessment tool provides managers with guidance to ensure that service plans are based on robust analysis of qualitative and quantitative information and take account of relevant issues and considerations at a local and national level. It covers:
- key principles to consider when undertaking self-assessment;
 - sources of information to inform the self-assessment; and
 - a self-assessment table.
- 22 In 2021, the Council reviewed its performance management arrangements to ensure they supported the delivery of the Council Plan and are supporting strategies and the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The review highlighted that performance management guidance needed updating to provide a clearer focus on the quality of self-assessment moving forward. The toolkit was recently introduced to services and is expected to be fully implemented during 2021 in line with the performance management cycle. The Council intends service plans will be redefined as its self-assessment arrangements evolve.
- 23 The Council's performance management arrangements are supported by the Performance Improvement and Partnership Service (PIPS). The PIPS team is responsible for co-ordinating the collection of corporate performance information, ensuring timely and accurate reporting and overseeing the collation of risk management information.
- 24 Guidance and templates on the Performance Management Framework are available on the Council's Intranet site. The Performance Management Framework documents set out:
- the structure of the framework;
 - how the framework applies to different levels of the organisation;

- guidance and templates on self-assessment, service planning and performance assessment;
 - the performance monitoring and reporting cycle; and
 - roles and responsibilities at the different levels of governance.
- 25 Overall, we found the newly developed guidance and templates have been well received by officers. Senior officers recognise that the guidance and templates are work in progress and are reviewing their effectiveness in supporting sustainable performance improvement in an ongoing process.

The data collection and recording process could be more efficient

- 26 Measures of performance around the priorities are collated in a 'Performance and Milestones Report Card' Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The relevant PIPS Officer collates the data and presents the information in a word document scorecard for the Priority Boards. This process contains fundamental risks. Microsoft Excel spreadsheets are not secure enough for data collection and recording because they lack an audit trail and version controls meaning that formulae and data can be overwritten with no record. The transfer of data from a spreadsheet to a performance report introduces the potential for operator error. Officers recognise that there is opportunity for efficiencies through automation and improved accessibility of information and are now exploring alternative database software solutions.
- 27 We were told that ongoing monitoring of processes has progressed in the Children's service. The Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS) allows access to dashboards that support monitoring of performance. Social workers monitor their own performance in terms of caseloads. Social work managers can easily obtain information about status of cases and related performance data. This should enable a proactive response to any potential areas of concern. Children's service managers recognise they have more to do to improve consistency of practices in their own performance management arrangements to support sustainable improvement.

Reporting cycles are in place, but they are not holistic or frequent enough; there are opportunities to further improve communication and to strengthen oversight and deliver a clearer focus on performance for councillors

Reporting cycles are in place, but these are not holistic or frequent enough to provide clear oversight of performance

- 28 It is important when monitoring and managing performance that reporting is timely. For example, if data is collated quarterly, it should be reported as soon after the

quarter end as is practical. Once reported, it should be clear what action officers plan to take and what impact that is expected to have on performance. These actions should be monitored by managers to ensure they are delivering improvements as planned and the intended impact on performance should be evident.

- 29 During 2020 and 2021 to date, officers and managers have prioritised dealing with the pandemic. Despite the challenges, reporting to councillors on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in various service areas has been frequent. The Council has reported to relevant scrutiny committees and Executive Board meetings. In addition, weekly situational reports have been provided to councillors as an all-member briefing pack.
- 30 The Council monitors delivery of its priorities through its priority boards. Services report to the priority board each quarter and then twice a year to SLT and the Executive Board. Each Priority Board receives quarterly updates on performance indicators relating to its priority area. The performance information is presented in a scorecard accompanied by a highlight report and a detailed report showing progress on delivery of the priority. The scorecard includes an 'interventions' section to provide an indication of whether plans are being delivered and what corrective action is required to address any underperformance. This provides a clear link between the performance indicators and actions and helps priority boards to focus on sustainable performance improvement.
- 31 Performance against the Council Plan, that includes progress on both priority and non-priority areas, is reported to the Executive Board twice each year, around three months after the end of quarters two and four. The Executive Board also receives the Focused on our Performance outturn report in October of each year. This frequency of reporting hinders the management of sustainable improvement; it becomes more difficult for senior managers and councillors to be assured that the narrative around performance is sufficient to allow effective challenge of performance, particularly those that continue to fall short of expectations.
- 32 Priority boards only receive information relating to their own priority area. As a result, priority board members may not be aware of performance in another priority area that could impact on the delivery of their own priority such as how action to improve secondary education might affect progress in promoting the good health and wellbeing of children.
- 33 Scrutiny committees consider a range of information on service delivery. However, committee members collectively select the subjects they wish to scrutinise themselves and as they are only sighted of overall performance as at quarter two during the year, they may miss a key area where performance is dipping.

The Council's communication and channels are improving, but there is room for improvement in cross-departmental communication

- 34 The Council's objectives and performance are communicated to councillors in various ways such as the Modern Ways of Working marketplace, Chief Executive briefings and at Council meetings. At an operational level there is regular communication between Lead Members and chief officers, and between July 2020 and February 2021, 13 all-member workshops were held.
- 35 Managers described having a good understanding of performance in their own services but were often unaware of performance issues in other services. For example, around setting targets and objectives, and the potential impact that actions in their services could have on the performance in other services.
- 36 The key to effective performance management arrangements is the alignment of plans throughout the organisation. For example, the budget is a performance measure, but just expressed in financial terms. In addition to providing the funding with which to deliver improvements and maintain services, budget monitoring highlights budget variations and provides an indication of operational performance. The Council does not effectively report performance data and budget data alongside each other as part of its in-year monitoring to make the clear connections.

Arrangements to learn as part of the performance management process are developing

- 37 Performance data is reviewed at Departmental Management Teams (DMT) before being collated as part of the corporate reporting process. The performance reports show the performance of indicators for the previous quarter and baseline information where possible to enable officers to compare performance.
- 38 At the time of our fieldwork, some formal capturing of the lessons learned had taken place and others were on hold as the Council was still responding to the pandemic. Performance has been affected by the pandemic and as the Council emerges from this response stage and focuses on recovery, it will need to learn from the positive and negative aspects of its experience when deciding the future shape of services. In the 2020 staff survey, employees were given the opportunity to feedback on their experiences of working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents were asked to give examples of 'what went well' and 'what didn't go so well'. In Summer 2021, services expect to more formally review lessons learnt from their experiences.



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