

Annual Improvement Report

Wrexham County Borough Council

Issued: July 2019 Document reference: 1393A2019-20



This Annual Improvement Report has been prepared on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales by Jeremy Evans and Alan Hughes under the direction of Huw Rees.

Adrian Crompton Auditor General for Wales Wales Audit Office 24 Cathedral Road Cardiff CF11 9LJ

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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.

We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English. Corresponding in Welsh will not lead to delay. Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg. Ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

This document is also available in Welsh.

Contents

Summary report

2018-19 performance audit work	4
The Council is meeting its statutory requirements in relation to continuous improvement	
but, as with all councils in Wales, it faces challenges going forward	4
Recommendations and proposals for improvement	4
Audit, regulatory and inspection work reported during 2018-19	6
Appendices	
Appendix 1 – Status of this report	11
Appendix 2 – Annual Audit Letter	12
Appendix 3 – National report recommendations 2018-19	15

Summary report

2018-19 performance audit work

- 1 To decide the range and nature of the work we would undertake during the year, we considered how much we already know from all previous audit and inspection work and from other sources of information including Wrexham County Borough Council's (the Council) own mechanisms for review and evaluation. For 2018-19, we undertook improvement assessment work; an assurance and risk assessment project and work in relation to the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act at all councils. At some councils, we supplemented this work with local risk-based audits, identified in the Audit Plan for 2018-19.
- 2 The work carried out since the last Annual Improvement Report (AIR), including that of the relevant regulators, is set out in Exhibit 1.

The Council is meeting its statutory requirements in relation to continuous improvement but, as with all councils in Wales, it faces challenges going forward

Based on, and limited to, the work carried out by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators, the Auditor General believes that the Council is likely to comply with the requirements of the Local Government Measure (2009) during 2019-20. However, all councils face significant financial pressures which will need continued attention in the short and medium term to enable them to reach a stable and sustainable financial position.

Recommendations and proposals for improvement

- 4 Given the wide range of services provided by the Council and the challenges it is facing, it would be unusual if we did not find things that can be improved. The Auditor General is able to:
 - make proposals for improvement if proposals are made to the Council, we would expect it to do something about them and we will follow up what happens;
 - make formal recommendations for improvement if a formal recommendation is made, the Council must prepare a response to that recommendation within 30 working days;
 - conduct a special inspection, publish a report and make recommendations; and

- recommend to ministers of the Welsh Government that they intervene in some way.
- 5 During the course of the year, the Auditor General did not make any formal recommendations. However, we have made a number of proposals for improvement and these are repeated in this report. We will monitor progress against them and relevant recommendations made in our national reports (Appendix 3) as part of our improvement assessment work.

Audit, regulatory and inspection work reported during 2018-19

Exhibit 1: audit, regulatory and inspection work reported during 2018-19

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
March 2019	 Assurance and Risk Assessment Project to identify the level of audit assurance and/or where further audit work may be required in future years in relation to risks to the Council: putting in place proper arrangements to secure value for money in the use of resources; putting in place arrangements to secure continuous improvement; and acting in accordance with the sustainable development principle in setting wellbeing objectives and taking steps to meet them. 	 Arising from this project we identified the following topics for inclusion in our audit programme at the council for 2019-20: A review of the Council's financial sustainability (national themed review across 22 councils); A review of the Human Resources function and its supporting IT systems; A supportive self-assessment workshop for Audit Committee members; and Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015 (WFG Act) examinations. 	Not applicable

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
April 2019	 Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015 (WFG Act) examinations Examination of the extent to which the Council has acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle 'to develop and deliver an ambitious arts and cultural offer within Tŷ Pawb' step to meet the following wellbeing objectives: to enable access to leisure and cultural activities; and encouraging people to live, work, learn, visit and invest Wrexham. 	 The Council has acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle in developing the step to develop and deliver an ambitious arts and cultural offer within Tŷ Pawb and there are opportunities to further embed the five ways of working: the Council has considered the long-term benefits in setting this step and recognises the need to develop appropriate outcome measures; consideration of prevention is fundamental to the actions the Council is taking to deliver this step; the Council has considered how Tŷ Pawb contributes to the national well-being goals and the Council's well-being objectives but could take a more systematic approach to integrating with other public bodies; the Council has involved stakeholders in the design and delivery of Tŷ Pawb. 	 The Council elected to undertake a number of actions as a result of the review, these are detailed in our full report. <u>Well-being of Future Generations:</u> <u>An examination of 'Arts and cultural offer within Tŷ Pawb' – Wrexham County Borough Council</u>

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
December 2018	Annual audit letter 2017-18 Letter summarising the key messages arising from the Auditor General's statutory responsibilities under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 and his reporting responsibilities under the Code of Audit Practice. The Annual Audit Letter is in Appendix 2 of this report.	 The Council complied with its responsibilities relating to financial reporting and use of resources; I am satisfied that the Council has appropriate arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources; My work to date on certification of grant claims and returns has not identified significant issues that would impact on the 2018-19 accounts or key financial systems; and The Council has a track record of managing its finances but the financial challenge is significant over the medium term. 	• None
Improvement pla	anning and reporting		
July 2018	Wales Audit Office annual improvement plan audit Review of the Council's published plans for delivering on improvement objectives.	The Council has complied with its statutory improvement planning duties.	• None
November 2018	Wales Audit Office annual assessment of performance audit Review of the Council's published performance assessment.	The Council has complied with its statutory improvement reporting duties.	• None

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
Reviews by ins	pection and regulation bodies		
Estyn	Estyn did not undertake a Wrexham County Borough Council inspection in this period, but several school inspections were carried out. Full details are on Estyn's website <u>https://www.estyn.gov.wales/</u>		
Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW)	Inspection of Older Adults Services CIW undertook an inspection jointly with Healthcare Inspectorate Wales (HIW), and explored how well Wrexham local authority, working with Betsi Cadwaladr University (BCU) Health Board, is promoting independence and preventing escalating needs for older adults.	 Findings People can be increasingly confident that the local authority recognises that adults are the best people to judge their own wellbeing. People who lack mental capacity can be confident the importance of assessments and best interest decisions is firmly embedded in practice. Positive progress has been made in developing safeguarding. Staff from across health and social care reflected a can do and will do approach, staff were professional and dedicated to their focus of doing the best they can for people. 	 Areas for improvement Inspectors reported that the consistency of opportunities for carers to have their voices heard and support for their wellbeing could be improved. CIW recommended that in collaboration with key partners, a need to drive a whole sector plan. Inspectors reported the need to move beyond vision statements and 'good projects' to a clear understanding of what a system of sustainable outcome focused services will look like in practice in Wrexham. CIW recommended continued work with statutory and voluntary sector partners to develop approaches to early intervention and prevention.

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
			 Next steps CIW expect the local authority to consider the areas for development and incorporate them into their development plans. CIW will monitor progress through their on-going engagement activity with the local authority.

Appendix 1

Status of this report

The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) requires the Auditor General to undertake a forward-looking annual improvement assessment, and to publish an annual improvement report, for each improvement authority in Wales. Improvement authorities (defined as local councils, national parks, and fire and rescue authorities) have a general duty to 'make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of [their] functions'.

The annual improvement assessment considers the likelihood that an authority will comply with its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement. The assessment is also the main piece of work that enables the Auditor General to fulfil his duties. Staff of the Wales Audit Office, on behalf of the Auditor General, produce the annual improvement report. The report discharges the Auditor General's duties under section 24 of the Measure, by summarising his audit and assessment work in a published annual improvement report for each authority. The report also discharges his duties under section 19 to issue a report certifying that he has carried out an improvement plan audit under section 17) he believes that the authority has discharged its improvement planning duties under section 15.

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.

Appendix 2

Annual Audit Letter

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Please contact us in Welsh or English. Cysylltwch â ni'n Gymraeg neu'n Saesneg.

Councillor Mark Pritchard – Leader Ian Bancroft – Chief Executive Wrexham County Borough Council The Guildhall Wrexham LL11 1AY

Reference: 969A2018-19 Date issued: 4 December 2018

Dear Mark and Ian

Annual Audit Letter - Wrexham County Borough Council 2017-18

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

The Council complied with its responsibilities relating to financial reporting and use of resources

It is Wrexham County Borough Council's (the Council's) responsibility to:

- put systems of internal control in place to ensure the regularity and lawfulness of transactions and to ensure that its assets are secure;
- maintain proper accounting records;
- prepare a Statement of Accounts in accordance with relevant requirements; and

• establish and keep under review appropriate arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

The Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 requires me to:

- provide an audit opinion on the accounting statements;
- review the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources; and
- issue a certificate confirming that I have completed the audit of the accounts.

Local authorities in Wales prepare their accounting statements in accordance with the requirements of the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom. This code is based on International Financial Reporting Standards.

The draft financial statements were shared with us on 23 May 2018, five weeks earlier than the statutory deadline. Despite the shorter timescale, the draft financial statements were prepared to a good standard and were supported by comprehensive and timely working papers. The key matters arising from the audit of the financial statements were reported to members of the Audit Committee in my Audit of Financial Statements report on the 26 July 2018.

On 27 July 2018, I issued an unqualified audit opinion on the financial statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council's financial position and transactions. I also issued the certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts had been completed on the same day.

I am satisfied that the Council has appropriate arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources

My consideration of the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness has been based on the audit work undertaken on the accounts as well as placing reliance on the work completed under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. The Auditor General published his Annual Improvement Report in September 2018 and concluded that the Council was meeting its statutory requirements in relation to continuous improvement.

My work to date on certification of grant claims and returns has not identified significant issues that would impact on the 2018-19 accounts or key financial systems

My ongoing work on the certification of grants claims and returns has not identified any significant issues to date in relation to the accounts or the Council's key financial systems. I will report any key issues to the Head of Finance once this year's programme of certification work is complete.

The Council has a track record of managing its finances but the financial challenge will continue over the medium term

Austerity funding remains the most significant challenge facing local government bodies in Wales and these financial pressures are likely to continue for the medium term. The recent provisional local government funding settlement will see the Council's settlement decrease by 0.6%.

In 2017-18 the Council generated a surplus on the provision of services of £1.17m and reported greater net yield from council tax of £0.1m, resulting in an overall Council Fund surplus of £1.28m. As at 31 March 2018, the Council had useable reserves of £25.8m, £7.0m in the General Fund reserve and a further £18.8m in earmarked reserves.

In setting its 2018-19 budget, the Council identified the need to make savings of £4.8m. In a report to the Customers, Performance and Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee on 24 October 2018 the Council was projecting a year-end overspend of £1.0m as at 31 July 2018. Work is currently ongoing to minimise overspends and identify additional savings to reduce the projected overspend. Of concern is the deteriorating schools budget position with overall delegated budget balances for the Council's schools projected to reduce during 2018-19 by £2.1m, to a net total deficit figure of £39,000.

Since 2008, the Council has delivered £52.0m of savings. Further savings will be required in the future, with the Council's latest forward financial plan projecting a revenue funding shortfall of £4.8m in 2018-19 and £8.3m in 2019-20. The Council recognises it needs to continue reshaping its services and has engaged with the public on an annual basis through its Difficult Decisions consultation. It is projected that an element of this shortfall will be funded through budget reductions and savings already identified. The Council has not utilised General Fund Reserves to date to help mitigate the financial challenge but is projecting a decrease in its earmarked reserves to £10.7m.

The financial audit fee for 2017-18 is currently expected to be in line with the agreed fee set out in the Annual Audit Plan.

Yours sincerely

Derwyn Owen Engagement Director For and on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales

Appendix 3

National report recommendations 2018-19

Exhibit 2: national report recommendations 2018-19

Summary of proposals for improvement relevant to local government, included in national reports published by the Wales Audit Office, since publication of the last AIR.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
October 2018	Procuring Residual and Food Waste Treatment Capacity	R1 The projections for the three residual waste projects in the Programme assume that, across the 14 councils involved, the overall amount of residual waste will increase through the lifetime of the contracts. If these projections are accurate then something significant would have to occur beyond 2040 to reach zero waste across these council areas by 2050. If the projections are not accurate then there is the risk that councils will pay for capacity they do not need. We recommend that the Welsh Government:
		 in reviewing the Towards Zero Waste strategy, considers how its ambition of there being no residual waste by 2050 aligns with current projections for residual waste treatment; and works with councils to consider the impact of changes in projections on the likely cost of residual waste projects and any mitigating action needed to manage these costs.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
		R2 The Welsh Government's programme support to date has mainly focused on project development and procurement. Now that most of the projects are operational, the focus has shifted to contract management. We recommend that the Welsh Government continue its oversight of projects during the operational phase by:
		 building on its existing model of providing experienced individuals to assist with project development and procurement and making sure input is available to assist with contract management if required;
		 setting out its expectations of councils regarding contract management; ensuring partnerships revisit their waste projections and associated risks periodically, for
		example to reflect updated population projections or economic forecasts; and
		• obtaining from partnerships basic management information on gate fees paid, amount of waste sent to facilities and quality of contractor service.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
November 2018	Local Government Services to Rural Communities	R1 Socio economic change, poor infrastructure and shifts in provision of key services and facilities has resulted in the residualisation of communities in rural Wales. We recommend that Welsh Government support public bodies to deliver a more integrated approach to service delivery in rural areas by:
		 refreshing rural grant programmes to create sustainable financial structures, with multi-year allocations; and
		 helping people and businesses make the most of digital connectivity through targeted and more effective business and adult education support programmes.
		R2 The role of Public Service Boards is evolving but there are opportunities to articulate a clearer and more ambitious shared vision for rural Wales (see paragraphs 2.2 to 2.9 and 2.28 to 2.31). We recommend that PSB public services partners respond more effectively to the challenges faced by rural communities by:
		 assessing the strengths and weaknesses of their different rural communities using the Welsh Governments Rural Proofing Tool and identify and agree the local and strategic actions needed to support community sustainability; and
		 ensuring the Local Well-Being Plan sets out a more optimistic and ambitious vision for 'place'

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
		with joint priorities co-produced by partners and with citizens to address agreed challenges.
		 R3 To help sustain rural communities, public services need to think differently in the future (see paragraphs 3.1 to 3.12). We recommend councils provide a more effective response to the challenges faced by rural communities by:
		 ensuring service commissioners have cost data and qualitative information on the full range of service options available; and
		 using citizens' views on the availability, affordability, accessibility, adequacy and acceptability of council services to shape the delivery and integration of services.
		R4 To help sustain rural communities, public services need to act differently in the future (see paragraphs 3.1 to 3.12). We recommend councils do more to develop community resilience and self-help by:
		 working with relevant bodies such as the Wales Co-operative Centre to support social enterprise and more collaborative business models;
		 providing tailored community outreach for those who face multiple barriers to accessing public services and work;

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
		 enhancing and recognising the role of town and community councils by capitalising on their local knowledge and supporting them to do more; encouraging a more integrated approach to service delivery in rural areas by establishing pan-public service community hubs, networks of expertise, and clusters of advice and prevention services; enabling local action by supporting community asset transfer identifying which assets are suitable to transfer, and having the right systems in place to make things happen; and improving community-based leadership by developing networks of interest, training and coaching, and encouraging volunteering.
November 2018	Waste Management in Wales: Municipal Recycling	 R1 Benchmarking work has found that the cost of certain waste management services show surprising variation (paragraphs 1.31-1.39). The Welsh Government should work with councils to understand better the basis of the variation in spending on waste management services that are fundamentally the same and ensure that waste management costs are accounted for in a consistent way. R2 The Welsh Government believes that, if applied optimally, its Collections Blueprint offers the most cost-effective overall means of collecting recyclable resources but is planning

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
		further analysis (paragraphs 1.40-1.51). When undertaking its further analysis to understand better the reasons for differences in councils' reported costs, and the impact on costs where councils have adopted the Collections Blueprint, we recommend that the Welsh Government:
		 explores how the cost of collecting dry recyclables may affect the overall cost of providing kerbside waste management services to households; and
		compares the actual costs with the costs modelled previously as part of the Welsh Government-commissioned review of the Collections Blueprint for councils that now operate the Collections Blueprint.
		R3 The Welsh Government has undertaken to consider alternatives to the current weight-based recycling targets which can better demonstrate the delivery of its ecological footprint and carbon reduction goals (paragraphs 2.38-2.45). We recommend that the Welsh Government replace or complement the current target to recycle, compost and reuse wastes with performance measures to refocus recycling on the waste resources that have the largest impact on carbon reduction, and/or are scarce. We recognise that the Welsh Government may need to consider the affordability of data collection for any alternative means of measurement.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
		R4 In refreshing Towards Zero Waste, the Welsh Government needs to show that wider sustainability benefits sought through municipal recycling offer value and cannot be more readily attained in other ways and at lower cost including, but not necessarily limited to, other waste management interventions (paragraphs 2.52-2.53). The Welsh Government should demonstrate in the revised waste strategy that not only is it possible to recycle a greater proportion of municipal waste, but how doing so maximises its contribution to achieving its sustainable development objectives.
November 2018	Provision of Local Government Services to Rural Communities: Community Asset Transfer	R1 Local authorities need to do more to make CATs (Community Asset Transfers) simpler and more appealing, help build the capacity of community and town councils, give them more guidance in raising finance, and look to support other community development models such as social enterprises that support social value and citizen involvement. In addition, we recommend that local authorities monitor and publish CAT numbers and measure the social impact of CATs.
		R2 Local authorities have significant scope to provide better and more visible help and support before, during, and after the community asset transfer process. We conclude that there is considerable scope to improve the business planning, preparation, and aftercare for community asset transfer. We recommend that local authorities:

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
		 identify community assets transfer's role in establishing community hubs, networks of expertise and clusters of advice and prevention services; work with town and community councils to develop their ability to take on more CATs; identify which assets are suitable to transfer, and clarify what the authority needs to do to enable their transfer; ensure their CAT policy adequately covers aftercare, long term support, post transfer support, signposting access to finance, and sharing the learning about works well; and support community-based leadership by developing networks of interest, training and coaching, and encouraging volunteering.
December 2018	The maturity of local government in use of data	 R1 Part 1 of the report highlights the importance of creating a strong data culture and clear leadership to make better use of data. We recommend that local authorities: have a clear vision that treats data as a key resource; establish corporate data standards and coding that all services use for their core data; undertake an audit to determine what data is held by services and identify any duplicated records and information requests; and

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
		create a central integrated customer account as a gateway to services.
		R2 Part 2 of the report notes that whilst it is important that authorities comply with relevant data protection legislation, they also need to share data with partners to ensure citizens receive efficient and effective services. Whilst these two things are not mutually exclusive, uncertainty on data protection responsibilities is resulting in some officers not sharing data, even where there is agreement to provide partners with information. We recommend that authorities:
		 provide refresher training to service managers to ensure they know when and what data they can and cannot share; and
		 review and update data sharing protocols to ensure they support services to deliver their data sharing responsibilities.
		R3 In Part 3 of our report, we conclude that adequate resources and sufficient capacity are ongoing challenges. However, without upskilling staff to make better use of data, authorities are missing opportunities to improve their efficiency and effectiveness. We recommend that authorities:
		identify staff who have a role in analysing and managing data to remove duplication and free up

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
		 resources to build and develop capacity in data usage; and invest and support the development of staff data analytical, mining and segmentation skills.
		R4 Part 4 of our report highlights that authorities have more to do to create a data-driven decision-making culture and to unlock the potential of the data they hold. We recommend that local authorities:
		 set data reporting standards to ensure minimum data standards underpin decision making; and make more open data available.

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