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Mr David Waggett
Chief Executive
Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Municipal Offices
Civic Centre
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Reference	605A2013
Date	16 December 2013
Pages	1 of 4

Dear David

Improvement Assessment

In my letter of 2 October 2013, I gave my opinion on whether the Council had discharged its statutory duties in respect of improvement planning.

I am also required, under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) to give an opinion on whether Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council (the Council) has discharged its duties in respect of improvement reporting and met the requirements of the Measure.

In my opinion, and based on audit work undertaken to date, the Council has discharged its improvement reporting duties under the Measure although there is potential to strengthen its arrangements further.

I have reached this conclusion because:

- The Council published an assessment of its performance in its *Corporate Improvement Plan 2013/14* (the Performance Report) on 31 October 2013.
- As required by the Measure, the Performance Report assesses the Council's performance in 2012-13 and sets out how the Council has sought to discharge its duties under the Measure.
- The Performance Report includes details of performance and comparisons as measured by the national statutory performance indicators in accordance with the Measure.
- The Performance Report includes details of the way in which the Council has sought to collaborate.

- The Performance Report sets out how the Council has responded to my statutory recommendation made in the November 2011 Corporate Assessment. It also includes details of the most recent recommendations I made in my letter of 2 October 2013 and the recommendation made by the Appointed Auditor on 31 October 2013 under section 25 (2) of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004.
- The Performance Report is available in English and Welsh to download from the Council's website. It is also available in hard copy, and versions in other formats, such as Braille and audio, can be provided upon request.

The Council could act more in accordance with Welsh Government guidance and I have identified a number of areas where the Council can improve its Performance Report:

- The Council needs to strengthen its arrangements to collect information that will allow it to assess whether it has met its improvement objectives. For example, the Council was unable to collect some of the performance measures it had set to assess the achievement of the improvement objective 'to provide a clean and pleasant environment to enjoy and be proud of, by listening to our citizens and visitors and promoting what we do' for the whole of 2012-13. As a result, neither the Council nor readers can effectively assess whether this particular improvement objective has been achieved.
- Some of the Council's evaluations were limited, unbalanced and did not fully explain performance information. An example is the evaluation of the improvement objective 'Town Centres are more vibrant, attractive and viable as a result of physical regeneration and town centre management for the benefit of shoppers and businesses'. The evaluation refers to vacancy rates in town centres, which was not a measure associated with the particular improvement objective in the Improvement Plan and does not clearly state what the impact has been of actions undertaken in 2012-13 on the delivery of the improvement objective. The evaluation of each improvement objective needs to be clear, transparent and balanced, enabling the reader to understand if the Council has been successful in achieving improvement objectives during 2012-13.
- The Performance Report does not clearly present performance against the improvement objectives for the financial year 2012-13. The Performance Report includes performance in quarters 3 and 4 for 2012-13 and quarter 1 for 2013-14. This aspect of the Performance Report presents a confused picture of performance as it cuts across two financial years.
- Councils are encouraged to use information from peer reviews, scrutiny assessments, benchmarking data and other more qualitative information such as customer satisfaction. The Performance Report lacks this breadth of analysis and could use a wider evidence base to help the Council to more effectively self-evaluate its performance and report more comprehensively on achievement.

- The Performance Report includes a section 'Working with Others to Deliver Better Services' in which it describes a number of its main collaborations. Whilst the section provides an overview of current activity, the Performance Report could be improved by setting out the intended benefits and outcomes of these collaborations and partnerships. Setting out the timescales for achieving the outcomes arising from the Council's collaboration activity, such as efficiency savings and improvements in service delivery, would enable the Council to measure, evaluate and report more transparently on the actual benefits achieved through collaborative activities.
- Although the Council is not required to produce a summary of the Performance Report, it recognises the value in producing one. The Summary is structured around the three high level outcomes and could be improved by providing a clear evaluation of each improvement objective and what had been achieved during 2012-13.

Further proposals for improvement/recommendations

I am making further new proposals for improvement in this letter in addition to proposals for improvement that I set out in my Improvement Assessment Letter in December 2012. I will continue to monitor and report on the progress made by the Council in implementing the proposals set out in my previous reports and letters.

Proposals for improvement

P1 The Council should ensure it has robust information collection systems in place for performance measures that it will use to manage, assess and report progress against improvement objectives.

P2 If the Council produces a summary of its assessment of performance (stage 2), it should ensure that the summary presents a clear and balanced picture of performance in respect of the improvement objectives during the relevant reporting period.

I will undertake more detailed work on the arrangements that support the Council's performance management and reporting over the following months and report this, as well as summarising all of my work and that of relevant regulators during 2013-14, in an Annual Improvement Report for the Council that I will issue by the end of March 2014.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Huw Vaughan Thomas', with a flourish at the end.

HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS

Auditor General for Wales

cc: Lesley Griffiths, Minister for Local Government and Government Business

Non Jenkins – Manager

Jackie Joyce – Performance Audit Lead