



WALES AUDIT OFFICE
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

Annual Improvement Report 2015-16

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

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This Annual Improvement Report has been prepared on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales by Non Jenkins, Lisa Williams and Dave Wilson under the direction of Alan Morris.

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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

About this report

- 1 This Annual Improvement Report (AIR) summarises the audit work undertaken by the staff of the Wales Audit Office on behalf of the Auditor General at Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council (the Council) since the last such report was published in August 2015. This report also includes a summary of the key findings from reports issued by 'relevant regulators', namely: the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW); Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales (Estyn); and the Welsh Language Commissioner (the Commissioner). Nonetheless, this report does not represent a comprehensive review of all the Council's arrangements or services. The conclusions in this report are based on the work carried out at the Council by relevant external review bodies and, unless stated otherwise, reflect the situation at the point in time that such work was concluded.
- 2 Taking into consideration the work carried out during 2015-16, the Auditor General will state in this report whether he believes that the Council is likely to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2016-17.
- 3 This statement should not be seen as a definitive diagnosis 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.
- 4 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.

2015-16 performance audit work

- 5 The work undertaken since the last AIR, including that of the 'relevant regulators', is set out below.

Project name	Brief description
Wales Audit Office: Annual 'Improvement Plan' Audit	Review of the Council's published plan for delivering on improvement objectives in line with the requirements of the Measure.
Wales Audit Office: Annual 'Assessment of Performance' Audit	Review of the Council's published performance assessment in line with the requirements of the Measure.
Wales Audit Office: Data Quality Review	Review of a sample of eight of the Council's performance indicators and supporting data collection, recording and reporting arrangements.
Estyn: Evaluation of schools performance	A review of performance across a range of areas within schools in the Council.
Estyn: Monitoring visit	Monitoring visit to assess the Council's progress against the seven recommendations made following its inspection in January 2013.
CSSIW: Annual Review and Evaluation of Performance	An evaluation of the Council's performance in delivering its social services functions.
Welsh Language Commissioner: Review of the Council's Welsh Language Scheme	Assessment of the effectiveness of the scheme in providing Council services to the public in Welsh.
Wales Audit Office: Financial Resilience Assessment	Review of the Council's financial position and how it is budgeting and delivering on required savings.
Wales Audit Office: Information Management follow-up	Follow-up review of the Council's Information Management arrangements.
Wales Audit Office: Human Resources 2012 review – Progress follow-up	Follow-up review of the Council's Human Resources arrangements.
Wales Audit Office: Governance review with a focus on Scrutiny	Review of the Council's progress addressing the Auditor General's Statutory Recommendation issued in October 2013 and the Council's implementation of its Scrutiny Arrangements Action Plan.

Project name	Brief description
Wales Audit Office: Gwent Frailty Programme	A review of the Gwent Frailty Programme to assess whether the Programme had delivered improvements in line with individual organisations' expectations.
Wales Audit Office: National reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The financial resilience of councils in Wales (published 2 April 2015) • Achieving improvement in support to schools through regional education consortia – an early review (published 3 June 2015) • Review of Corporate Safeguarding arrangements in Welsh Councils (published 21 July 2015) • Supporting the Independence of Older people: Are Councils Doing Enough? (published 15 October 2015) • Delivering with Less – Leisure Services (published 3 December 2015)

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 Measure during 2016-17 providing that it continues to maintain the current pace of improvement

- 6 The Auditor General has reached this conclusion because:
- a Arrangements for data collecting and reporting performance are not sufficiently robust or consistent across the Council.
 - b Estyn judged that the Council made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the inspection of January 2013. As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales considered that the authority no longer required special measures and was removed from further follow-up activity.
 - c CSSIW reported that the Council continued to make progress with developing its social services department in 2014-15 and built on the previous year's foundations.

- d The Council's financial resilience arrangements continued to improve in the face of some significant financial challenges, but its financial planning arrangements could be further improved in some key areas.
- e The Council established arrangements and policies to support the improvement of information management but because, until recently, progress had been slow, they were not yet fully effective.
- f The Council made significant progress against the recommendations from our 2012 Human Resources (HR) review, although there were opportunities to further improve in some key areas. Strong HR leadership and vision were driving improvement in the Council's arrangements and systems that, if implemented effectively, were likely to help the Council achieve its wider service transformation.
- g The Council had taken positive steps to address the Auditor General's statutory recommendation set out in his Improvement Assessment Letter dated October 2013 relating to scrutiny and is implementing its Scrutiny Arrangements Action Plan, but more work could still be done to make scrutiny more effective and consistent in practice.
- h The Gwent Frailty Programme had demonstrated positive regional cross-sector partnership working to tackle growing community-based needs, but it had not evidenced tangible improved outcomes, which would be important as partners determine the future of the programme.

Recommendations

- 7 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:
 - a 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;
 - b make formal recommendations for improvement – if a formal recommendation is made, the Council must prepare a response to that recommendation within 30 working days;
 - c conduct a special inspection, publish a report and make recommendations; and
 - d recommend to Ministers of the Welsh Government that they intervene in some way.

- 8 During the course of the year, the Auditor General did not make any formal recommendations. However, lower-priority issues, known as proposals for improvement, are contained in our other reports but may be referred to later on in this report. We will continue to monitor proposals for improvement during the course of our improvement assessment work. He does, however, make recommendations that may be relevant to the Council in his Local Government National Reports. A list of recommendations contained in reports issued in 2015-16 can be found in [Appendix 5](#).
- 9 Areas for Improvement (AFIs) made by CSSIW during the course of the year are set out below.

CSSIW's Annual review and evaluation of performance

AFI1

- The Council should consider working with health partners to establish a pathway for the future development of integration.
- Continued monitoring of quality and outcomes within the adult safeguarding team.

AFI2

- Timescales for child protection reviews were below comparable authorities and the national average, and the council should interrogate contributory factors to this.
- Explore and monitor educational achievement for looked after children.

AFI3

- The Council should monitor workloads to identify workload pressures and gaps in resources.

Detailed report



Performance

Audit of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council's 2015-16 Improvement Plan

- 10 On 7 July 2015, we issued a certificate confirming that the Council had discharged its duties under section 15(6) to (9) of the Measure and has acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance sufficiently to discharge its duties. The certificate is contained in [Appendix 3](#).

Certificate of Compliance for the Audit of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council's assessment of 2014-15 performance

- 11 On 25 November 2015, we issued a Certificate of Compliance for the audit of the Council's assessment of 2014-15 performance. The certificate confirms that the Council has discharged its duties under sections 15(2), (3), (8) and (9) of the Measure. Our certificate is contained in [Appendix 4](#).

Arrangements for data collecting and reporting performance are not sufficiently robust or consistent across the Council

- 12 In January 2016, we carried out an examination of a sample of eight of the Council's performance indicators (PIs) and supporting data collection, recording and reporting arrangements. The indicators examined were five National Strategic Indicators (NSIs), one Public Accountability Measure (PAM) (which all councils are required to submit results for) and two local performance indicators specific to the Council. We issued the findings to the Council in June 2016.
- 13 Overall, we found that the following four indicators had arrangements that were fit for purpose which produced accurate end-of-year performance data:
- a PLA/006b – The number of additional affordable housing units provided during the year as a percentage of all additional housing units provided during the year.
 - b SCA/002 – The rate of older people (65 and over) supported in the community per 1,000 of the population, aged 65 or over on 31 March.
 - c PSR/002 – The average number of calendar days taken to deliver a Disabled Facilities Grant.
 - d Local – Number of additional affordable housing units delivered per annum.
- 14 We found weaknesses in the arrangements in the following three PIs resulting in inaccurate performance reporting:
- a LCS/002 – The number of visits to local-authority sport and leisure facilities during the year per 1,000 population where the visitor will be participating in physical activity.

- b STS/005b – The percentage of highways inspected of a high or acceptable standard of cleanliness.
 - c Local – Number of financial efficiency projects behind schedule.
- 15 We were unable to review STS/006 – The percentage of reported fly tipping incidents cleared within 5 working days as the Council could not make available the original records used to calculate the 2014-15 performance. Therefore, we were unable to test whether the PI had been recorded, calculated and reported accurately.

Estyn's evaluation of school performance

- 16 Estyn undertook a review of school performance within the Council for 2015-16 and identified the following:
- a The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in Blaenau Gwent is the highest in Wales. This was taken into account when evaluating the performance in the authority.
 - b When the performance of schools in Blaenau Gwent was compared with that of similar schools in Wales, based on the proportion eligible for free school meals, performance in the Foundation Phase indicator was around average and performance in the core subject indicators was just above average at key stages 2 and 3.
 - c At key stage 4, the proportion of pupils achieving the level 2 threshold including English or Welsh and mathematics in 2015 was the lowest in Wales. Nevertheless, the authority exceeded the benchmark for performance in this indicator set by the Welsh Government. Performance in this measure was in line with the benchmark in 2014 but was below it in the previous three years. Performance in the average wider capped points score failed to meet the Welsh Government benchmark for the last five years.
 - d The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals has improved considerably in recent years, particularly in secondary schools, where in 2015 the main indicators were all close to the Wales average.
 - e Attendance rates in primary and secondary schools were closer to the Wales averages as they have improved at faster rates than the national average over the last five years.
 - f The rate of exclusions of five days or less from schools more than doubled since 2012 and was now the second highest in Wales, having been lower than the Wales average until 2014.

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the inspection of January 2013. As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales considers that the authority no longer requires special measures and is removing it from further follow-up activity

- 17 In November 2015, Estyn undertook a monitoring visit to assess the Council's progress against the seven recommendations made following its inspection in January 2013. In December 2015, Estyn published the **outcome** of the monitoring visit on its website.

CSSIW reported that the Council continued to make progress with developing its social services department in 2014-15 and built on the previous year's foundations

- 18 CSSIW published its **Annual Review and Evaluation of Performance 2014-15** in October 2015 and this is available on its website.
- 19 CSSIW reported that the Council's social services had seen a period of stability during 2014-15. The previous year saw significant changes at both corporate and departmental level, which led to restructuring within the Council and social services. In last year's performance evaluation, it was noted that despite the change agenda, social services managed a consistent performance.
- 20 The Council continued to make progress with the development of its social services department in 2014-15. This built on the previous year's foundations.
- 21 In children's services this included continuity from the previously restructured services. The Council maintained good performance as in the previous year. Social services was proactive in seeking improvement, and an action plan was developed and implemented in relation to areas for improvement found in CSSIW's inspection of looked after children 2013-2014.
- 22 Restructuring of adult services took place during 2014-15 in line with children's services, to provide a locality-based approach to support and advice. This restructuring reflected prevention and integration agendas and placed the Council in a strong position in readiness for the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act (SSWB Act).
- 23 In 2013-14, areas for corporate improvement had been identified by the Wales Audit Office, necessitating the provision of external support and input to drive improvement in governance arrangements and to secure a robust and consistent approach to budgeting and planning within the Council. The Council worked closely with the support team and regulators during this period and there had been significant progress in achieving this.

- 24 The annual report of the director of social services provided a comprehensive picture of the current status of social services in Blaenau Gwent. This set out progress on the previous year's priorities and achievements and areas for development in the year ahead. This included progressing collaborative arrangements with health and third-sector providers, and sought alternative resources to support change and development within a constrained financial environment.
- 25 The director considered and outlined arrangements to support the provision of services in the medium of Welsh or other language of need. This included methods to support the implementation of More Than Just Words – strategic framework for Welsh language services in health, social services and social care.

Welsh Language Commissioner's evaluation of Blaenau Gwent's performance

- 26 The role of the Welsh Language Commissioner (the Commissioner) was created by the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. New powers to impose standards on organisations came into force through subordinate legislation on 31 March 2015. The Commissioner will continue to review Welsh-language schemes by virtue of powers inherited under the Welsh Language Act 1993.
- 27 The Commissioner works with all councils in Wales to inspect and advise on the implementation of language schemes. It is the responsibility of councils to provide services to the public in Welsh in accordance with the commitments in their language schemes. Every council is committed to providing an annual monitoring report to the Commissioner outlining its performance in implementing the language scheme. The Commissioner analyses every monitoring report, provides a formal response and collects further information as required.
- 28 The Commissioner's formal response and letters issued to the Council during the year are available on the [Commissioner's website](#).

Use of resources

Audit of the Council's accounts

- 29 On 26 November 2015, the Auditor General issued an Annual Audit Letter to the Council. The letter summarises the key messages arising from his statutory responsibilities under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 as the Appointed Auditor and his reporting responsibilities under the Code of Audit Practice. The Auditor General issued an unqualified opinion on the Council's accounting statements confirming that they presented a true and fair view of the Council's financial position and transactions. The Annual Audit Letter can be found in **Appendix 4** of this report.
- 30 The Annual Audit Letter highlighted that the audit could not be formally concluded and that the Auditor General could not issue an audit certificate until he was able to respond to correspondence from a member of the public. It also highlighted that the Auditor General was satisfied that the issues raised would not have a material effect on the statement of accounts. This matter has now been resolved and the Auditor General issued his certificate confirming that the audit of the Council's accounts had been completed on 13 July 2016.'

The Council's financial resilience arrangements continued to improve in the face of some significant financial challenges, but its financial planning arrangements could be further improved in some key areas

- 31 During the period May to October 2015, we undertook a review the Council's financial resilience, following up issues highlighted in the 2014-15 financial position work. The focus of the work was on the delivery of 2014-15 savings plans and the 2015-16 financial planning period.
- 32 Our review concluded that 'the Council's financial resilience arrangements continued to improve in the face of some significant financial challenges, but its financial planning arrangements could be further improved in some key areas'.
- 33 In reaching our conclusion, we reported the following findings:
- a the Council had arrangements in place to support effective financial planning but had a mixed track record of delivering the intended savings outlined in its budget proposals with some plans lacking key details;
 - b the Council had adequate financial control arrangements in place, and introduced some new arrangements to address previous weaknesses but these were not yet fully embedded; and
 - c the Council generally had effective financial governance arrangements in place, which had improved significantly over recent years.
- 34 The Council's Audit Committee received the **financial resilience assessment** in July 2016.

The Council established arrangements and policies to support the improvement of information management but because, until recently, progress had been slow, they were not yet fully effective

- 35 In November 2015, we undertook a review of the Council's progress in addressing weaknesses in its information management arrangements identified in our two earlier reviews in 2012 and 2013. We concluded that 'the Council was establishing arrangements and policies to support the improvement of information management but because, until recently, progress had been slow, they were not yet fully effective'. We came to this conclusion because:
- a an Information Governance Strategy had recently been approved and was in place, but its approval and version history were not documented and it lacked clear links to local issues;
 - b the Council had recently increased capacity to support the continued development of policy and guidance documents that would clearly define governance arrangements, structures, and roles and responsibilities;
 - c although there was evidence that the Information Governance Action Plan was starting to drive information issues forward within the Council, the plan was not clearly linked to the Council's corporate objectives or its Information Governance Strategy;
 - d arrangements were in place to ensure that the Senior Information Risk Owner (SIRO) was fully briefed on all aspects of information governance;
 - e the Council developed a central register of Information Sharing Protocols and was strengthening its compliance with the Wales Accord on the Sharing of Personal Information (WASPI) standard;
 - f the Council had recently paused and reviewed the implementation of the Electronic Document and Records Management System (EDRMS) to assess progress and direction, however, further work was required to fully understand the current position and aims of the system;
 - g arrangements were in place for the security of the Council's information in the event of a disaster; however, these were not formally documented in an IT disaster recovery plan or comprehensive back-up policy; and
 - h the Council did not have an up-to-date, approved, freedom of information (Fol) policy; and had not reviewed and refreshed the Fol content of its website.
- 36 The Council's Audit Committee received the **Information Management follow-up report** on 22 March 2016.

The Council made significant progress against the recommendations from our 2012 Human Resources (HR) review, although there were opportunities to further improve in some key areas. Strong HR leadership and vision were driving improvement in the Council's arrangements and systems that, if implemented effectively, were likely to help the Council achieve its wider service transformation

- 37 In June 2012, we carried out a review of the Council's arrangements to effectively manage and utilise its workforce. We concluded that the Council had a solid HR foundation but did not have in place arrangements or systems for the delivery of HR services that were likely to support continuous improvement.
- 38 In November 2015, we carried out a further review of 'the Council's progress in addressing proposals for improvement from the June 2012 HR Review. In carrying out this review, we did not examine Single Status as this was nearing completion. Instead, we included in our review a focus on the Council's wider approach to workforce planning.
- 39 We concluded that 'the Council had made significant progress against our 2012 Human Resources (HR) recommendations, although there were opportunities to further improve in some key areas. Strong HR leadership and vision were driving improvement in the Council's arrangements and systems that, if implemented effectively, were likely to help the Council achieve its wider service transformation'.
- 40 We identified progress as follows:
 - a the Council had clearly set out its strategic HR vision;
 - b the Council had reviewed its HR arrangements and systems, and HR performance was being measured and evaluated effectively;
 - c workforce planning was in place and was incorporated into business planning and service redesign exercises;
 - d Information Technology was providing better support in the delivery of HR services, with the potential to get further benefits from the current system; and
 - e not all key HR risks were adequately recorded and managed; the continuing high sickness absence rate had not been incorporated into the Corporate Risk Register and action to reduce sickness absence was not yet effective.
- 41 The Council's Audit Committee and Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee received the **human resources report** in July 2016.

Governance

The Council had taken positive steps to address the Auditor General's statutory recommendation set out in his Improvement Assessment Letter dated October 2013 relating to scrutiny, and is implementing its Scrutiny Arrangements Action Plan but more work could still be done to make scrutiny more effective and consistent in practice

- 42 In the Auditor General's Improvement Assessment Letter dated October 2013, he made two statutory recommendations for improvement under section 19 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. The first recommendation was to address weaknesses in financial planning by improving the quality of reports to members on budget savings proposals. The second recommendation was to strengthen scrutiny of decision making.
- 43 In May 2014, the Auditor General published his improvement study report **Good Scrutiny? Good Question!** summarising the work he had undertaken in relation to scrutiny in local government during 2012-13. This study identified eight all-Wales recommendations to improve scrutiny across the 22 councils in Wales. The Council incorporated these all-Wales recommendations into its Scrutiny Arrangements Action Plan along with areas for improvement drawn from its own internal evaluation and other work carried out by the Centre for Public Scrutiny, Welsh Government and ourselves.
- 44 In December 2015, we reviewed the Council's progress in relation to the Auditor General's Statutory Recommendation 2 (as above) and the Council's implementation of its Scrutiny Arrangements Action Plan.
- 45 We concluded that 'the Council had taken positive steps to address the Auditor General's October 2013 statutory recommendation relating to scrutiny and was implementing its Scrutiny Arrangements Action Plan but more work could still be done to make scrutiny more effective and consistent in practice'.
- 46 We came to this conclusion because:
- a executive members and senior officers were clear about how they contribute to the Council's scrutiny function, although in practice executive member invitations to attend scrutiny meetings were not consistently offered or in line with the Executive Committee Support Handbook;
 - b the Council had provided scrutiny members with support and training but some inconsistencies remained in the quality of chairing and questioning at scrutiny meetings;
 - c the Council had improved its arrangements for developing and reviewing forward-work programmes for all of its scrutiny committees; however, members needed to take the opportunities presented to more confidently lead in shaping the programme;
 - d relevant reports from external auditors and other external review bodies were included in the Council's scrutiny work programmes and were monitored during the year;

- e the Council had taken action to evaluate and improve its scrutiny function, but this had been, to date, process-driven rather than outcome-focused; and
- f the Council had not yet evaluated the impact its scrutiny function was having on delivering better decisions and outcomes for local people or the effectiveness of its public engagement.

47 The Council's Audit Committee received the **governance report** in July 2016.

The Gwent Frailty Programme had demonstrated positive regional cross-sector partnership working to tackle growing community-based needs, but it had not evidenced tangible improved outcomes, which would be important as partners determine the future of the programme

48 From April 2011, Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (the Health Board) and Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport and Torfaen Councils began implementing an ambitious integrated model of care called the Gwent Frailty Programme (the Programme)¹. The Programme was funded by a Welsh Government Invest to Save loan and contributions from respective partners to create a pooled fund.

49 The Programme has legal status under a Section 33 partnership agreement² between the Health Board and the five Gwent councils. The agreement ran for three years commencing in April 2011. A Gwent Frailty Joint Committee (GFJC) was created as a decision-making body holding formal accountability under the Section 33 agreement. An Operational Co-ordinating Group (OCG), a range of specialist sub-groups and local implementation structures also supported the work of the GFJC.

50 In November 2012, we reviewed the Programme and found that partners were strongly committed to the Gwent Frailty vision and had created a sound programme management framework to underpin it. We recognised that the Programme was in the early stages of implementation and it faced challenges to ensure the Programme was sustainable, to change established working practices and to demonstrate its impact.

51 Our latest review in May 2015 focused on whether the Gwent Frailty Programme had delivered improvements in line with individual organisations' expectations.

52 We concluded that 'the Programme had demonstrated positive regional cross-sector partnership working to tackle growing community-based needs, but it had not evidenced tangible improved outcomes, which would be important as partners determine the future of the programme'.

53 We reached this conclusion because:

¹ Unless stated otherwise, the 'Programme' covers the committees and working groups, members and staff and the overall delivery and service model.

² The Section 33 agreement provides a formal basis for partnership working. The partners can employ a section 33 agreement as a mechanism to create pooled revenue and capital funding. The host's financial management and financial accounting rules apply. This means that the joint service can reclaim VAT as well as utilising other financial flexibilities available to local-government bodies.

- a The Gwent Frailty Programme successfully brought together partners who invested time and resources to improve outcomes for frail elderly people, but the financial aims had not been achieved, and outcomes remained difficult for partners to evidence.
- b Governance arrangements over the lifetime of the programme had been generally adequate but the Programme could have engaged partners better, benefited from clearer information and been more open about its business.
- c We found that:
 - the governance arrangements provided for timely decision-making but partner organisations were not always kept adequately informed of important issues affecting the Programme, such as the emerging large underspend;
 - financial reporting arrangements within the Programme were adequate but performance reporting was not fit for purpose;
 - public transparency and decision recording started well but became weaker over time; and
 - routine scrutiny of decisions by the GFJC was not robust, although, most partners reported annually through their own scrutiny arrangements.
- d The Gwent Frailty Programme benefited from strong commitment and was at a pivotal point in its journey but needed clarity of vision to succeed. We found that:
 - the Programme had benefited from a strong commitment from the partner organisations, this needed to be re-confirmed in the context of the financial and operational challenges facing the individual organisations; and
 - the future direction of the Programme was unclear, the partnership was at a pivotal point and partners were yet to agree a clear vision, which would need measurable outcomes and benefits.

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.

Appendix 2 – Audit of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council’s 2015-16 Improvement Plan

Certificate

I certify that I have audited Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council’s (the Council) Improvement Plan in accordance with section 17 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) and my Code of Audit Practice.

As a result of my audit, I believe that the Council has discharged its duties under section 15(6) to (9) of the Measure and has acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance sufficiently to discharge its duties.

Respective responsibilities of the Council and the Auditor General

Under the Measure, the Council is required to prepare and publish an Improvement Plan describing its plans to discharge its duties to:

- a make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of its functions;
- b make arrangements to secure achievement of its improvement objectives; and
- c make arrangements to exercise its functions so that any performance standard specified by Welsh Ministers is met.

The Measure requires the Council to publish its Improvement Plan as soon as is reasonably practicable after the start of the financial year to which it relates, or after such other date as Welsh Ministers may specify by order.

The Council is responsible for preparing the Improvement Plan and for the information set out within it. The Measure requires that the Council has regard to guidance issued by Welsh Ministers in preparing and publishing its plan.

As the Council’s auditor, I am required under sections 17 and 19 of the Measure to carry out an audit of the Improvement Plan, to certify that I have done so, and to report whether I believe that the Council has discharged its duties to prepare and publish an Improvement Plan in accordance with statutory requirements set out in section 15 and statutory guidance.

Scope of the Improvement Plan audit

For the purposes of my audit work I will accept that, provided an authority meets its statutory requirements, it will also have complied with Welsh Government statutory guidance sufficiently to discharge its duties.

For this audit I am not required to form a view on the completeness or accuracy of information, or whether the Improvement Plan published by the Council can be achieved. Other assessment work that I will undertake under section 18 of the Measure will examine these issues. My audit of the Council's Improvement Plan, therefore, comprised a review of the plan to ascertain whether it included elements prescribed in legislation. I also assessed whether the arrangements for publishing the plan complied with the requirements of the legislation, and that the Council had regard to statutory guidance in preparing and publishing its plan.

The work I have carried out in order to report and make recommendations in accordance with sections 17 and 19 of the Measure cannot solely be relied upon to identify all weaknesses or opportunities for improvement.

Huw Vaughan Thomas
Auditor General For Wales

CC: Leighton Andrews, Minister for Public Services
Non Jenkins, Manager
Dave Wilson, Performance Audit Lead

Appendix 3 – Audit of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council’s assessment of 2014-15 performance

Certificate

I certify that, following publication on 27th October 2015, I have audited Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council’s (the Council) assessment of its performance in 2014-15 in accordance with section 17 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) and my Code of Audit Practice.

As a result of my audit, I believe that the Council has discharged its duties under sections 15(2), (3), (8) and (9) of the Measure and has acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance sufficiently to discharge its duties.

Respective responsibilities of the Council and the Auditor General

Under the Measure, the Council is required to annually publish an assessment which describes its performance:

- in discharging its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of its functions;
- in meeting the improvement objectives it has set itself;
- by reference to performance indicators specified by Welsh Ministers, and self-imposed performance indicators; and
- in meeting any performance standards specified by Welsh Ministers, and self-imposed performance standards

The Measure requires the Council to publish its assessment before 31 October in the financial year following that to which the information relates, or by any other such date as Welsh Ministers may specify by order.

The Measure requires that the Council has regard to guidance issued by Welsh Ministers in publishing its assessment.

As the Council’s auditor, I am required under sections 17 and 19 of the Measure to carry out an audit to determine whether the Council has discharged its duty to publish an assessment of performance, to certify that I have done so, and to report whether I believe that the Council has discharged its duties in accordance with statutory requirements set out in section 15 and statutory guidance.

Scope of the audit

For the purposes of my audit work I will accept that, provided an authority meets its statutory requirements, it will also have complied with Welsh Government statutory guidance sufficiently to discharge its duties.

For this audit I am not required to form a view on the completeness or accuracy of information. Other assessment work that I will undertake under section 18 of the Measure may examine these issues. My audit of the Council's assessment of performance, therefore, comprised a review of the Council's publication to ascertain whether it included elements prescribed in legislation. I also assessed whether the arrangements for publishing the assessment complied with the requirements of the legislation, and that the Council had regard to statutory guidance in preparing and publishing it.

The work I have carried out in order to report and make recommendations in accordance with sections 17 and 19 of the Measure cannot solely be relied upon to identify all weaknesses or opportunities for improvement.

Huw Vaughan Thomas
Auditor General For Wales

CC: Leighton Andrews, Minister for Public Services
Non Jenkins, Manager
Dave Wilson, Performance Audit Lead

Appendix 4 – Annual Audit Letter

Mr David Waggett
Chief Executive
Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Municipal Offices
Civic Centre
Ebbw Vale
NP23 6XB

Dear David,

Annual Audit Letter – Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council 2014-15

This letter summarises the key messages arising from the Auditor General's 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 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. On 30 September 2015, I issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council's financial position and transactions. My report is contained within the Statement of Accounts. The key matters arising from the accounts audit were reported to members of the Audit Committee in my Audit of Financial Statements report on 29 September 2015, and a more detailed report will follow in due course.

The Council continues to respond positively to the statutory recommendations made in 2013 by the Appointed Auditor and Auditor General for Wales

My 2013-14 Annual Audit Letter issued in November 2014, highlighted that the Council had responded positively to the Statutory Recommendation under Section 25(2) of the Public Audit Wales Act 2004. It also highlighted that the Council had taken appropriate action to improve its financial management arrangements but at that point it was too early to confirm whether the actions taken would deliver the full quantum of the savings required.

During the 2014-15 financial year, the Council delivered total savings of approximately £9,925,000. Despite this significant achievement, the Council's Statement of Accounts for 2014-15 show that its General Fund Reserve decreased by £574,000 to £5,246,000 and that Total Usable Reserves (both revenue and capital) decreased by £190,000 to £27,973,000. The decrease in the Council Fund was primarily as a result of technical accounting adjustments being required arising from our audit of the Council's draft financial statements. The adjustments related to the write off of bad debts, elimination of inter-company debtors and the establishment of provisions to cover the costs associated with the closure of Monwel Limited.

The Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy indicates that the Council continues to face significant on-going financial challenges and forecasts that it will need to save a further £29,270,000 between 2015-16 and 2019-20. Detailed plans as to how the quantum of the savings are to be achieved are yet to be developed. Consequently, I will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the arrangements that the Council operates to ensure its on-going financial sustainability.

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 as part of the Improvement Assessment under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. My Annual Improvement Report for 2014-15 was issued in August 2015 and concluded that as long as current momentum is maintained the Council has the potential to comply with the requirements of the Local Government Measure during 2015-16. The report did not contain any formal recommendations. It did, however, contain five lower priority issues referred to as proposals for improvement which were contained in reports issued throughout the year. I will monitor the actions put in place by the Council to respond to these proposals during the course of the 2015-16 improvement assessment work.

I have not yet issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts has been completed

The audit cannot be formally concluded and an audit certificate issued until I am able to respond to correspondence from a member of the public that I am currently dealing with. I am satisfied that the issues raised will not have a material effect on the statement of accounts.

My work to date on certification of grant claims and returns has not identified significant issues that would impact on the 2015-16 accounts or key financial systems

My grant certification work on your grant claims and returns to date has not identified any significant issues that would impact on your 2015-16 accounts or the key financial systems. A more detailed report on my grant certification work will follow in 2016 once this year's programme of certification work is complete.

The financial audit fee for 2014-15 is currently expected to be in line with the agreed fee of £191,489 as set out in the Audit Plan issued in March 2015.

Yours sincerely

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

Appendix 5 – National report recommendations published in 2015-16

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
April 2015	<p>The Financial resilience of Councils in Wales</p>	<p>R1 Councils should ensure that their corporate plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is the core driver for the service plans and other supporting strategies including workforce, information technology and capital expenditure; • maintains at least a three to five year forward view and is aligned with the medium term financial plan and other supporting strategies; and • should clearly articulate the desired role of the council in five years - the model for delivering priority services and the infrastructure and resources needed to deliver future priorities within available finances. <p>R2 The medium term financial plan should identify the major financial risks and key assumptions and senior officers and councillors should subject them to effective scrutiny and challenge before adopting the plan.</p> <p>R3 Councils need to ensure that funding deficits are accurately projected and fully reconciled to detailed savings plans for each year over the life of the medium term financial plan.</p> <p>R4 Councils should review the adequacy of the financial assurance arrangements that underpin the delivery of annual savings plans, including the level of scrutiny and challenge provided by councillors.</p> <p>R5 Councils should ensure that they have a comprehensive reserves strategy that outlines the specific purpose of accumulated useable reserves as part of their Medium term Financial Plan.</p> <p>R6 Councils should develop corporate wide policies on income generation with a view to increasing revenue streams and relieving financial pressures.</p> <p>R7 Councils should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strengthen budget setting and monitoring arrangements to ensure financial resilience; and • review the coverage and effectiveness of their internal and external assurance financial systems and controls to ensure they are fit for purpose and provide early warning of weaknesses in key systems.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
April 2015	<p>The Financial resilience of Councils in Wales</p>	<p>R8 Councils must review their finance teams and ensure that they have sufficient capacity and capability to meet future demands.</p> <p>R9 Council officers need to equip councillors with the knowledge and skills they need to deliver effective governance and challenge by extending training opportunities and producing high quality management information.</p>
June 2015	<p>Achieving improvement in support to schools through regional education consortia – an early view.</p>	<p>R1 To clarify the nature and operation of consortia. We found there to be continuing uncertainty about some aspects of the nature of regional consortia and their present and future scope (paragraphs 2.2 to 2.20). We therefore recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local authorities should clarify whether consortia services are jointly provided or are commissioned services (services provided under joint-committee arrangements are jointly provided services and are not commissioned services). <p>R2 To focus on outcomes through medium-term planning. We found that the development of effective regional consortia was hindered by a focus on short-term actions and uncertainty about the future of consortia (paragraphs 2.33 to 2.36; 3.16 to 3.17). We therefore recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As any possible local authority re-organisation will not be fully implemented until 2020, the Welsh Government and regional consortia should develop three-year plans for the further development, scope, and funding of regional consortia linked to appropriate strategic objectives.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
June 2015	<p>Achieving improvement in support to schools through regional education consortia – an early view.</p>	<p>R3 To develop more collaborative relationships for the school improvement system. The development of the National Model for Regional Working involved many school improvement partners but we found that this had not led to the development of sufficiently collaborative relationships (paragraphs 2.25 to 2.32). We therefore recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional consortia should develop improved arrangements for sharing practice and supporting efficiency (for example, one consortium could take the lead on tackling an issue or have functional responsibility for the development of a policy). • The Welsh Government, local authorities and regional consortia should recognise the interdependency of all partners fulfilling their school improvement roles and agree an approach to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – information sharing and consultation about developments related to school improvement; – developing collaborative relationships of shared accountability; and – undertaking system wide reviews, and an alignment of the understanding and position of regional consortia across all Welsh Government relevant strategies. <p>R4 To build effective leadership and attract top talent. Regional consortia, local authorities and the Welsh Government have all found difficulties in recruiting to senior leadership for education and we found there had been limited action to address this (paragraphs 2.37 to 2.40). We therefore recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Welsh Government and local authorities should collaborate to improve the attractiveness of education leadership roles to attract the most talented leaders for the school improvement system; and • local authorities should collaborate to support the professional development of senior leaders and to ensure appropriate performance management arrangements are in place for senior leaders.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
June 2015	<p>Achieving improvement in support to schools through regional education consortia – an early view.</p>	<p>R5 To improve the effectiveness of governance and management of regional consortia. Whilst continuing progress is being made, we found that regional consortia have not yet developed fully effective governance and financial management arrangements (paragraphs 3.2 to 3.36). We therefore recommend that local authorities and their regional consortia should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improve their use of self-evaluation of their performance and governance arrangements and use this to support business planning and their annual reviews of governance to inform their annual governance statements; • improve performance management including better business planning, use of clear and measurable performance measures, and the assessment of value for money; • make strategic risk management an integral part of their management arrangements and report regularly at joint committee or board level; • develop their financial management arrangements to ensure that budgeting, financial monitoring and reporting cover all relevant income and expenditure, including grants funding spent through local authorities; • develop joint scrutiny arrangements of the overall consortia as well as scrutiny of performance by individual authorities, which may involve establishment of a joint scrutiny committee or co-ordinated work by local authority scrutiny committees; • ensure the openness and transparency of consortia decision making and arrangements; • recognise and address any potential conflicts of interest; and where staff have more than one employer, regional consortia should ensure lines of accountability are clear and all staff are aware of the roles undertaken; and • develop robust communications strategies for engagement with all key stakeholders.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
July 2015	<p>Review of Corporate Safeguarding Arrangements in Welsh Councils</p>	<p>R1 Improve corporate leadership and comply with Welsh Government policy on safeguarding through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the appointment of a senior lead officer who is accountable for safeguarding and protecting children and young people with corporate responsibilities for planning improvements; • the appointment of a lead member for safeguarding; and • regularly disseminating and updating information on these appointments to all staff and stakeholders. <p>R2 Ensure there is a corporate-wide policy on safeguarding covering all Council services to provide a clear strategic direction and clear lines of accountability across the Council.</p> <p>R3 Strengthen safe recruitment of staff and volunteers by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring that Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks and compliance with safe recruitment policies cover all services that come into contact with children; • creating an integrated corporate compliance system to record and monitor compliance levels on DBS checks; and • requiring safe recruitment practices amongst partners in the third sector and for volunteers who provide services commissioned and/or used by the Council which are underpinned by a contract or service level agreement. <p>R4 Ensure all relevant staff, members and partners understand their safeguarding responsibilities by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring safeguarding training is mandated and coverage extended to all relevant Council service areas, and is included as standard on induction programmes; • creating a corporate-wide system to identify, track and monitor compliance on attending safeguarding training in all Council departments, elected members, schools, governors and volunteers; and • requiring relevant staff in partner organisations who are commissioned to work for the Council in delivering services to children and young people to undertake safeguarding training.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
July 2015	<p>Review of Corporate Safeguarding Arrangements in Welsh Councils</p>	<p>R5 In revising guidance, the Welsh Government should clarify its expectations of local authorities regarding the roles and responsibilities of the designated officer within education services, and the named person at senior management level responsible for promoting the safeguarding.</p> <p>R6 Improve accountability for corporate safeguarding by regularly reporting safeguarding issues and assurances to scrutiny committee(s) against a balanced and Council-wide set of performance information covering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • benchmarking and comparisons with others; • conclusions of internal and external audit/ inspection reviews; • service-based performance data; • key personnel data such as safeguarding training, and DBS recruitment checks; and • the performance of contractors and commissioned services on compliance with Council safeguarding responsibilities. <p>R7 Establish a rolling programme of internal audit reviews to undertake systems testing and compliance reviews on the Council's safeguarding practices.</p> <p>R8 Ensure the risks associated with safeguarding are considered at both a corporate and service level in developing and agreeing risk management plans across the Council.</p>

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
October 2015	<p>Supporting the Independence of Older People: Are Councils Doing Enough?</p>	<p>R1 Improve governance, accountability and corporate leadership on older people's issues through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the appointment of a senior lead officer who is accountable for coordinating and leading the Council's work on older people's services; • realigning the work of the older people's strategy coordinators to support development and delivery of plans for services that contribute to the independence of older people; • the appointment of a member champion for older people's services; and • regularly disseminating and updating information on these appointments to all staff and stakeholders. <p>R2 Improve strategic planning and better coordinate activity for services to older people by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring comprehensive action plans are in place that cover the work of all relevant council departments and the work of external stakeholders outside of health and social care; and • engaging with residents and partners in the development of plans, and in developing and agreeing priorities. <p>R3 Improve engagement with, and dissemination of, information to older people by ensuring advice and information services are appropriately configured and meet the needs of the recipients.</p> <p>R4 Ensure effective management of performance for the range of services that support older people to live independently by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting appropriate measures to enable Members, officers and the public to judge progress in delivering actions for all council services; • ensuring performance information covers the work of all relevant agencies and especially those outside of health and social services; and • establishing measures to judge inputs, outputs and impact to be able to understand the effect of budget cuts and support oversight and scrutiny.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
October 2015	<p>Supporting the Independence of Older People: Are Councils Doing Enough?</p>	<p>R5 Ensure compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty when undertaking equality impact assessments by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting out how changes to services or cuts in budgets will affect groups with protected characteristics; • quantifying the potential impact and the mitigation actions that will be delivered to reduce the potentially negative effect on groups with protected characteristics; • indicating the potential numbers who would be affected by the proposed changes or new policy by identifying the impact on those with protected characteristics; and • ensuring supporting activity such as surveys, focus groups and information campaigns includes sufficient information to enable service users to clearly understand the impact of proposed changes on them. <p>R6 Improve the management and impact of the Intermediate Care Fund by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting a performance baseline at the start of projects to be able to judge the impact of these overtime; • agreeing the format and coverage of monitoring reports to enable funded projects to be evaluated on a like-for-like basis against the criteria for the fund, to judge which are having the greatest positive impact and how many schemes have been mainstreamed into core funding; and • improving engagement with the full range of partners to ensure as wide a range of partners are encouraged to participate in future initiatives and programmes.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
December 2015	Delivering with less - leisure services	<p>R1 Improve strategic planning in leisure services by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting an agreed council vision for leisure services; • agreeing priorities for leisure services; • focusing on the Council's position within the wider community sport and leisure provision within the area; and • considering the potential to deliver services on a regional basis. <p>R2 Undertake an options appraisal to identify the most appropriate delivery model based on the Council's agreed vision and priorities for leisure services which considers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the availability of capital and revenue financing in the next three-to-five years; • options to improve the commercial focus of leisure services; • opportunities to improve income generation and reduce council 'subsidy'; • a cost-benefit analysis of all the options available to deliver leisure services in the future; • the contribution of leisure services to the Council's wider public health role; • better engagement with the public to ensure the views and needs of users and potential users are clearly identified; • the impact of different options on groups with protected characteristics under the public sector equality duty; and • the sustainability of service provision in the future.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
December 2015	Delivering with less - leisure services	<p>R3 Ensure effective management of performance of leisure services by establishing a suite of measures to allow officers, Members and citizens to judge inputs, outputs and impact. This should cover council-wide and facility specific performance and include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • capital and revenue expenditure; • income; • council 'subsidy'; • quality of facilities and the service provided; • customer satisfaction; • success of 'new commercial' initiatives; • usage data – numbers using services/facilities, time of usage, etc; and • impact of leisure in addressing public health priorities. <p>R4 Improve governance, accountability and corporate leadership on leisure services by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regularly reporting performance to scrutiny committee(s); • providing elected Members with comprehensive information to facilitate robust decision-making; • benchmarking and comparing performance with others; and • using the findings of internal and external audit/inspection reviews to identify opportunities to improve services.

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