



WALES **AUDIT** OFFICE  
SWYDDFA **ARCHWILIO** CYMRU

# Annual Improvement Report

## **Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council**

January 2011



## Annual Improvement Report by the Auditor General for Wales

This report is written by the Wales Audit Office on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales. (An explanation of what the Auditor General does is at Appendix 1). It is a new report that he is required to publish about how well Welsh councils are improving their services. With help from other inspectors like Estyn (for education) and the Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales, we have brought together a picture of what the council is trying to achieve; how it is going about it; and what it needs to do to improve its approach to improving services.

This Annual Improvement Report sets out that picture and each year we will produce a report to let you know what progress Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (the Council) has made. We have not covered all the services the Council provides. We have focused on a small number of things, especially those things that the Council has said are its priorities for improvement.

We want to find out what you think of the services the Council is providing in your area and will be giving you an opportunity to comment in the future. In the meantime we would like to know whether this report gives you the information you need, and whether it is easy to understand. You can let us know your views by emailing us at [info@wao.gov.uk](mailto:info@wao.gov.uk) or writing to us at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF11 9LJ.

The Wales Audit Office study team that assisted in preparing this report comprised Colin Davies and Justine Morgan under the direction of Jane Holownia.

This report has been prepared by the Wales Audit Office on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales as required by the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. The Auditor General for Wales assesses the compliance of Welsh improvement authorities (county councils, county borough councils, national park authorities and fire and rescue authorities) with the improvement requirements of Part 1 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009.

The Auditor General for Wales and his staff together comprise the Wales Audit Office. For further information about the Wales Audit Office please write to the Auditor General at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9LJ. Telephone 029 2032 0500, email: [info@wao.gov.uk](mailto:info@wao.gov.uk), or see website [www.wao.gov.uk](http://www.wao.gov.uk).

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# What kind of area is Rhondda Cynon Taf?

- 1 The area covered by Rhondda Cynon Taf accounts for two per cent of the total area of Wales and comprises a mixture of urban, semi-suburban and rural communities, situated in mountains and lowland farmland. It is the thirteenth largest local authority area of Wales. The county borough borders Merthyr Tydfil and Caerphilly to the east, Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan to the south, Bridgend and Neath Port Talbot to the west and Powys to the north. Its main towns are Aberdare, Mountain Ash, Pontypridd and Porth. The Council's administrative headquarters are sited in Clydach Vale.
- 2 Based on the latest mid-year estimate (2009) the population of Rhondda Cynon Taf is 234,403 making it the second-most populous local authority area in Wales. Rhondda Cynon Taf has a slightly higher proportion of people of working age and a lower proportion of people of retirement age than Wales as a whole. The age profile of the population shows there were 44,335 children (aged 0 - 16) and 39,511 adults aged 65 and over in 2009. The population of Rhondda Cynon Taf is projected to increase by around 5 per cent by 2033.

**population**  
**234,403**  
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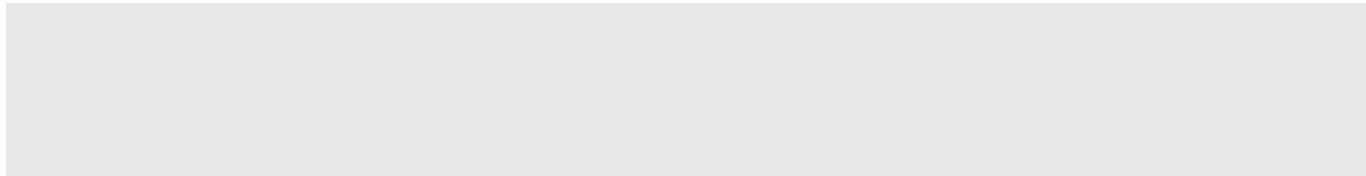
**44,335 aged 0-16**  
**39,511 aged >65**  
//////////
- 3 In July 2010, 4 per cent of the working age population in Rhondda Cynon Taf declared they were out of work by claiming the Jobseekers Allowance and National Insurance credits. The Wales average was 3.6 per cent and Rhondda Cynon Taf had the seventh highest level of unemployment in Wales.

**average weekly earnings**  
**£496**  
//////////
- 4 In 2008 Rhondda Cynon Taf had the second highest rate of children living in workless households amongst the Welsh local authorities, a rate which has risen consistently since 2004. In 2009 the average weekly earnings in Rhondda Cynon Taf stood at £496, which was the twelfth highest amongst the 22 Welsh local authorities.
- 5 Further information about Rhondda Cynon Taf and the Council is available in [Appendix 2](#).

# Is Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council well-managed?

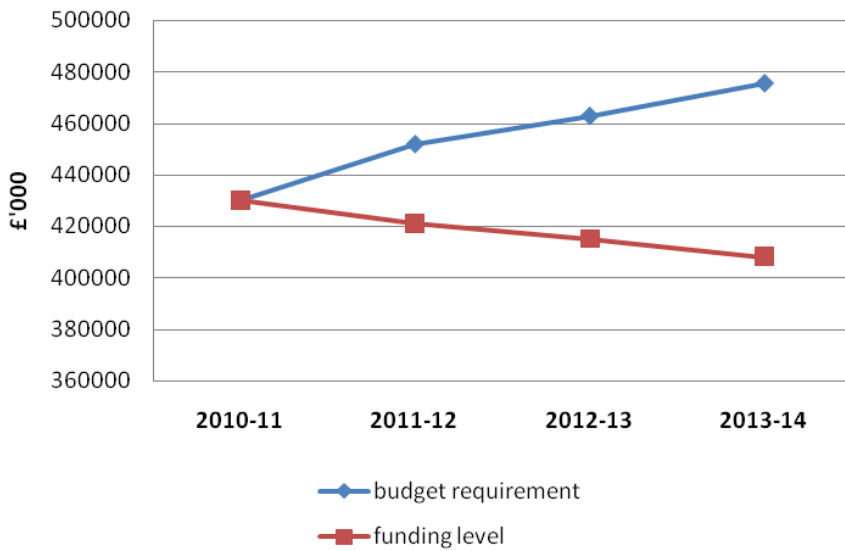
- 6 In October of last year the Auditor General produced a report that sets out how the Council is organised and managed. [Appendix 3](#) sets out the findings from that report. The whole Corporate Assessment Report is available on the Wales Audit Office website at [www.wao.gov.uk](http://www.wao.gov.uk).
- 7 The overall conclusion of that report was that Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (the Council) is well-managed and has a clear and realistic strategic approach to improvement.
- 8 The Council has improved considerably over time. It has managed its finances well and been realistic about what it can achieve. We found it was in a good position to improve, manages people well and has a good approach to strategic planning. The Council does however need a clearer picture of what it is achieving for citizens.
- 9 Since we carried out our fieldwork for the Corporate Assessment the pressure has grown on all public services to make the very best use of all their resources. Revenue funding is the money that Councils spend running and managing their services. The Council set a revenue budget of £419 million in 2009-10. In 2010-11 the budget was £430 million. The auditor appointed by the Auditor General has given his opinion on the Council's accounts. His annual audit letter, which provides information regarding the accounts, use of resources and the Council's Improvement Plan is included in this report in [Appendix 4](#).
- 10 The Council continues to develop and refine its approach to medium term financial planning and how to make best use of the money it has. Over the summer and early autumn the Council undertook further work to assess its likely revenue resource requirements in the future. The budget requirement is predicted to grow to £452 million next year and £463 million the year after.
- 11 At the same time the Council predicted, using resource indications from the Assembly Government, that its income streams will decrease in the future. It predicted a shortfall of £20 to £23 million in 2011-12 increasing to £55 to £60 million by 2013-14. This is illustrated in [Figure 1](#) on a worst case scenario basis.
- 12 Subsequently, following the outcome of the UK Government's Comprehensive Spending Review, the Assembly Government announced the local government budgets for 2011-12. The Council will see a reduction of around £5.9 million (1.7 per cent) in the revenue funding it gets from the Assembly Government for 2011-12. Once inflation is factored in, that means a real terms<sup>1</sup> cut of around £12.5 million (3.6 per cent). Indicative Assembly Government figures show further real terms reductions in the Council's revenue funding for 2012-13 and 2013-14.
- 13 The Council's budget has been well-managed in recent years with balanced budgets achieved at both directorate and corporate level. This places the Council on a sound footing going forward into a period of significant change and financial cuts as it has a track record of making sure its services are delivered with the resources it has available.

<sup>1</sup> Real terms means the effect of inflation is taken into account. There are lots of different measures of inflation. The figures used for public sector budgets come from the Treasury's GDP deflator series.



**Figure 1: Predicted budget spend and income 2010-11 – 2013-14**

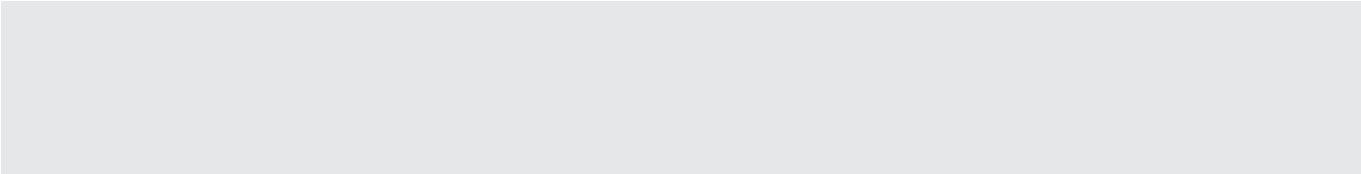
The gap between what the Council predicts it needs to spend and the level of resources it will have available will grow in the future unless action is taken to reduce expenditure.



Shortfall predicted by the Council in June 2010 based on early resource indications from Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) of 3% Council Tax increase and 3% decrease in WAG funding

Source: Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Medium Term Financial Plan 2011-2014, presentation to Cabinet June 2010.

- 14 However, the Council has some real challenges to address if it is to secure the level of savings it envisages, and it has begun working on a range of options within three broad areas:
  - implementing, through agreement, the results of its job evaluation exercise and reductions to staff terms and conditions;
  - introducing new ways of delivering existing services to make savings and improvements – ie, further efficiencies; and
  - transforming the business – reviewing the continued provision of non statutory services and the service level provided for statutory services including how services are delivered.
- 15 The Council anticipates that its proposals, which are in the process of being fully developed, will result in sufficient cost savings to achieve a balanced revenue budget over the next three years.

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- 16 Capital funding is the money that councils spend on infrastructure, for example new buildings and new equipment. The capital funding available to the Council is set to reduce considerably. Because councils make bids for capital funding, it is not possible to be entirely clear about how much each council will get. The total sum of capital available to councils will fall by 14 per cent in 2011-12 (a real terms cut of 18.5 per cent). There are no official figures for local government capital spending beyond 2011-12 but it is likely to be in line with a general reduction in the Assembly Government's capital spending, which will be cut by around 34 per cent (around 40 per cent in real terms) between 2010-11 and 2013-14, and this will impact significantly on the Council's plans for the future.

# Does Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council know what it needs to do to improve?

- 17 The Assembly Government requires all authorities to publish their plans for improving what they do and how they do it. They must also publish a list of the main things they are aiming to improve each year – their improvement objectives.
- 18 In October 2009 the Council agreed and published its Improvement Plan containing its 11 improvement priorities for the next three years, 2010-11 to 2012-13. The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 came into force on 1 April 2010 requiring the Council to publish its improvement objectives and plans to achieve them as soon as practical after the beginning of April each year.
- 19 The Council re-assessed its Improvement Priorities taking into account a range of information sources that included:
- reviewing and challenging progress made;
  - taking account of updated three-year service plans covering the period from 2010-11 to 2012-13;
  - seeking the views of its citizens and stakeholders around what matters most to them, and
  - considering whether the priority areas of the Council contributed to the delivery of the long-term vision for the county borough, as set out in the Community Strategy.
- 20 Having considered the findings from its assessment, the Council concluded that the 11 improvement priorities agreed in 2009 remained well grounded in the local needs of the area and if delivered, would have a significant positive impact on the majority of residents of the county borough.
- 21 At its meeting on 21 April 2010, the Council endorsed the 11 improvement priorities for 2010-11, which we have summarised as:
- improve the learning and achievement of children and young people;
  - improve the local environment to build a cleaner, greener county borough;
  - keep all children and young people safe, and improve the life chances of vulnerable children;
  - support adults and older people to live independently;
  - manage the late night economy and reduce antisocial behaviour;
  - improve the look and feel of Rhondda Cynon Taf's town centres, widen housing choice and affordability, tackle child poverty and help local people to maximise their income, and increase employment opportunities;
  - rationalise the number of Council buildings, improve their quality and ensure their occupancy is optimised;
  - improve and extend access to services and increase their efficiency and effectiveness to enhance customer experience;
  - maximise opportunities to work in partnership with others to deliver more visible and measurable benefits for local communities;
  - manage finances very prudently and innovatively in order to achieve the Council's priorities; and
  - improve the effectiveness of communication approaches to raising awareness and keeping people informed.



- 22 The Council must publish its improvement priorities as soon as practical after the beginning of April each year. We think that by publishing a summary of its improvement priorities in a community magazine distributed to every home in September last year, the Council did share its plans with local people. However, in accordance with legislation, they need to be published earlier and more comprehensively this year to ensure that citizens can be clear on what the Council intends to focus its activity on, what beneficial outcomes they can expect and how they may propose new improvement objectives during the year.
- 23 To ensure that the Council's improvement plans are sufficiently focussed, we examined whether the Council is clear about how citizens will be better off if it improves in the ways that it intends to. As in previous years, lead officers with responsibility for each improvement priority have developed individual action plans. The improvement priorities are reasonably clear so it should be possible for the Council to measure whether it is achieving its aims. However, for some of the priorities it is more difficult to measure whether people are actually benefitting. The Council has recognised this and has made some changes to how they will evaluate progress. Officers were required to compile their 2010-11 service plans with specific emphasis on clarity and focus, highlighting the outcomes that each plan aims to achieve, in order to facilitate more effective scrutiny and progress monitoring.
- 24 For each priority, the plans set out the critical improvement actions that must be delivered to achieve the stated aims together with the measures and targets to be used to evaluate and evidence success. For most of its priorities, the Council has identified quantitative national and local performance indicators as key measures of progress towards their successful achievement, and aligned these with relevant Community Strategy measures. For some priorities, such measures are complemented by the outcomes of project evaluations, external inspections and surveys of public opinion. Where available, comparative data is also provided to enable the Council's performance to be compared with all Wales averages.
- 25 Our review of the Council's improvement plans indicates that overall, the 2010-11 Improvement Plan is clearer and more focussed on outcomes for citizens than was the case in the previous year. However, the extent to which this is achieved is variable across the range of priorities. For example, to measure progress towards achieving its priority to provide a top quality education for all, the Council has identified a range of measures that focus on desired outcomes in areas in which it needs to improve, as informed by Estyn inspection findings and national Performance Indicators. Also, the community focussed schools initiative is an example where plans propose that its success be evaluated specifically from the perspective of young people in Rhondda Cynon Taf. However for some priorities e.g. Raising the profile of adult protection, and Communication – raising awareness and keeping people informed, the relationship between critical improvement actions, performance measures and observable outcomes are less clear.

- 26 The Council's progress in delivering its stated improvement priorities is being monitored by the Cabinet Performance & Resources Committee and the relevant Scrutiny Committee as part of the Council's Performance Reporting arrangements.
- 27 We also looked at how well the Council involved local people and those that work with and for it, in deciding what it should make a priority. The Council undertook an extensive consultation programme between October and December 2009 to support the development of its new Community Strategy and the feedback results showed that 95 per cent of respondents agreed with the priority areas as set out within the draft strategy at that time. Subsequently, the Council has demonstrated that the current priority areas of the Council contribute to the delivery of the long-term vision for the county borough, as set out in the Community Strategy.
- 28 The Council also sought the views of its citizens and stakeholders (including local businesses, 6th Form pupils and the voluntary sector) as part of setting its budget for 2010-11. The majority of respondents (94 per cent) considered that the Council's selected improvement priorities would make a positive difference to improving outcomes for local people. We note that the Council has launched its Budget Consultation 2011-12 and that consultees are invited to comment on whether a continued focus on these key priority areas by the Council would help improve the quality of their life and those of their family in 2011 and beyond. Consultees are also invited to suggest other specific areas that the Council should consider prioritising.
- 29 In our work we considered how well the Council's plans support its efforts to improve and if it could afford to pay for these improvements. We found that the Council is working hard to achieve a high degree of coherence in its strategic planning, building stronger links between different levels of planning, and across service areas. The Council's medium term financial planning arrangements are both driving and supporting planning for service delivery and improvement. Where there are financial consequences of improvement actions, they are robustly assessed and built into business plans, and reflected in the Medium Term Financial Plan and the three year capital programme as appropriate.
- 30 Every Council needs to have good information and use it well if it is to provide good services and make them even better. We found that the Council makes extensive and effective use of the Ffynnon electronic information management system to collect and analyse its performance data. We are satisfied that, generally, there are appropriate arrangements in place designed to ensure the quality and accuracy of the Council's performance data. However, our audit of the Council's reported 2009-10 National Strategic Indicators identified inadequacies in relation to the systems supporting two of the education indicators. The Council needs to address these system weaknesses to ensure that the indicators are fairly stated.
- 31 In scrutinising services, members receive quarterly reports that provide detailed information on both service and financial performance together with a summary of key issues and exceptions. This allows members to focus on underperforming areas and provides the opportunity for more targeted discussion on why services are underperforming.

# Is Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council serving people well?

- 32 Through the Auditor General's Improvement Assessment we hope to gradually build a picture of how well the Council is serving local people. In order to do that, each year we will examine the Council's services and some of their objectives for improvement as they relate to three important aspects of life in Rhondda Cynon Taf. We think that together, these aspects cover the main things that councils do. They are:
- helping to support people in need;
  - helping people develop; and
  - helping to create a safe, prosperous and pleasant place to live.
- 33 In this year's assessment we have looked at how the Council is doing so far on one objective under each of these aspects, so that next year the Council, and others, will be in a better position to understand how far performance has improved. The objectives we have chosen are:
- supporting adults and older people to live independently;
  - providing a top quality education for all; and
  - providing a cleaner, greener county borough.
- 34 We chose these objectives because together they span several key areas of the Council's responsibilities. Overall, if the Council has chosen to make things a priority, then it should be able to measure them in terms of how they affect local people. We will look at other improvement objectives the Council is setting itself in our report next year.
- 35 In Wales there is also a need to serve citizens and deliver services through the medium of Welsh, as appropriate to the needs of the community. In 2009, 17 per cent of the population of Rhondda Cynon Taf could speak Welsh compared with just under 26 per cent of the total population of Wales although the number of pupils assessed in Welsh as a first language is above the Welsh average.
- 36 The Welsh Language Board (the Board) works with Local Authorities to help them develop their statutory Welsh language schemes that outline the way in which they provide services to the public in Welsh. The primary responsibility for the range and standard of services rests with the Authorities who provide them, working in accordance with the statutory framework and guidelines of the Board. Every local authority is expected to provide the Board with an Annual Monitoring Report that explains how its scheme has been implemented. This allows the Board to offer advice as to how a Council might improve its local arrangements. The Board also undertakes its own reviews to assess the provision of Welsh language services and to promote improvement.
- 37 The Board found that the Council was only partly compliant with its Welsh Language Scheme (WLS) in respect of electoral documentation. The Board also found that the Welsh language content on the Council's website was less comprehensive than the English content, but that progress was being made in-line with its WLS commitments. The Council is also improving its processes for collecting Welsh language skills data.
- 38 The Council is expected to develop a Language Skills Strategy in the next few months to allow it to plan its Welsh language services for the medium and long term.

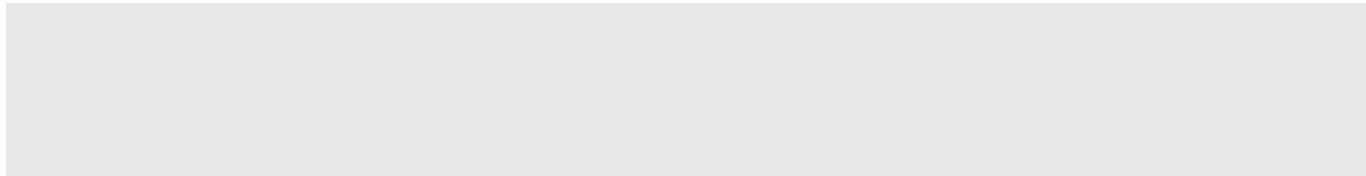
# Is Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council supporting people in need?

- 39 High levels of deprivation exist in Rhondda Cynon Taf and life expectancy is below average. Female life expectancy in Rhondda Cynon Taf for 2007-09 was 80.0 years, which was lower than the Welsh average of 81.6 years. Male life expectancy was 75.5 years, also lower than the Welsh average of 77.2. The population is projected to increase over the next 20 years.
- 40 There are also high levels of teenage pregnancies. In 2007, Rhondda Cynon Taf residents had the second highest level of teenage pregnancy in Wales with 57.2 conceptions per 1,000 girls aged 15 to 17; the average rate for Wales was 44.9.
- 41 The Assembly Government's Health Survey of adults for 2007-08 suggested that people in Rhondda Cynon Taf had poorer mental health and well-being than average for Wales.
- 42 The level of homelessness is well below average and the rate of people accepted as homeless in Rhondda Cynon Taf in 2008-09 was the lowest of all the local authorities in Wales. Since 2003-04 the rate of homelessness has decreased considerably and remained well below the Wales average each year. But, while the rate of extra affordable housing provided in Rhondda Cynon Taf has increased since 2007-08, it remains well below the Wales average.

## Is Rhondda Cynon Taf Council supporting adults and older people to live independently?

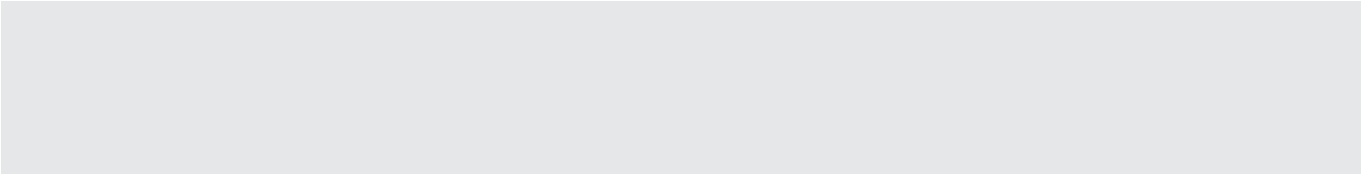
- 43 We think that supporting adults and older people to live independently is an appropriate improvement objective for the Council. This is because the Council's population includes a significant number of older people, which is predicted to increase in the future. The improvement objective is clearly linked to the themes of the Council's community strategy and its Health Social Care and Well-being Strategy.
- 44 The key elements of the improvement objective are to:
- promote independence and quality of life by continuing to improve services to support adults and older people to live at home;
  - prevent unnecessary hospital admissions and facilitate timely discharges;
  - raise the profile of adult protection in order to enhance the opportunities to protect vulnerable adults; and
  - support those with caring responsibilities.
- 45 Promoting independence and quality of life by continuing to improve services to support adults and older people to live at home has been a priority of the Council since last year. Good progress has been made to promote independence, for example:
- the number of people waiting for an assessment of their needs to live safely and independently at home is reducing;

- the number of disabled facilities grants completed to fund stair lifts, provide accessible bathrooms and install grab rails has increased over the last three years and the Council is in the top performing 25 per cent when compared to other Wales authorities;
  - more older people have been provided with specialist telecare;
  - more people with dementia have received assisted technology; and
  - the number of people receiving a direct payment to pay for home help and support has increased, giving citizens further choice about how they receive care, support and maintain their independence.
- 46 The percentage of adults between 18 and 64 years who were supported in the community during 2009-10 was the highest in Wales, and the rate of people over the age of 65 years was in the best performing 25 per cent of Welsh authorities.
- 47 However some critical actions to achieve key milestones are dependent upon other organisations, for example further promotion of intermediate care services requires collaboration with Cwm Taf Health Board. It is important that priorities of the two organisations are aligned if they are to be realised this year.
- 48 Similarly, to prevent unnecessary hospital admissions and facilitate timely discharges from hospital requires collaboration with Cwm Taf Health Board to achieve many of its critical improvement actions. Performance on delayed transfer of care did not meet targets last year and this is an area that the Council and Cwm Taf Health Board need to improve.
- 49 The Care and Social Services Inspectorate in Wales (CSSIW) conducted a Review of the Protection of Vulnerable Adults in 2010 and an action plan has been put in place by social services to address the recommendations from this report. Recommendations focussed around strategic leadership and the status of the Adult Area Protection Committee with partners and professionals. It is clearly appropriate for the Council to have identified the protection of vulnerable adults as a corporate priority. However the critical improvement actions that the Council has agreed focus on promoting the awareness of vulnerable adult issues to the residents of RCT. Whilst beneficial, it is less clear whether these improvement actions have been designed to address concerns raised by CSSIW, or have been prioritised for some other reason. In addition, last year the Council focussed on developing services for older people with mental health problems and it is not clear why this is no longer a priority or whether the Council achieved its intended outcomes.
- 50 Supporting those with caring responsibilities has been a priority of the Council since 2009-10 and the Council is performing well in assessing the needs of carers of adult service users. There is clarity and continuity in the critical improvement actions in relation to supporting those with caring responsibilities. Last year the Council mapped the needs of carers and this year it is planning to implement what carers said they needed.
- 51 Performance measures are included in the elderly and physical disability service business plan against each of the elements of the improvement objective. This means that it is clear and easy to understand what the Council intends to do and how it will measure this, although the measures tend to focus on what the Council will do, rather



than how people will benefit, Only 5 out of 15 measures are outcome focussed. For example, the Council is not clear how many people required and claimed a Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) but were not awarded a grant because resources could not match demand.

- 52 The role of the CSSIW is to make professional assessments and judgments about social care, early years and social services and so encourage improvement by the service providers. It works on behalf of Welsh Ministers, but there are a number of safeguards in place to ensure its independence. Under new legislation there is a new framework in place for local authority social services inspection, evaluation and review.
- 53 Directors of social services are required to produce an annual self-assessment report on how well services are being delivered. The CSSIW will then undertake a review and analysis of evidence underpinning the report, including evidence from other regulators and inspectors. This analysis will result in an individual inspection and review plan for each council. The CSSIW's analysis, and the inspection and review plan, will be set out annually in a published letter.
- 54 2009-10 is the first full year of the new framework with the purpose being to establish a baseline of current performance. The key messages of the letter issued in December 2010 are summarised below.
- 55 Overall, the Council demonstrates strong leadership and accountability from the Director to team management levels. The corporate plan provides a solid structure and there is good financial management between its services and the corporate centre. The Council has continued its 'grow your own' social work strategy and provides training to social workers at all grades. Areas of improvement for the overall service are to develop expertise in commissioning and improve the quality of its commissioning strategies and focus on outcomes rather than process in management reporting.
- 56 In relation to adult services, the Council is making progress by providing information in a variety of formats for users and carers. Assessments are completed on time and partnership working has enhanced services. Additionally the Council uses internal 'critical success factors' to improve performance. The Council's learning disability and mental health services support independent living and the Council takes seriously its responsibilities to respond to allegations of abuse. Services provided by the Council have been nominated and shortlisted for national awards.
- 57 However, the Council needs to further modernise and reconfigure its adult services to expand service choice for users and carers and provide increased access to preventative services. The timescales and quality of assessments in learning disability services need to be improved. The Council should also develop more performance indicators that measure improved service quality and outcomes for users and carers and put in place a quality assurance framework to ensure consistency in practice across adult services.

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- 58 Safeguarding children is a priority for the Council and strategic planning for children's services is well considered and embedded. In children's services there has been consistently good performance in the quality of information available from the Family Information Service. An improvement has been made in the level of children whose protection plan has been reviewed on time. Additionally, the arrangements in place to support young carers have been identified as a strength.
- 59 Areas for improvement for children's services include timeliness and quality of assessment and provision of accessible information for children of all ages and communication needs. Additionally, ensuring all cases are allocated to a social worker should be a key priority and the numbers of social workers need to be increased. The education, employment and training of care leavers should continue to be a priority and the Council should continue to improve the quality and performance of its case management.

## Is Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council helping people to develop?

- 60 In Rhondda Cynon Taf, there are three nursery schools, 117 primary schools, 19 secondary schools and four special schools. In total, these schools serve a population of 39,500 pupils – the second largest number in Wales.
- 61 The Council faces a financial challenge to ensure its school buildings are fit for purpose as over half of its schools were built before the Second World War and a considerable stock of buildings from the 1960's are also increasingly in need of repair.
- 62 There are varying pressures on school places across the Council and whether education is provided through the medium of English or Welsh. There is an ageing and rapidly decreasing population in the Valley areas, causing surplus places in schools, particularly in English-medium schools. But in the south of the County, along the M4 corridor, there has been a growth in new housing and as a result there are too few places in some schools. Across Rhondda Cynon Taf there is growing demand for Welsh-medium education. The Council has developed a schools modernisation programme to respond to some of these challenges.
- 63 The proportion of pupils of statutory school age entitled to free school meals in Rhondda Cynon Taf is 22.9 per cent, which is above the average for Wales of 18.9 per cent. The percentage of pupils achieving the expected level at key stage 2 (year 6) has risen since 1999 and was 74.1 per cent in 2009. But this was still below the Welsh average of 77 per cent. The percentage of working age adults in Rhondda Cynon Taf with no qualifications has gradually fallen since 2001 although the figure is comparatively high at 18 per cent when compared to the Welsh average of 14 per cent.
- 64 Estyn, the inspectorate of education and training in Wales, looks at how well councils are helping children and young people develop knowledge and skills. They carry out inspections of schools, further education colleges and training organisations as well as making judgements on how well councils support these education providers. Estyn, through its regional teams, analyses performance information, visits schools and has regular meetings with directors of education to come to a view about the role of the Council and about education performance in the area.
- 65 Estyn have told us that the overall standard of education in Rhondda Cynon Taf is good. The proportion of pupils achieving the expected level in a range of subjects is called the 'core subject indicator (CSI)'<sup>2</sup>. In key stages 2 (year 6) and 3 (year 9) there is an overall upward trend in the percentage of pupils achieving this level. Performance in these key stages meets expected levels when compared to similar schools and authorities across Wales. Performance is particularly strong in key stage 4 (year 11) where results on most indicators have improved at a faster rate than Wales in recent years and are well above average compared to similar schools elsewhere in Wales. However, performance in key stage 1 (year 2) has declined in the last four years and is below expected levels.
- 66 The percentage of pupil attendance at primary and secondary school is in the poorest performing 25 per cent of Welsh authorities and trends show poor performance in this area over the last three years. Class sizes at primary school are also comparatively high. However, it is positive that a low number of pupils are permanently excluded from primary school.

<sup>2</sup> These subjects are English or Welsh first language, maths and science combination. The indicator covers children aged 7, 11 and 14.



- 67 The attainment figures for Looked after Children are comparable with other Councils and particular groups of learners, including vulnerable groups and those with additional needs, generally attain at expected levels.
- 68 The percentage of pupils remaining in full-time education at 16 compares well to similar authorities. The percentage leaving full-time education without a recognised qualification reached the Wales average in 2008 although it fell behind in 2009.

### Is the Council providing a top quality education for all?

- 69 Providing a top quality education for all is an appropriate and important improvement objective for Rhondda Cynon Taf. The continued high level of adults with no qualifications is a barrier to finding suitable employment, enabling social mobility and increasing opportunities for all. The improvement objectives identified have clear links to the recommendations contained in the Estyn report of January 2010 which is referred to below.
- 70 The key elements of the objective are to:
- ensure that learners in Rhondda Cynon Taf achieve their potential at all key stages;
  - optimise the use of school buildings to improve and support the education experience for all; and
  - improve standards and services through more effective use of data, networks and joined up working.
- 71 In a report on the local education authority published by Estyn in January 2010 ([www.estyn.gov.uk](http://www.estyn.gov.uk)) the Council was rated as 'good' overall due to children and young people

achieving good standards, and making good progress to the next stage in their education, training or employment. But Estyn criticised some aspects of the Council's performance, particularly in relation to attendance, sharing of data, inappropriate school buildings and surplus places. Addressing surplus school places ensures that resources can be released to improve school buildings elsewhere. Research has shown that poor school facilities have a negative effect on how well pupils and students do in their studies. The Wales Audit Office review of school spending also points to the connection between investing in school buildings and educational attainment ([www.wao.gov.uk](http://www.wao.gov.uk)).

- 72 The Council has developed an action plan to address recommendations made in the Estyn report and there is a clear link between this action plan and the improvement objective and it is clear and easy to understand what the Council intends to do and how improvement will take place. Performance measures are included in the education action plan of the Council and there is a more focused attempt to raise school attendance levels through better sharing of data, effective promotion of good attendance and shared learning.
- 73 Innovative and successful work is being undertaken in Rhondda Cynon Taf by giving opportunities to young people to develop skills outside the school environment. The Council's successful E3+ programme provides 'out of school hours' learning opportunities for young people collaboratively with the youth service, schools, voluntary sector and the police. A recent exemplar event held at the Wales Millennium Centre, 'In Tune with Youth', demonstrated the artistic talents of more than 650 young people living in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

## Is Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council helping to create a safe, prosperous, and pleasant place to live?

- 74 Rhondda Cynon Taf's crime rate is 76.98 per 1000 which is slightly lower than the average for Wales. The highest proportion of these crimes is accounted for by criminal damage (25 per cent) and violence against the person (21 per cent). Crime in Rhondda Cynon Taf has fallen to just over three-quarters of the level in 2003. The rate that people were killed or seriously injured on roads in Rhondda Cynon Taf was below the Wales average in 2008-09.
- 75 Roads are generally in poor condition. The condition of principal A roads, of which there are 164 miles, are in overall poor condition and the worst in Wales by this measure.
- 76 **Is the Council helping to create a cleaner, greener county borough?**
- 77 The Council provides a comprehensive range of waste collection services with high public satisfaction levels, typically above 90 per cent. However, the Council failed to meet its 2009-10 target to reduce the amount of waste that is sent to landfill and its performance in relation to this indicator is in the poorest 25 per cent when compared with all Wales authorities. This potentially adds to the risk of the Council infringing European Union directives on the use of landfill, which could lead to financial penalties. In order to improve performance, the Council recognises that it needs to increase the amount of waste it reuses/recycles and/or the amount of waste it composts or treats biologically. The Council did not meet the 40 per cent recycling/composting target set by the Assembly Government for all Councils to achieve in 2010.

- 76 The Council has identified that providing a cleaner, greener county borough is a key priority and important to the people of Rhondda Cynon Taf as identified through consultation with its citizens. It aligns with the themes of the Community Strategy and contributes to limiting the impact of climate change.
- 77 The key elements of the Council's objective are:
- reduce the amount of waste that is sent to landfill, initially to 56 per cent of total waste by 2010-11 and increase the amount of waste recycled or reused;
  - deliver cleaner streets all year round, ensuring a continued focus upon strict enforcement of littering, graffiti, fly tipping and fly posting;
  - a highway that is clean, well-maintained and safe for all users; and
  - parks that are accessible to all, have a well-maintained appearance, providing a range of facilities that users want and delivered in partnership with citizens.
- 78 In 2009-10 the Council performed well on reusing/recycling waste with its performance in the top 25 per cent of Wales authorities. However, the Council identifies that participation in kerbside recycling has plateaued and accordingly it plans more engagement with residents to support further improvement. The Council has used marketing and publicity successfully in relation to good waste management, and plans to undertake a further range of initiatives in 2010-11 including awareness-raising campaigns, the continuation of 'Love Where You Live', the 'Environvision song quest', zero waste village and various school projects.
- 79 Conversely, a low percentage of waste is composted or treated biologically meaning that high percentages of bio-degradable waste are sent to landfill. For 2009-10 the Council's performance in relation to these indicators is in the lower quartile when compared with all Wales authorities. Given the urban make up of the county borough there is less green waste available than in more rural areas. Accordingly the Council is targeting the

food waste stream, where its collection services cover 45,000 houses but only around 23,000 are currently taking part. The Council is procuring more specialist collection vehicles and seeking to extend its food waste collection service to 80,000 properties by March 2011.

- 81 The Council has clearly set out the actions it proposes to take, and by when, in order to deliver its improvement objective of reducing the amount of waste it sends to landfill. Appropriate performance measures, including both national and locally determined indicators, have been identified together with targets to be achieved and baselines to set performance against. There are also links to the Community Strategy Measures.
- 82 Ensuring that the streets of Rhondda Cynon Taf are clean all year round is a legitimate improvement objective that seeks to improve the quality of life for local people. During 2009-10 the Council met its own target and matched the Welsh average by achieving 94.8 per cent of streets, highways and relevant land being of a high or acceptable standard of cleanliness.
- 83 The Council met its own targets during 2009-10 on the removal of fly tipping and cleaning of graffiti through continued surveillance and targeting of hotspot areas using preventative measures and enforcement activity. It has also carried out a programme of street blitzes and increased participation through its volunteering scheme, 'Tidy Towns' initiative. The Council is promoting civic pride and responsibility by continuing with its 'Love Where you Live' awards to recognise efforts of citizens in improving the local environment. In the first quarter of 2010-11 the Council has maintained improvement in delivering cleaner streets all year round with all of the relevant performance indicators meeting target.
- 84 The Council has clearly set out the actions it proposes to take, and by when, in order to deliver its improvement objective of ensuring the streets of Rhondda Cynon Taf are clean all year round. Appropriate performance measures, including both national and locally determined indicators, have been identified together with targets to be achieved and baselines to set performance against. There are also links to the Community Strategy Measures.
- 85 Rhondda Cynon Taf's roads, in general, are in a poor condition and there are limited funds allocated for investment in highways maintenance. The Council's three year Capital Programme 2010-13 identifies a total budget of £5.2 million to be spent on its roads and related structures (e.g. bridges, culverts etc). The budget for 2010-11 is almost £3 million, and budgeted expenditure falls to £1.3 million and to less than £1 million in the subsequent two years. This reflects the reduced availability of capital funds anticipated over the medium term, and is recognised to be insufficient to address the Council's highway maintenance backlog. Severe cold weather at the start of 2010 made the condition of Rhondda Cynon Taf's roads worse and Members agreed to fund £500,000 extra investment in this area.
- 86 The Council measures the condition of its principal A roads in overall poor condition and does not meet its own targets in relation to this indicator, and is the worst performing Council in Wales in this respect. Similarly conditions of non principal/B classified roads are poor and are in the bottom quartile across Wales.

- 87 The Council's improvement objective, to achieve a highway that is clean, well maintained and safe for all users, is therefore valid and legitimate. The critical improvement action set by the Council for 2010-11 is to develop a Highways Asset Management Plan and determine minimum, fit for purpose and optimum requirements by March 2011. Clearly this action in itself will not bring about visible improvements in maintenance of the highway. However it should enable the Council to set more meaningful targets and be clearer to citizens regarding its priorities for investment and visible improvement they can expect to see in its Improvement Plan next year.
- 88 The Council has been successful in securing transport grants from the Assembly Government to fund two major capital investment programmes to improve its road systems – the Porth Relief Road and the Church Village Bypass. The Porth/Lower Rhondda relief road has improved access to the A470 for citizens and potential new industrial developments; removed traffic congestion within the communities of the Rhondda and provided additional bus and cycle routes for citizens. The Council achieved a Constructing Excellence award for the Porth Relief road in 2008 in recognition of its innovative approach to procurement, value engineering and local employment 'community' benefits.
- 89 The completion of the new £90 million, 7.5 km Church Village Bypass has brought about improved links from the A4119/M4 at Llantrisant to the A470 and Pontypridd, allowing some respite from traffic congestion in local communities at Tonteg, Church Village and Efail Isaf. The road has improved access to the University of Glamorgan and local industrial developments and has provided additional cycling and walking routes for citizens. The Council has undertaken post project evaluation to learn from procuring such large scale projects and the added value that has been generated to benefit local communities.
- 90 The Council's objective of ensuring that parks are accessible to all and are well-maintained is informed by citizens providing feedback on what they consider to be an important priority. This is a continued priority for the Council from the previous year and actions build on the successes of the previous year's activities. The Council has achieved the Green Flag award for Ynysangharad War Memorial Park and has completed a programme of planned improvements to parks in the area. It now plans to tackle areas of overgrowth within parks, improve the way it deals with complaints, and introduce a code of practice for parks. The Council has set out clearly its planned improvement actions and set appropriate measures and targets to evaluate its success that include inspection and residents' satisfaction.

# What should Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council do?

- 91 Given the wide range of services provided and the challenges facing the Council, it would be unusual if we did not find things that can be improved. The Auditor General is able to:
- recommend to Ministers of the Assembly Government that they intervene in some way;
  - conduct a special inspection and publish the report with detailed recommendations;
  - make formal recommendations for improvement – if a formal recommendation is made the Council must respond to that recommendation publicly within 30 days; and
- make proposals for improvement – if we make proposals to the Council, we would expect them to do something about them and we will follow up what happens.
- 92 We do not consider that there is a need to recommend Ministerial intervention, nor do we consider there should be a special inspection or formal recommendations for improvement. Instead we think the Council needs to consider the following proposals to help it improve:

## Proposals we made in our earlier work

- Develop more outcome measures that enable the Council to identify the impact of its activity for its communities and service users.

## New proposals

- review its improvement priorities in the context of reduced resource availability; and
- publish its improvement priorities and plans to achieve them in accordance with statutory timescales to ensure that citizens can be clear on what the Council intends to focus its activity on, what beneficial outcomes they can expect, and how they may propose new improvement objectives during the year.

# Appendix 1

## About the Auditor General for Wales and this report

### The Auditor General

The Auditor General is independent of government and is appointed by Her Majesty the Queen. He leads the Wales Audit Office and is held accountable by the Public Accounts Committee of the National Assembly for the Wales Audit Office's work.

The Wales Audit Office helps the Auditor General by examining various aspects of how Welsh public bodies work. It was created in 2005 when the National Audit Office in Wales and the Audit Commission in Wales merged.

The Auditor General is the external auditor of the Assembly Government and its sponsored and related public bodies; the National Assembly for Wales Commission and National Health Service (NHS) bodies in Wales. He also appoints the external auditors of Welsh local government bodies, including unitary authorities, police, probation, fire and rescue authorities, national parks and community councils.

As well as carrying out financial audit, the Auditor General's role is to examine how public bodies manage and spend public money, including achieving value in the delivery of public services. The law which created the Wales Audit Office also expanded the powers of the Auditor General to follow the 'public pound' wherever it goes.

### This report

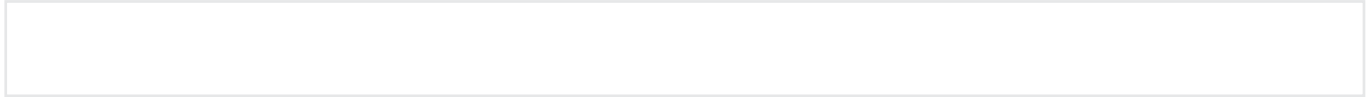
The Local Government Measure (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) introduced new responsibilities for the Auditor General, including a responsibility to publish his assessment of each council/authority's arrangements to secure continuous improvement.

This report has been produced by the Auditor General for Wales to discharge his duties under section 24 of the Measure. The report also discharges duties under section 19, namely; to issue a report certifying that he has carried out an audit under section 17 and an improvement assessment under section 18.

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 authorities, national parks, and fire and rescue authorities.

The main piece of work for the Wales Audit Office, to enable the Auditor General to fulfil his duties, is an annual Improvement Assessment.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This assessment will be conducted for each improvement authority, under section 18 of the Measure. For each authority, it will determine whether the authority is likely to comply with the requirements of Part 1 of the Measure. The WAO will also undertake improvement information and planning audit, as required under section 17 of the Measure, in order to ascertain whether the authority has discharged its duties under section 15(1) to (7).



This will be informed by a:

- Corporate Assessment – a forward-looking assessment of an authority's likelihood to comply with its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement; and
- Performance Assessment – 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 output(s) from these assessments will be issued by the Auditor General as Audit and Assessment Report(s), under section 19 of the Measure. In publishing this report under section 19, the Auditor General for Wales is certifying that we have undertaken a section 17 audit and a section 18 improvement assessment.

The Auditor General may also in some circumstances carry out Special Inspections (under section 21), in respect of which he will provide a report to the relevant authorities and Ministers, and which he may publish (under section 22).

The Auditor General will summarise Audit and Assessment Reports in this published Annual Improvement Report (under section 24). This will also summarise any reports of Special Inspections.

An important ancillary activity for the Wales Audit Office 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 will also take account of information shared by relevant regulators (under section 33) in his assessments and this report will summarise any work undertaken by them.

The Auditor General sets out the fee for his performance audit work undertaken to discharge his duties under the Measure at each local authority in a Regulatory Programme agreed each year with the authority. The fee for November 2009 until March 2011 is currently expected to be in line with that set out in the Regulatory Programme.

## Appendix 2

### Useful information about Rhondda Cynon Taf and Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

The Constituency Assembly Members for Rhondda Cynon Taf are:

- Christine Chapman, Cynon Valley, Labour Party
- Leighton Andrews, Rhondda, Labour Party
- Jane Davidson, Pontypridd, Labour Party
- Janice Gregory, Ogmore, Labour Party

South Wales Central Regional Assembly Members are:

- Leanne Wood, Plaid Cymru
- Christopher Franks, Plaid Cymru
- David Melding, Welsh Conservative Party
- Andrew RT Davies, Welsh Conservative Party

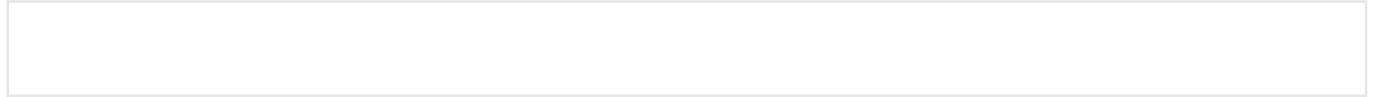
The Members of Parliament for Rhondda Cynon Taf are:

- Ann Clwyd, Cynon Valley, Labour Party
- Chris Bryant, Rhondda, Labour Party
- Huw Irranca-Davies, Ogmore, Labour Party
- Owen Smith, Pontypridd, Labour Party

There are 75 Councillors for Rhondda Cynon Taf who represent the community and make decisions about priorities and use of resources. The Council is made up of Members from the following political groups:

- 46 Labour
- 19 Plaid Cymru
- 6 Independent
- 3 Liberal Democrat
- 1 Conservative





In 2008-09 the Authority's gross revenue spend was £509 million, equating to £2,174 per resident. In that year the Authority also spent £90 million on capital items. The average band D council tax in 2009-10 for Rhondda Cynon Taf was £1,213.96 per year; this will increase by 4.03 per cent to £1,262.94 per year for 2010-11. Ninety one per cent of Rhondda Cynon Taf's housing is in council tax bands A to D.

### Corporate Management Team

Rhondda Cynon Taf Council's Chief Executive is Keith Griffiths. The Chief Executive is the Head of Paid Service. The Leadership Team is made up of:

- Steve Merritt, Group Director Corporate Services
- Ellis Williams, Group Director of Community & Children Services
- George Jones, Group Director of Environmental Services
- Chris Bradshaw, Acting Director of Education & Lifelong Learning
- Tony Wilkins, Director of Human Resources
- Paul Lucas, Director of Legal & Democratic services
- Chris Lee, Director of Finance

The Council is required by the Assembly Government to make plans to improve its functions and the services it provides. Each year it must publish these plans along with specific 'improvement objectives' that set out the key things that the Council intends to do to improve. The Council must do this as soon as possible after 1 April each year.

For more information see the Council's own website at [www.rctcbc.gov.uk](http://www.rctcbc.gov.uk) or contact the Council at Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council, Bronwydd, Porth, CF39 9DL.

# Appendix 3

## The Auditor General's Corporate Assessment

The main conclusions of the Auditor General's Corporate Assessment which was issued to the Council in October 2010 are set out below:

**The Council is well-managed and has a clear and realistic strategic approach to improvement.**

### How the Council has approached improvement over time

The Council has improved considerably from a very difficult position, largely through effective financial stewardship and a realistic approach to priorities, and is well placed to improve further.

- the Council has improved a very poor financial position and achieved significant improvement in services since 2000;
- underpinned by rigorous financial control, the Council now has generally effective arrangements to support improvement; and
- a clear understanding of priorities and future challenges equips the Council to continue making improvements.

### Analysis of the Council's arrangements to help it improve

Strong leadership and a clear strategic approach are supported by well-managed finances, partnerships and staff, although the Council does not consistently identify and evaluate outcomes.

- strong and united leadership continues to drive firm financial management that supports the Council's priorities although the political culture remains adversarial;
- a clear and careful strategic approach is founded in realistic priorities and a generally effective approach to partnership working;
- the Council uses management information well and is making largely effective use of its people although it is not yet identifying or evaluating all outcomes effectively; and
- the Council is making progress in its approach to managing its estate and using ICT to support improvement.

For the full report see our website at [www.wao.gov.uk](http://www.wao.gov.uk) or contact us at the address on the inside cover of this report.

## Appendix 4

### Annual Audit Letter to the Members of Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

#### **Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council complied with financial and performance improvement reporting requirements but is facing significant financial pressures in the near future**

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;
- establish and keep under review appropriate arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources; and
- publish its Improvement Plan by 31 October.

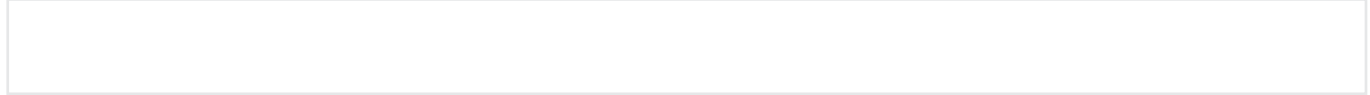
The Code of Audit Practice issued by the Auditor General (the Code) requires me to:

- provide an audit opinion on the accounting statements;
- review the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources;
- consider whether the Improvement Plan is prepared and published in accordance with statutory requirements; and
- issue a certificate confirming that I have completed the audit of the accounts.

On 30 September 2010 I issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements, confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council's and the Pension Fund's financial transactions. My report is contained within the Statement of Accounts.

The following issues were identified during the accounts audit:

- the accounting statements preparation processes have continued to improve, resulting in good quality draft statements supported by comprehensive working papers. These could be further improved with the addition of lead schedules cross-referenced to file content;
- revised accounting requirements for PFI were correctly implemented and significant progress is being made in preparation for implementing IFRS in 2010-11;
- arrangements for capturing information for all relationships to inform the accounts note on related party transactions could be improved; and
- the Whole of Government Account's return was prepared effectively and in accordance with the Assembly's timetable.



My review 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 LG Measure. The main findings from this latter work will be set out in the Annual Improvement Report. In addition I also bring the following issues to your attention:

- effective budgetary control arrangements are in place and medium-term financial planning is well developed, but the Council faces significant financial pressures in the future. This is referred to further in the Annual Improvement Report; and
- Internal Audit complied with the CIPFA standards although there was some slippage in its plan due to staffing shortages and unplanned assignments.

The Council's Improvement Plan 2010-2011 meets statutory requirements and provides a balanced view of its performance in 2009-2010.

I issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts had been completed on 15 November 2010 following resolution of a matter relating to expenditure incurred by a school on a legal case.

The financial audit fee for 2009-2010 is currently expected to be in line with that set out in the Financial Audit Strategy.

Yours sincerely

Anthony Barrett  
Appointed Auditor  
29 November 2010

# Appendix 5

## Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council's Improvement Objectives

The Council's eleven improvement priorities are set out in detail in a report to Council of 21 April 2010 which can be found on the Council website at [www.rctcbc.gov.uk](http://www.rctcbc.gov.uk).

They are:

- **Education** – a top quality education for all.
- **Street Care Services and the Natural Environment** – a cleaner greener county borough.
- **Children & Family Centred Services** – keeping all children and young people safe and improving the life chances of vulnerable children.
- **Maintaining People's Independence** – supporting adults and older people to live independently.
- **Enforcement & Regulation** – proactively managing the late night economy and tackling antisocial behaviour.
- **Regeneration of our Communities:**
  - Physical Regeneration
    - Town centre enhancement, bringing derelict land back to life and widening housing choice and affordability for all.
  - Social Regeneration
    - Income maximisation initiatives, help with employability, skills training, tackling labour market disadvantage.
- **Managing our Assets** – equipping ourselves for the future.
- **Better Customer Contact** – focusing on the customer.
- **Maximising Partnership Opportunities** – doing more for local communities by working together.
- **Medium Term Financial Planning** – living within our means.
- **Communication** – raising awareness and keeping people informed.

# Appendix 6

## References

All the data referred to within the report is drawn from one of the following sources:

- Welsh Assembly Government, StatsWales
- Welsh Assembly Government, local area summary statistics
- Improvement Authority's own websites and Improvement Plans
- The Wales Yearbook
- The Home Office
- Members' Research Service
- Office for National Statistics