



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

Annual Improvement Report

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

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Huw Vaughan Thomas, Auditor General for Wales, was supported by Colin Davies, Justine Morgan and colleagues under the direction of Jane Holownia in conducting the Improvement Assessment and producing this report.

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Summary report

- 1 Each year, the Auditor General must report on how well Welsh councils, fire and rescue authorities, and national parks are planning for improvement and delivering their services. Drawing on the work of the relevant Welsh inspectorates, and his own work, this report presents a picture of improvement over the last year. The report is in three main sections, which cover the planning, delivery and evaluation of improvement by Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (the Council).
- 2 The Council, together with its partners, has agreed a shared vision for Rhondda Cynon Taf to be a 'County Borough of Opportunity'. In addition to its statutory duties, the Council has set itself eight improvement priorities which are:
 - medium-term service planning – a financially sound and efficient Council;
 - a top-quality education for all;
 - a cleaner, greener county borough;
 - keeping all children and young people safe and improving the life chances of vulnerable children;
 - supporting adults and older people to live independently;
 - managing the late-night economy and tackling antisocial behaviour;
 - regenerating our communities; and
 - focusing on the customer.
- 3 We found that the Council's commitment to driving improvement is clear and it is focusing its improvement agenda more clearly on services and outcomes that are important to citizens.
- 4 We also found that there are some weaknesses in the Council's performance in some key service areas such as services to children and young people and education standards but it is demonstrating sustained improvement in waste management:
 - the Council has strength in its strategic and corporate arrangements and it needs to use these more effectively to drive the pace of change and improvement, particularly in respect of services to children and young people;
 - the Council and its schools are performing inconsistently in relation to some key educational standards across the county borough and between schools, particularly in relation to school attendance; and
 - waste management is a recognised priority for the Council and, building upon its sound performance in recycling through effective community engagement, the Council has a continued challenge to reduce the amount of waste it sends to landfill.
- 5 Finally, the report sets out our views on the Council's own assessment of its performance and arrangements. We concluded that the Council produced a comprehensive assessment of its performance but has yet to effectively evaluate how well it is delivering its improvement priorities and assess their impact upon citizens of Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Proposals for improvement

- 6 There are no formal recommendations but the following proposals are made to the Council to support improvement:

| Proposals for improvement | |
|---------------------------|--|
| P1 | Ensure greater consistency between the terminology used to convey key messages in the improvement plan, action plans and public summary to aid understanding about what the Council wants to achieve, what it plans to do and to make it easier to cross reference between the main documents.* |
| P2 | Continue to improve the effectiveness of improvement planning by ensuring that relevant, outcome-based success measures and critical improvement actions are in place together with appropriate targets and milestones.* |
| P3 | Strengthen service planning and financial management by ensuring that the links between strategic and improvement priorities and the <i>Medium Term Financial Plan</i> are clear and consider 'zero-basing' elements of the budget on a periodic basis so that the budget reflects current activity levels.* |
| P4 | Develop a suite of performance indicators to measure unit costs and promote internal benchmarking between key service areas in order to provide appropriate information for scrutiny and challenge, and help identify scope for further efficiencies.* |
| P5 | Further develop ICT governance arrangements so that they better align with, and support delivery of, the Council's improvement and transformation priorities. |
| P6 | Use existing service planning and performance management systems more effectively to set and monitor improvements in core areas of services to children and young people, and to adults in need. |

*These proposals were first made to the Council in August 2011.

Detailed report



Introduction

- 7 This report sets out the Auditor General's view of the performance of the Council in discharging its statutory duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement. On [page 2](#) you can find a brief explanation of what the Auditor General does. This view has been informed by the work of the Wales Audit Office, Estyn, the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) and the Welsh Language Board.
 - 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 it to do something about them and we will follow up what happens.
- 8 Under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure), the Auditor General must report each year on how well Welsh councils, fire and rescue authorities, and national parks are planning for improvement and delivering their services. [Appendix 1](#) provides more information about the Auditor General's powers and duties under the Measure. With help from Welsh inspectorates, Estyn (for education) and the CSSIW, we have brought together a picture of what each council or authority in Wales is trying to achieve and how it is going about it. This report also sets out the progress the Council has made since the Auditor General published his last *Annual Improvement Report*, drawing on the Council's own self-assessment.
- 9 Throughout the report, we set out what the Council needs to do to improve its services. 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 Welsh Government that they intervene in some way;
- 10 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@wao.gov.uk or writing to us at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF11 9LJ.

The Council's commitment to driving improvement is clear and it is focusing its improvement agenda more clearly on services and outcomes that are important to citizens

- 11 This section comments on the Council's planning and arrangements for delivering improvement, and covers:
- the Council's arrangements to secure continuous improvement;
 - previous findings by the Auditor General on the arrangements for improvement;
 - people management arrangements;
 - how the Council engages with the public and local communities;
 - the use of resources and arrangements to address the financial challenges faced by all councils;
 - the Council's governance and scrutiny arrangements;
 - the Council's arrangements for developing, using and supporting technology; and
 - the Council's arrangements to support the Welsh language.
- 12 We do not undertake a comprehensive annual review of all council arrangements or services. The conclusions in this report are based on our cumulative and shared knowledge and the findings of the prioritised work undertaken this year.
- 13 The Council along with the police, health, fire, voluntary and community sectors collectively agreed, in 2010, a shared vision for Rhondda Cynon Taf to be a 'County Borough of Opportunity'. This means that they intend to work together to enable individuals and communities to achieve their full potential, in terms of both their work and social life. This shared vision is set out in a document called a community strategy and titled *Promoting Achievement, Tackling Disadvantage*.
- 14 To help make this happen the Council agreed, on 20 April 2011, eight improvement priorities for delivery between April 2011 and March 2012. The Council has published a document called *Explaining our improvement priorities for 2011/12* which sets out these improvement priorities as follows:
- medium-term service planning – a financially sound and efficient Council;
 - a top-quality education for all;
 - a cleaner, greener county borough;
 - keeping all children and young people safe and improving the life chances of vulnerable children;
 - supporting adults and older people to live independently;
 - managing the late-night economy and tackling antisocial behaviour;
 - regenerating our communities; and
 - focusing on the customer.
- The Council is clearly committed to driving improvement and has well-developed processes in place to support this**
- 15 The Council's improvement objectives (referred to as 'priorities') and its improvement plan (called *Explaining our improvement priorities for 2011/12*) meet the requirements of the Measure and the guidance issued by the Welsh Government.
- 16 The improvement plan is well thought out and clearly presented. It is well written and easy to follow, meeting the needs of both a public and internal audience. Technical information is presented separately in an appendix that sets out comprehensive action plans for delivering

each improvement priority, and explains how progress will be monitored by relevant success measures. Targets and milestones are included. A short summary document is also provided.

- 17 This successful formula could be further enhanced by greater consistency in the terminology used in the different documents to describe what the Council wants to achieve and plans to do. This will help ensure that key messages are clearly conveyed and understood.
- 18 Also, whilst it is evident that the Council has consulted appropriately, the improvement plan could say more about how consultation has influenced the choice of improvement priorities.
- 19 The improvement plan has been published within the timeframe set by the Welsh Government. It is available in electronic format on the Council's website and is being publicised through the residents' newsletter and notices in customer service centres.

The Council is refining its arrangements to deliver improvement in its services that focus more clearly on what is important to citizens and is well-placed to address the financial challenges ahead

- 20 In August 2011, the Auditor General issued a *Corporate Assessment Update* letter to the Council. The letter commented on developments since the previous reports and the Auditor General confirmed that he was satisfied that the Council was discharging its duties under the Measure and was likely to comply with its requirements during this

financial year. This assessment was based on our findings that the Council is:

- making good progress on the areas of improvement identified in our previous assessments;
- well-placed to deliver work in the medium term following its review of job evaluation and terms and conditions, and is implementing sound workforce planning arrangements to support future service delivery;
- developing its approach to public engagement through the adoption of a new strategy that recognises the need to better co-ordinate its arrangements to achieve the benefits and outcomes arising from effective engagement with the public;
- embracing the emerging partnership and collaborative opportunities being encouraged by the Welsh Government, and is leading on initiatives that should help improve services and achieve efficiency savings;
- well-placed to address the financial challenges ahead and is working towards better integration of financial and service improvement planning and reporting;
- arrangements for developing, using and supporting technology are likely to support continuous improvement; and
- improving its ability to provide services through the medium of Welsh although further work is needed to ensure compliance with the *Welsh Language Scheme*.

The Council is making good progress on the areas of improvement identified in our previous assessments

- 21 Our *Preliminary Corporate Assessment*, published in July 2010, said: 'the Council is well-managed and has a clear and realistic strategic approach to improvement'.
- 22 Our 2009-10 *Annual Improvement Report*, published in January 2011, set out some important messages on how the Council is planning to improve its services.
- 23 These reports identified a number of areas for improvement and also noted some areas where we would undertake further work. The Council is making good progress on these matters as summarised below.

| Proposals for improvement | Progress |
|--|--|
| <p>1 Develop more outcome measures that enable the Council to identify the impact of its activity for its communities and service users.</p> | <p>It is evident that the Chief Executive and Head of Performance have taken a lead role in supporting managers to deliver more outcome-focused measures in their WPI action plans. Their focus has been to challenge whether the plans will deliver changes for the citizen and whether the citizen would understand what the service is seeking to do.</p> <p>There has also been a programme of training and development to support staff to better understand and identify outcome-based measures. This learning will also be applied to other strategic documents such as the community strategy.</p> <p>We will continue to monitor and support progress in this area.</p> |
| <p>2 Review its improvement priorities in the context of reduced resource availability.</p> | <p>The Council has rationalised its 11 improvement priorities for 2010-11 down to eight for 2011-12, allowing clearer focus on what is important to citizens within increasingly challenging budgets whilst maintaining clear links to the themes and ambitions of the community strategy.</p> |
| <p>3 Publish its improvement priorities and plans to achieve them in accordance with statutory timescales.</p> | <p>The Council's 2011 improvement plan <i>Explaining our improvement priorities for 2011/12</i> was available in electronic format on the Council's website on 30 June 2011, and has been publicised through the residents' newsletter and notices in customer service centres. Accordingly, it has been published within the timeframe set by the Welsh Government.</p> <p>The Council plans to publish quarterly updates in its <i>Outlook</i> newsletter keeping residents informed on progress in achieving its eight improvement priorities, with a clear invitation to the public to contribute and feed in their views and ideas.</p> |

The Council is well-placed to deliver work in the medium term following its review of job evaluation and terms and conditions, and is implementing sound workforce planning arrangements to support future service delivery

- 24 Addressing job evaluation and changes to staff terms and conditions at the same time was a bold step. The Council has used this solid foundation to implement its new pay and grading structure, which in turn will assist the processes of financial planning for the future.
- 25 The corporate workforce planning template and associated tools have the potential to help identify issues affecting the workforce and how they will support the delivery of services in the future. Workforce planning reports will support efficiency savings through identifying:
- capacity of staffing resources;
 - areas of collaborative working across services; and
 - recruitment and retention hot spots.

The Council is developing its approach to public engagement through the adoption of a new strategy that recognises the need to better co-ordinate its arrangements to achieve the benefits and outcomes arising from effective engagement with the public

- 26 Along with the adoption of a new consultation strategy in autumn 2010, the Council has appointed a member of the Cabinet to 'champion' public engagement. The Council is also taking steps to improve its approach to public engagement through more partnership work, mainly with the voluntary sector. Members are demonstrating a growing interest in the quality of public engagement

and its impact, and plans are in place to provide them with further information, analysis and training in the subject.

- 27 There are a number of examples of effective public engagement projects and activities undertaken by services, which demonstrate the Council's commitment to engaging with its citizens and a clear understanding of how such engagement contributes to improvement. This activity has helped the Council to achieve specific benefits and improve outcomes, such as a significant growth in recycling participation, and improving child and family services by means of greater and more effective engagement.
- 28 Moving forward, the Council aims to develop a more co-ordinated corporate approach to public engagement by:
- reorganising its specialist staff;
 - establishing a structure to improve and standardise the quality of its public engagement techniques;
 - investing in new software; and
 - introducing data evaluation processes.

Successful implementation of these actions will help the Council to ensure that all of its engagement activity is consistently implemented and accurately evaluated as to its effectiveness in improving services and outcomes for citizens.

The Council is embracing the emerging partnership and collaborative opportunities being encouraged by the Welsh Government, and is leading on initiatives that should help improve services and achieve efficiency savings

- 29 The Council, since we reported in the *Corporate Assessment Update* letter in August 2011, has made positive progress in recognising the importance of collaboration in delivering its services and is positioning itself well in relation to this agenda. For example, the Chief Executive and Director of Education and Lifelong Learning are leading negotiations within the regional collaboration framework on education with other South Wales councils including Merthyr Tydfil, Bridgend, Cardiff, and Vale of Glamorgan to further develop a teachers' learning centre and is leading on the programme management of schools' improvement.
- 30 There is evidence through our structured assessment work with Cwm Taf Health Board that the Council is leading on its strategic engagement with key partners such as Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council in relation to modernising its health and social care and well-being services in communities across Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil. The Council's Group Director of Community and Children's Services is the lead officer in this strategic partnership, and there are positive signs that relationships are effective and objectives are aligned. Projects such as *Delayed Transfer of Care* are underpinned by this strategic collaboration.

The Council is well-placed to address the financial challenges ahead and is working towards better integration of financial and service improvement planning and reporting

- 31 The Council continues to manage its financial pressures effectively with strong, accountable financial leadership in place. The Council has a track record of strong financial performance and there is good financial awareness throughout. The auditor appointed by the Auditor General recently gave his opinion on the Council's accounts and concluded that the financial statements were generally satisfactory. [Appendix 3](#) gives more detail.
- 32 The Council is taking appropriate steps to ensure its medium-term financial planning arrangements are robust. A framework has been developed through clear council priorities, service challenge processes, and consultation and engagement with partners and citizens. These arrangements help put the Council in a strong position to be able to address what will undoubtedly continue to be a challenging financial outlook.
- 33 The Council addressed its 2011-12 initial budget gap of £14 million through implementing its job evaluation exercise and modernising staff terms and conditions combined with a range of other service efficiencies and new ways of delivery. It is exploring a number of further service change and savings options which it could develop if required to address future financial challenges.

- 34 The arrangements the Council has in place could be further enhanced by introducing more unit costs and cost and performance comparisons into its financial reporting. Outcome measures are beginning to be reported to monitor performance against strategic objectives in the community strategy, and these could be better integrated into the medium-term financial planning process.
- 35 In August 2011, we recommended that the Council develop a suite of performance indicators to measure unit costs and promote internal benchmarking between key service areas in order to provide appropriate information for scrutiny and challenge and help identify scope for further efficiencies. The Council has responded positively by launching a corporate project to identify, collate and rationalise current benchmarking activity undertaken by services with a view to maximising the benefit of available data, and designing appropriate measures of cost and value for money. The Council is also evaluating the potential benefits that selective 'zero-basing' of service budgets may provide in relation to its already robust budget setting arrangements.

The Council's arrangements for developing, using and supporting technology are likely to support continuous improvement

- 36 Our review of the way the Council uses technology, which is essential for transforming the delivery of public services, improving outcomes for citizens and delivering efficiency savings, concluded that:
- The Council's arrangements for developing, using and supporting technology are likely to support continuous improvement though it needs to continue to build on its ICT governance arrangements.
 - The established ICT governance arrangements should be strengthened so that they further align and support the delivery of the Council's improvement and transformation priorities. Whilst the Council is investing in technology, further investment will need to be planned for the future, taking account of risk and resource availability.
 - The Council is developing its customer access channels which are working well; it also has a number of pilots in place that are assessing remote working, which if fully exploited, it expects will achieve back-office service transformation and deliver further efficiencies.
- 37 We are currently undertaking a review of the Council's approach to information management. The increasing financial pressure on the public sector emphasises the need for appropriately managed information to support operational service delivery and effective decision making. We will summarise our findings in our next report.

The Council is improving its ability to provide services through the medium of Welsh although further work is needed to ensure compliance with the Welsh Language Scheme

- 38 The Welsh Language Board found that the Council was partly compliant with its *Welsh Language Scheme* in respect of electoral documentation. It was recognised that improvements had been made to Welsh language content on the Council's website, but that some work is still to be done.
- 39 Progress has been made with the development of a linguistic skills strategy, as well as mainstreaming the Welsh language into the Council's business planning arrangements. There are also robust arrangements in place to improve the provision of Welsh language services in the social services sector.

There are some weaknesses in the Council's performance in some key service areas such as services to children and young people and education standards but it is demonstrating sustained improvement in waste management

40 This part of the report sets out how well we think the Council is improving its services. Our conclusions are informed by the work that we have done this year in reviewing the Council's performance and progress towards achieving its improvement objectives. We reflect the views of the CSSIW in relation to the Council's services for adults and children in need, and those of Estyn in relation to education services.

The Council has strength in its strategic and corporate arrangements and it needs to use these more effectively to drive the pace of change and improvement, particularly in respect of its services to children and young people

41 The Auditor General has relied on the views, work and evaluations undertaken by the CSSIW during the year to assess how well the Council is supporting people in need. The CSSIW's evaluations are summarised in its most recent *Annual Review and Evaluation of Performance 2010-11* as set out in a letter to the Council's Director of Social Services in October 2011. The main conclusions from the CSSIW's evaluation are summarised in the following paragraphs.

42 The Council can evidence some notable partnership and collaborative achievements in recent years in both adult and children's services which have underpinned the improvements realised in some key priority areas. The Council is continuing to pursue an improvement journey; in some parts of the service this has been from a low base which is further challenged by demographic and economic factors. Progress is slow which creates ongoing risks and challenges for the

Council as it seeks to achieve improvement in core aspects of assessment and care management.

43 The Council has a strategy in place which will, in time, lead to it having sufficient qualified social work staff in children and young people's services. The inability to achieve this quickly has been a contributory factor to vulnerable children and young people not receiving a consistent standard of service and some statutory obligations not being met. Initial and core assessment performance falls short of expectations, despite being an improvement priority last year, and too many children continue to have their cases managed by non social work staff. A decline in performance in child protection activity compounds this as does mixed performance in relation to looked-after children. The latter is also compounded by increased numbers of children becoming looked after.

44 There is evidence that focused attention has led to improvement in some aspects of service, for example in falling levels of re-referrals, but for many aspects the pace of improvement has stalled or remains slow and the Council needs to consider how it can achieve a step change in the pace of change and improvement.

45 Adult services have achieved improvements in tackling waiting times, increased equipment issued to service users and in delivering more adaptations. *The Reablement Programme*, provided jointly with health services, continues to work positively to maintain people within their own homes and reduce dependence upon institutional care services. However, there are continued challenges including delayed transfers of care from hospital and residential care numbers have

increased. The Council is, however, performing well in its assessments provided to carers and is providing high numbers of carers with support services.

- 46 The Council has strength in its strategic and corporate arrangements and needs to continue to ensure that it focuses its energies upon addressing its core performance, particularly in light of rising demand and more challenging funding. Performance management and service planning/development systems are in place and they need to be used more effectively to set and monitor improvements in core areas of service. There needs to be greater strategic synergy within social services so that workforce development better meets short and medium-term service planning requirements.

The Council and its schools are performing inconsistently in relation to some key educational standards across the county borough and between schools, particularly in relation to school attendance

- 47 This part of the report sets out how well the Council is improving the way in which it helps people to develop. In reaching our conclusion we have considered the views of Estyn, the education and training inspectorate for Wales which are set out in **paragraphs 48-50**.
- 48 When a range of contextual information is taken into account, the performance of pupils in Rhondda Cynon Taf in 2011 is below average in key stages 1 and 2 and average in key stage 3. At key stage 4, performance is generally below average.

- 49 Performance in key stages 3 and 4, based on entitlement to free-school-meals, has met or exceeded all of the Welsh Government benchmarks in the four years to 2010. Benchmark information for 2011 is not yet available.

- 50 Attendance in both primary and secondary schools improved in 2011 but remains among the lowest in Wales. In general, the number of exclusions from schools improved in 2010 but not as much as the average improvement in Wales. The number of days pupils lose from school because of exclusions remains relatively high.

- 51 The Council's education services for children and young people are to be inspected by Estyn in March 2012. Estyn will, in due course, publish its inspection report on its website at www.estyn.gov.uk and we will include a summary of the inspection findings and conclusions in our 2012 *Annual Improvement Report*.

Waste management is a recognised priority for the Council and, building upon its sound performance in recycling through effective community engagement, the Council has a continued challenge to reduce the amount of waste it sends to landfill

- 52 This part of the report sets out how well the Council is improving the way in which it creates and maintains the area as a safe, prosperous and pleasant place. This year, our work has focused on evaluating how well the Council is performing on collecting and recycling its municipal waste.

53 Waste management and recycling present a challenge for all councils because targets from the Welsh Government and the European Union are becoming progressively more demanding, and carry significant financial penalties. The Council clearly recognises this challenge and is addressing it through establishing waste management and recycling as a corporate priority, driving and monitoring performance as one of its eight specific improvement objectives ie, 'a cleaner, greener county borough'.

54 In the *Improvement Plan 2010*, the Leader of the Council says waste and recycling was a success during 2010-11. This is because:

- the amount of waste diverted to landfill fell from 76,450 tonnes in 2009-10 to 64,342 tonnes in 2010-11; and
- the amount of waste that was either, recycled, reused or composted increased from 40,543 tonnes in 2009-10 to 47,687 in 2010-11.

The Council says that these results reflect its positive work during the year including:

- holding over 400 awareness-raising events to boost public participation in recycling and waste reduction initiatives;
- increasing the availability of the food waste collection service from 41,000 properties in 2009-10 to 100,000 properties in 2010-11; and
- preparing for the development of a food waste treatment plant, funded by the Welsh Government, as part of creating a *Waste and Recycling Service fit for the 21st Century*.

55 Our review of relevant 2010-11 performance indicators confirms that the Council sent only 52.75 per cent of its municipal wastes to landfill. Not only is this good performance, it represents a trend of continuous reduction over the three years since 2008-09. This is a reflection of the extent to which Rhondda Cynon Taf's residents are increasingly engaging with the need to recycle and reduce the amount of waste they create. Performance indicators also show that the Council is good at dry recycling, achieving 30.74 per cent compared to an all-Wales average of 26.34 per cent representing the fourth best performance of the 22 councils in Wales. However, at 10.41 per cent, compared to all-Wales average of 16.91 per cent, the contribution from municipal composting is limited. The impact of the Council increasing the availability of food waste collection should be reflected in an improvement in this figure for 2011-12. Overall, at 41.4 per cent for 2010-11, the Council continues to improve its combined waste reuse, recycling and composting rate although improvement must quicken if the Council is to meet the 52 per cent statutory recycling target set by the Welsh Government for 2012-13.

56 The Council used 89 per cent of its landfill allowance in 2010-11, well above the all-Wales average of 73 per cent and ranked twentieth of the 22 councils in Wales. Although this is a slight improvement compared to 2009-10, it means that the Council still has limited headspace before it is at risk of failing to divert sufficient biodegradable waste from landfill with the prospect of financial penalties from the Welsh Government.

57 Innovative marketing strategies are being effectively deployed in the longer term such as advertisements at the local cinema and on local buses that raise the profile of the need to recycle, avoid dog fouling and fly tipping. In addition, there are examples of effective community engagement such as the *Zero Waste* initiative, deployed at Glyncoch, one of the Council's Community First areas of Pontypridd. Broader strategic approaches have also been rolled out more widely across the Council, through schools and young people and older, retired residents through community groups. These strategies and initiatives, in the longer term, should pave the way to improve reduction of waste to landfill through citizens of the Council responding due to their growing awareness of the negative impact of creating waste. The importance of this work in reducing waste and its impact upon climate change is significant and will benefit future generations of Rhondda Cynon Taf's residents.

58 The Council is working collaboratively with Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council towards the procurement of both the food waste and residual waste treatment capacity required to meet waste targets after 2014, and secure more sustainable waste management for the future. Covanta Waste has recently withdrawn from a proposal to build an energy-from-waste plant near Merthyr Tydfil and discussions with the Welsh Government around funding and collaborative opportunities towards procurement of residual waste treatment capacity are ongoing. The Council recognises that these procurements are essential and that any protracted delay could mean financial penalties for the Council for failing to meet statutory waste diversion and recycling targets.

The Council produced a comprehensive assessment of its performance but has yet to effectively evaluate how well it is delivering its improvement priorities and assess their impact upon citizens

- 59 The Council has reviewed its performance in 2010-11 in a comprehensive 214-page document called the *Improvement Plan 2010* (the Plan). The Plan contains an extensive amount of detailed information, presented both as a narrative and performance data in separate appendices. It is clearly written for the informed reader rather than the general public, although a separate one-page summary is available and the introductory section of the Plan does provide a broad overview.
- 60 The Plan is logically structured and places the improvement agenda in its statutory context and the wider strategic framework of the community strategy and *Outcome Agreement*. The Plan and its main narrative section focus primarily on how the Council's improvement priorities have contributed to the themes and ambitions of the community strategy. This links improvement priorities with their wider strategic context and highlights the extent of partnership working involved in delivery. There is a useful section called *Bringing it all together* which sets out cross-cutting issues and organisational changes needed to deliver improved, cost-effective services. There is also clear recognition throughout the document of the importance of public engagement and user feedback. Detailed monitoring of progress against specific actions and related milestones is set out separately in an appendix.
- 61 This is a good formula and the amount of information presented is extensive, detailed and comprehensive. The narrative section includes a reasonable balance between reporting what the Council has done and the difference this is making in terms of outcomes. In practice, the Plan is somewhat difficult to follow – partly because of its length and detailed content, and partly because the information needed to form an overall assessment is fragmented. The distinction between the progress the Council is making against its improvement priorities and broad progress towards community strategy themes and ambitions is not always clear, particularly in terms of outcomes achieved.
- 62 Performance indicators and other data are presented in a user-friendly format, with associated commentary where required, and a clear indication is given of where targets have and have not been met. However, some of the performance indicators specifically highlighted to demonstrate progress could relate more clearly to improvement priorities. For example, street lighting measures are used to demonstrate progress in reducing the impact of alcohol misuse and antisocial behaviour in relation to the 'safer communities' improvement priority.
- 63 The Measure requires councils to be more self-critical and evaluative around how they deliver their services. Councils now need to focus much more clearly on identified improvement objectives and the impact of improved services upon citizens, ensuring that citizens recognise that improved outcomes have been achieved. The Plan lacks a self-evaluation of how well the Council thinks it is performing and tends to focus mainly on its positive achievements towards the community strategy. It does not identify how areas of underperformance will be addressed going forward. A section on planning for the future would be helpful in taking forward issues that the Council has become aware of through undertaking this self-assessment.

64 The Auditor General has determined that the Council has discharged all of its duties in relation to publishing improvement information. In relation to its self-assessment of performance, we will continue to work with the Council to further improve the extent to which it accords with Welsh Government guidance.

Appendices



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 the Auditor General to discharge his duties under section 24 of the Measure. The report also discharges 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 informed by 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. This report also summarises the Auditor General's conclusions on the Council's self-assessment of its performance.

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 may also take account of information shared by relevant regulators (under section 33) in his assessments.

Appendix 2

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

The Council

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council budgeted to spend £429 million in 2010-11. This equates to about £1,835 per resident. In the same year, the Council also spent £84 million on capital items.

The average band D council tax in 2010-11 for Rhondda Cynon Taf was £1,089 per year. This has increased by just under three per cent to £1,121 per year for 2011-12. Ninety per cent of the dwellings within Rhondda Cynon Taf are in council tax bands A to D, and sixty-seven per cent of all dwellings are in council tax bands A and B.

The Council is made up of 75 elected members who represent the community and make decisions about priorities and use of resources. The political make-up of the Council is as follows:

- 48 Labour
- 18 Plaid Cymru
- 5 Independent
- 3 Welsh Liberal Democrats
- 1 Conservative

The Council's Chief Executive is Keith Griffiths. The other key posts that make up the Council's Corporate Management Team are:

- Group Director of Community and Children's Services: Ellis Williams
- Group Director of Corporate Services: Steve Merritt
- Group Director of Education and Lifelong Learning: Christopher Bradshaw
- Group Director of Environmental Services: George Jones
- Director of Human Resources: Anthony Wilkins
- Director of Legal and Democratic Services: Paul Lucas

Other information

The Assembly Members for Rhondda Cynon Taf are:

- Christine Chapman, Cynon Valley, Labour Party
- Leighton Andrews, Rhondda, Labour Party
- Mick Antoniw, Pontypridd, Labour Party

The Members of Parliament for Rhondda Cynon Taf are:

- Ann Clwyd, Cynon Valley, Labour Party
- Chris Bryant, Rhondda, Labour Party
- Owen Smith, Pontypridd, Labour Party

For more information see the Council's own website at www.rhondda-cynon-taf.gov.uk or contact the Council at Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Bronwydd, Porth CF39 9DL.

Appendix 3

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council's accounts and use of resources

The auditor appointed by the Auditor General issued the following auditor's letter on 28 November 2011.

Councillor R Roberts, Leader
Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
The Pavillions
Cambrian Park
Clydach Vale
CF40 2XX

Dear Russell

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

As you will be aware the Auditor General for Wales will be issuing an Annual Improvement Report to each local authority by the end of January 2012 and some of the issues that were traditionally reported in the Appointed Auditor's Annual Audit Letter will be included in that report. Therefore I have taken the opportunity to summarise the key messages arising from the Appointed Auditor's statutory responsibilities into this short letter which forms the Annual Audit Letter. The letter is designed to be a standalone document, but will also be presented to the Council and the public as part of the Annual Improvement Report and therefore discharges my reporting responsibilities under the Code of Audit Practice.

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council complied with reporting requirements relating to its financial performance and use of resources

1 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.

- 2 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.
- 3 On 30 September 2011 I issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council's, the Group's and the Pension Fund's financial position and transactions. My report is contained within the Statement of Accounts. A number of matters arising from the accounts audit were reported to members in my Audit of Financial Statements report which was considered by full Council on 28 September 2011. The main issue reported was that following a change in requirements brought about by the Local Government Pension Scheme (Benefits, Membership and Contributions) Regulations 2007, the Council should have provided for pension costs relating to equal pay settlements it made in 2008 and 2011. The Council's legal advice at the time was that no such provision was required. The potential amendment was not considered material and the accounts were not adjusted for this item.
- 4 From 2010-11 local authorities in Wales are required to produce their accounts on the basis of International Financial Reporting Standards. The introduction of these new standards imposed significant additional demands on the Council's finance staff. Despite these additional pressures, the accounts were prepared by the statutory deadline and to a good standard.
- 5 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 Improvement Assessment under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. The main findings from this latter work will be set out in the Annual Improvement Report. There are no other issues to bring to your attention.
- 6 I issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts has been completed on 30 September 2011.
- 7 The financial audit fees for 2010-11 are currently expected to be in line with those set out in the Annual Audit Outline.

John Herniman
Group Director
For and on behalf of the Appointed Auditor

28 November 2011

Local electors and others have a right to look at the Council's accounts. When the Council has finalised its accounts for the previous financial year, usually around June or July, it must advertise that they are available for people to look at. You can get copies of the accounts from the Council; you can also inspect all books, deeds, contracts, bills, vouchers and receipts relating to them for 20 working days after they are made available. You can ask the auditor questions about the accounts for the year that they are auditing. For example, you can simply tell the auditor if you think that something is wrong with the accounts or about waste and inefficiency in the way the Council runs its services. For more information see the Wales Audit Office leaflet, *Council accounts: your rights*, on our website at www.wao.gov.uk or by writing to us at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF11 9LJ.

Appendix 4 Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council's improvement objectives and self-assessment

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council's improvement objectives

The Council is required by the Welsh 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.

The Council along with the police, health, fire, voluntary and community sectors collectively agreed, in 2010, a shared vision for Rhondda Cynon Taf to be a 'County Borough of Opportunity'. This means that they intend to work together to enable individuals and communities to achieve their full potential, in terms of both their work and social life. This shared vision is set out in a document called a community strategy and titled *Promoting Achievement, Tackling Disadvantage*. To help make this happen, the Council agreed, on 20 April 2011, eight improvement priorities for delivery between April 2011 and March 2012. The Council has published a document called *Explaining our improvement priorities for 2011/12* which sets out these improvement priorities and can be found on the Council's website at www.rhondda-cynon-taf.gov.uk They are:

| The Council's proposed improvement priorities for 2010-11 | | Explaining our improvement priorities for 2011-12 | |
|---|--|--|--|
| Medium-term financial planning – living within our means | The Council's key priority, already well known to members and officers, is managing the Council's finances very prudently and innovatively in order to achieve our priorities. Whilst specific funding levels for future years are unknown, most commentators agree that the position is likely to be extremely challenging, with at best minimal increases and at worst significant cuts in resource levels. 'living within our means' needs to be a watchword for us all. We need to focus upon maximising the revenue we generate, become more efficient in how we deliver services, increase the level of external funding to support quality service delivery and continue to develop the workforce and improve recruitment and retention of staff. | Medium-term service planning – a financially sound and efficient council | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> continuing to deliver effective financial and performance management arrangements that are open and transparent to our citizens and stakeholders; managing and developing our staff to achieve local people's priorities; pro-actively managing the use of our buildings in an efficient and sustainable way; and working with our partners to deal with service challenges from a citizen's point of view. |

| The Council's proposed improvement priorities for 2010-11 | | Explaining our improvement priorities for 2011-12 | |
|--|--|--|--|
| Education – a top-quality education for all | The focus is to continue to drive up standards in both early years' settings and schools, improving the outcomes for all children. If we are to break the cycle of deprivation, a top-quality education that meets the needs of all children is essential. A key priority is the development of community schooling – providing extended services to children and their families through programmes such as E3+, in partnership with schools, other agencies and the voluntary sector. | A top-quality education for all | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • raising standards of success and achievement at all key stages for pupils educated within Rhondda Cynon Taf; • creating more appropriate learning environments to help children achieve better educational outcomes; and • supporting improved attendance at school or work-based learning for pupils. |
| Street care services and the natural environment – a cleaner, greener county borough | We have made good progress in recent years in improving the local environment. We aim to further improve the local environment by increasing our waste recycling rates to meet the challenging national targets, continue to deliver cleaner streets and well-maintained highways all year round and improve parks so everyone can enjoy the open green spaces the county borough has to offer. There will be a continued focus on the strict enforcement of littering, graffiti, fly tipping and fly posting. | A cleaner, greener county borough | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reducing the amount of waste sent to landfill; • increasing the amount of waste collected that is recycled or reused; • keeping our streets clean and working to prevent littering, graffiti, fly tipping and fly posting; and • making sure our roads are well-maintained, clean and safe for all users. |

| The Council's proposed improvement priorities for 2010-11 | | Explaining our improvement priorities for 2011-12 | |
|---|---|--|--|
| Children and family centred services – keeping all children and young people safe and improving the life chances of vulnerable children | Our focus will be on safeguarding and supporting children and young people in need, including those that are carers; significantly improving the range and effectiveness of services designed to support children and families in their own homes; providing high-quality care and permanent family homes for children who are unable to live with their birth families; delivering and commissioning high-quality services for children in their early years; and preventing young people from becoming involved in criminal activity. | Keeping all children and young people safe and improving the life chances of vulnerable children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring children remain with their families when it is in the child's best interest; • improving the decisions we make for children who will require long-term permanent care; • safeguarding and protecting vulnerable children and young people; and • helping to prevent young people becoming involved in criminal activity. |
| Maintaining people's independence – supporting adults and older people to live independently | The Council will continue to improve the services it provides to support older people to live at home, promoting independence and improving the quality of life, preventing unnecessary hospital admissions and facilitating timely discharges. In particular, developing services for older people with mental health problems, providing more support for people with long-term needs, protecting vulnerable adults and helping those with caring responsibilities. | Supporting adults and older people to live independently | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promoting independence and quality of life to help adults and older people to live at home; • working toward the integration of health and social care services; and • safeguarding vulnerable adults from neglect and abuse. |

| The Council's proposed improvement priorities for 2010-11 | | Explaining our improvement priorities for 2011-12 | |
|---|---|--|---|
| <p>Enforcement and regulation – proactively managing the late-night economy and tackling antisocial behaviour</p> | <p>Many of our residents' lives are blighted by antisocial behaviour. Much of this antisocial behaviour is alcohol-related which can escalate into incidents of criminal damage and violent crime. It is clear from discussions with the community that they wish the Council to use its licensing and public protection powers to effectively manage the late-night economy, prevent the sale of alcohol to minors, encourage sensible drinking and reduce antisocial behaviour.</p> | <p>Managing the late-night economy and tackling antisocial behaviour</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reducing alcohol-related harm to drinkers and the problems they create in the community; and • discouraging unhealthy drinking and promote more responsible management of licensed premises. |

| The Council's proposed improvement priorities for 2010-11 | | Explaining our improvement priorities for 2011-12 | |
|--|--|--|--|
| <p>Regeneration of our communities</p> | <p>Focusing on our town centres, work with funders to secure improvements to the physical environment and encourage the enhancement of the retail on offer, in order that they are more attractive to shoppers and businesses. A priority is to attract significant investment into the county borough to develop former industrial sites and promote Rhondda Cynon Taf as a very attractive location. We want to ensure that a range of good-quality housing is available across the county borough, which is secure, affordable, well-maintained and meets varied and changing needs. We will also take pro-active steps to tackle child poverty and support social regeneration (to help local people to maximise their income, to improve their skills and enhance their employability, throughout the economic downturn and on a sustained basis into the future). We will use the opportunities afforded by Communities First to help us achieve this.</p> | <p>Regenerating our communities</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facilitating the development of former industrial sites; • improving the physical environment of our town centres; • in partnership, ensuring that a range of good-quality housing is available; • helping to maximise family income by addressing barriers to the take-up of means tested benefits; • helping to increase opportunities for working-age adults to enter employment, education and training; • in partnership, introducing new ways of working so that the impact of poverty on children, young people and families is reduced; and • the prevention and reduction of young people not in education, employment or training. |

| The Council's proposed improvement priorities for 2010-11 | | Explaining our improvement priorities for 2011-12 | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Better customer contact – focusing on the customer | The customer remains at the centre of all that we are doing and many of our recent achievements have had the objective of enhancing the customer experience. We are committed to providing customers with a range of access channels; many services can be accessed through the new customer service centre at Ty Elai, and the One4All centres. We are extending this provision and increasing the number of services that can be accessed electronically, to improve access to them and to increase their efficiency and effectiveness. | Focusing on the customer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensuring customers can easily access services in their preferred way and receive a quality and timely response. |
| Maximising partnership opportunities – doing more for local communities by working together | We have a good track record of partnership working in Rhondda Cynon Taf but there are opportunities to deliver more visible and measurable benefits of partnership working. In particular, the Council needs to play a lead role in the Local Services Board, strengthening local public sector leadership to tackle the service delivery challenges from a customer/user perspective that can only be addressed by working in partnership. This may result in new models of service delivery, pooling resources and realigning services between sectors. | | |

The Council's proposed improvement priorities for 2010-11

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Managing our assets – equipping ourselves for the future</p> | <p>Internal changes continue to be necessary in order for the Council to be well-prepared for the future – to deliver sustainable services by working in a better, more efficient way. These changes will require the Council to rationalise the number of buildings we occupy, improving the quality of the buildings that remain and ensuring occupancy is optimised.</p> |
| <p>Communication – raising awareness and keeping people informed</p> | <p>The Council has various approaches to communicating internally and externally, and has improved these through simplifying key messages and using technology. However, often we communicate through various means to the same audience, and often the information and messages we wish to share never reaches those who need them the most. We need to assess the effectiveness of our communication approaches and introduce ways in which we can ensure key messages and information reaches the audiences where it can have the greatest impact.</p> |

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council's self-assessment of performance

The Council's self-assessment of performance can be found in its *Improvement Plan 2010* which is available from the Council and from its website at: www.rhondda-cynon-taf.gov.uk.

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