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Mr Jack Straw
Chief Executive
City and County of Swansea
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Oystermouth Road
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Pages	1 of 6

Dear Jack

Improvement Assessment

This letter summarises the key conclusions arising from the Auditor General for Wales' work in respect of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure).

I am required to report my audit and assessment work in relation to whether City and County of Swansea Council (the Council) has discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure.

Further to my Improvement Assessment letter of September 2012, this letter summarises:

- my views on whether the Council has discharged its statutory duties in respect of improvement reporting;
- my views, and the views of relevant regulators, on the Council's arrangements to undertake effective self-evaluation;
- my further proposals for improvement and/or recommendations.

My views were informed by a review of the Council's Annual Review of Performance Report 2011-12 (the Report), published performance information, an audit of a sample of the Council's Performance Indicators, regular liaison with the Corporate Business Management Team and a review of performance management arrangements within a sample of priority areas.

I shall summarise all of my work and that of relevant regulators during 2012-13 and publish an Annual Improvement Report for the Council by the end of March 2013.

The Council has discharged its improvement reporting duties under the Measure

The Council has discharged its improvement reporting duties under the Measure. The Council published an assessment of its performance during 2011-12 in the Report by 31 October 2012, and is actively seeking feedback from citizens.

The Report:

- assesses the Council's performance in the preceding financial year (2011-12):
- includes details of performance and comparisons as measured by the national statutory performance indicators:
- includes details of the ways in which the Council has sought to collaborate:
- demonstrates how the Council is actively seeking feedback from communities and citizens.

There is scope for the Council to act more in accordance with Welsh Government guidance

There are elements of the Report that could be developed in accordance with Welsh Government guidance such as:

- Reporting of past performance could be expanded to compare performance with previous years, with other comparable bodies and could include greater use of qualitative information such as bench marking data:
- Including details of whether a collaborative activity has achieved its intended outcomes in addition to an account of the ways in which the Council has exercised its powers of collaboration:
- By specifically explaining the Council's views on its success in achieving each of its improvement objectives.

Overall the report provided a balanced picture of performance and changes in approach to performance reporting reflect the Council's commitment to illustrate outcomes for citizens and communities

Overall the report produced a balanced picture of performance, although the Foreword and executive summary could highlight areas of poorer performance more clearly

Overall the Council has produced a balanced report supported by a balanced suite of performance indicators and links to a range of supplementary detailed reports and supporting documentation.

Efforts to make the Foreword and executive summary succinct have resulted in it being unbalanced. The Foreword refers to 'good progress delivering our priorities around sustainable communities, improved economic performance, caring for vulnerable people and safeguarding children and young people against a challenging backdrop'. The Foreword does not, however, then balance this by referring to any areas where performance has either declined or remains below the Welsh average such as waste management. The service ranks 21st in Wales for the percentage of waste sent to landfill, and is just above the bottom quartile at 16th in Wales for levels of recycling. There is, therefore, a significant risk that the Council will not achieve the Welsh Government targets, and may incur financial penalties as a result. The challenge to meet national targets is acknowledged within the Summary and the main body of the Report. The Summary does not identify comparative performance in Education, where attendance in both Primary and Secondary sectors remain either in the bottom quartile or just above the bottom quartile performance in Wales respectively.

The report provides a high-level overall assessment of 'good progress' for all improvement objectives but does not give a clearly supported view of its assessment of its performance for each of its improvement objectives for 2011-12. There is a great deal of information to support an evaluation, but it has been left to the reader to form their own opinion on whether the Council has made good progress in achieving specific improvement objectives.

More detailed performance information is available in Part 2 of the Report, either in the body of the document, or via hyperlinks/hot buttons when accessed in the web version. There is an analysis of Performance Indicators under each improvement objective on the website, which details the percentage that met target, the percentage that improved and the percentage that stayed the same or equated to 100 per cent. Availability of this information is dependent on the reader having access to the web version of the report.

Our review of a sample of service areas identified some instances where progress reported does not provide a complete and accurate picture of performance. For example, under the waste and recycling improvement objective, the Report does not highlight the fact that there have been difficulties getting charities to register for the reuse/recycling credits scheme and so the number registered is low.

The Measure encourages councils to report performance beyond its Improvement Objectives. The report focuses on activities and measures to support its Improvement Objectives, and does not cover other key areas, such as housing. This is surprising given that the Council still retains its housing stock and is working to meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard. Performance in this area is therefore likely to be of interest to the Council's citizens and communities, particularly its tenants.

The structure of the Report reflects a new approach to performance review which, once embedded, will enable the Council to illustrate outcomes for citizens and communities

The Council is developing a results based accountability approach to performance management and has structured its report to ask the following questions in respect of the improvement objectives:

- 'what have we done?';
- 'how well are we doing?';
- 'what is the impact?'; and
- 'is anyone better off?'

On the whole, the narrative under these questions reflects performance against indicators or highlights future actions, but does not always go on to identify the actual outcome for service users. This is primarily because the Council is in the process of developing this style of reporting and has not traditionally captured the necessary information. The Corporate Business Management Team (CBMT) is currently working with service delivery teams to develop measures that teams will use in the future that will better demonstrate the outcomes experienced by service users and other stakeholders.

Our review of the Council's arrangements for producing performance indicators found systems were reliable. All aspects critical to the compilation, use and reporting of indicators were in place. The main gap in performance information related to the measurement of 'outcomes'.

The Report includes a section on performance information and its use. This provides information about the Council's performance management arrangements, including how it determines its priorities, how these are monitored and how risks are managed. However, the section could be enhanced and does not clearly articulate how the Council uses its performance information to assess and challenge performance on a routine basis and what it has done to compare its performance.

There is reference to some qualitative information in the Report but this is limited. The main focus is around performance against measures and indicators. The guidance also recommends the use of other qualitative information such as surveys, benchmarking against family groups and perhaps with other comparable bodies, which may include other councils. This was a proposal for improvement made last year and the Council should more clearly demonstrate how this is being addressed.

The outcome of collaborative working is not clearly stated

There is a significant range of collaborative arrangements detailed in the report, yet they have not been linked with the relevant Improvement Objective and priority area that they

support. For example the Council could explain the anticipated impact on its performance of the regional food waste treatment plan which may provide a cost-efficient solution and provide for the region's food waste disposal needs for the next 25 years.

The Council has attempted to reach a wide audience with its publication

The Welsh Government Guidance emphasises the need to publish in a way that best suits the needs of the audiences for whom the information is made. The full extent of information should be clear and readily available to all audiences. The Council has been innovative in its attempt to promote the report and increase access to a wide audience as follows:

- By publishing the information on its website in a very user-friendly way making it easier to navigate and read. The format of the full document is also logical and is a marked improvement on last year's.
- By producing a summary and detailed report.
- By publicising its report in a local newspaper.
- By placing copies in local libraries and providing assistance available from Council staff.
- By e-mail contact with stakeholders to increase their awareness of the existence of the Report.
- By the website signposting the Report and including hot buttons to link to specific areas.
- By making the Report available in different font sizes and in Welsh.

In order for the publication to be easier to read, available hard copies do not include the full range of performance information. Both the Adobe and web-based versions rely on hyperlinks to the Council's 2011-12 performance tables and to scrutiny reports. This places heavy reliance on interested readers having access to the internet.

As recommended by the Welsh Government Guidance, the Council should build on the positive approach taken, and should consider approaches to ensure the information reaches service user groups to whom the Report would be of particular interest.

Further proposals for improvement/recommendations

No proposals for improvement are being suggested in this letter. We will continue to monitor and report on the progress made by the Council in implementing the proposals set out in my previous reports and letters.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Huw Vaughan Thomas'.

HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS
AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES

CC: Carl Sargeant, Minister for Local Government and Communities

Steve Barry – Manager

Samantha Spruce – Performance Audit Lead