



WALES AUDIT OFFICE
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

Annual Improvement Report

Wrexham County Borough Council

Issued: June 2014

Document reference: 224A2014



About the Auditor General for Wales

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The Auditor General and staff of the Wales Audit Office aim to provide public-focused and proportionate reporting on the stewardship of public resources and in the process provide insight and promote improvement.

This Annual Improvement Report has been prepared on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales by Huw Lloyd Jones and Paul Goodlad under the direction of Alan Morris.

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Summary report

Summary

- 1 Each year, the Auditor General must report on how well Welsh councils, fire and rescue authorities, and national park authorities are planning for improvement in delivering their services. This report draws on the work of the relevant Welsh inspectorates, as well as work undertaken on the Auditor General's behalf by the Wales Audit Office. The report covers delivery and evaluation of services of Wrexham County Borough Council (the Council) in relation to 2012-13 and its improvement planning for 2013-14. Taking these into account, the report concludes whether the Auditor General believes that the Council will make arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2014-15.
- 2 We found that, in 2012-13, the Council has made steady progress against many of its improvement objectives, but outcomes for citizens are not consistently improving at a corresponding rate. We reached this conclusion because:
 - despite strong performance in several areas, the Council's overall performance against the national indicators has deteriorated slightly;
 - the Council made steady progress against most of its 'economic' priorities, but does not have robust arrangements to assess the impact of its activities;
 - despite some important improvements, the secondary school system is not as cost-effective as it should be;
- 3 We also found that, overall, the Council has improved its self-evaluation for the majority of its improvement priorities and data quality arrangements are more robust. We reached this conclusion because:
 - the Council is delivering steady improvements in both adult and children's social care, but some aspects of children's services remain below-average despite the Council's efforts over several years;
 - the Council and its partners are helping to reduce crime and the fear of crime, but there is scope to better demonstrate progress and impact;
 - the Council has made progress in some aspects of Welsh language provision, but has not yet met its target for increasing the number of staff who can speak Welsh; and
 - the Council is responding effectively to its environmental challenges, but its efforts to address local housing needs and aspirations have had a limited impact in some areas.

4 Finally, we found that, during 2013-14, the Council's arrangements to plan and support improvements remain robust and are becoming more streamlined and efficient. We reached this conclusion because:

- the Council's Improvement Planning during 2013-14 continues to provide a clear strategic direction for the Council, although service-level plans do not always provide a clear route-map for driving service improvement;
- despite the challenging financial climate, the Council continues to manage its financial position effectively; and
- the Council has responded positively to feedback by strengthening arrangements that were previously underdeveloped.

5 Despite the improved arrangements, the Council faces the challenge of transforming the progress against its improvement objectives into significantly improved outcomes for its citizens.

6 Taking the above into account, the Auditor General believes that the Council is well placed to secure continuous improvement in 2014-15, as the improved corporate arrangements begin to deliver the anticipated improvements in service performance.

Recommendations

7 We do not intend to make any new recommendations or proposals for improvement. [Appendix 5](#) summarises the status of our previous recommendations and proposals.

Detailed report

Introduction

- 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 park authorities are planning for improvement in delivering their services. **Appendix 1** provides more information about the Auditor General's powers and duties under the Measure.
- 9 With help from Welsh inspectorates, Estyn (for education), the Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales (CSSIW) and the Welsh Language Commissioner we have brought together a picture of what each council or authority in Wales is trying to achieve, how it is going about it, and the progress the Council has made since the Auditor General published his last annual improvement report. The report also draws on the Council's own self-assessment. Finally, taking all this into account, the report concludes whether the Auditor General believes that the Council is likely to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2014-15.
- 10 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 prioritised work undertaken. This year our work included an assessment of the Council's progress against a range of priority outcomes within three of its four strategic themes:
- **Economy**
 - people want to live, work, visit and invest here;
 - businesses can locate and grow here; and
 - people can prosper as individuals and within their communities.
 - **People**
 - all children and young people have positive aspirations, learn and achieve their potential;
 - children and young people are safeguarded;
 - people feel, and are, safe and secure; and
 - Welsh language and culture is promoted and supported.
 - **Place**
 - homes that meet people's needs and aspirations; and
 - an environmentally responsible place.

11 Our assessment consisted of desktop reviews of documents and discussions with officers and elected members responsible for delivery of the priority outcomes. Where appropriate, our assessment incorporates the views of other inspectorates and regulators. 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:

- make proposals for improvement – if proposals are made to the Council, we would expect it to do something about them and we will follow up what happens;
- make formal recommendations for improvement – if a formal recommendation is made the Council must prepare a response to that recommendation within 30 working days;
- conduct a special inspection and publish a report and make recommendations; and
- recommend to Ministers of the Welsh Government that they intervene in some way.

12 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 has made steady progress against many of its improvement objectives, but outcomes for citizens are not consistently improving at a corresponding rate

Despite strong performance in several areas, the Council's overall performance against the national indicators has deteriorated slightly

- 13 We reviewed the Council's performance for 2012-13 against the average for Wales across a basket of 44 national indicators¹. Despite strong performance in several areas, the Council's overall performance against the national indicators marginally deteriorated. For example, during 2012-13, slightly fewer indicators improved or remained at optimum performance (27, compared with 29 in 2011-12) and fewer indicators (18, compared with 22 in 2011-12) were in the top half of their performance tables. The Council's performance against just over half of the national indicators (24 of 43, where comparisons were possible) was below the Welsh average. Its performance for 12 of the indicators was within the bottom (worst) quartile, compared with 13 in 2011-12.
- 14 The Welsh Government's Local Authority Services Performance Report², published in January 2014 identified a similar deterioration in performance during 2012-13, across the areas covered by the report. When compared with the other local authorities in Wales, the Council's performance was in the upper or middle quartiles for 12 of the 18 indicators. In 2011-12, 14 of the 18 indicators were within the upper or middle quartiles. The Council's performance for half of the indicators covered by the report exceeded the Welsh average, a slight improvement on 2011-12.
- 15 The Council's assessment of progress against the 15 improvement priorities in its 2012-13 improvement plan was generally positive: It reported:
- good progress, with improving outcomes against nine improvement priorities;
 - some progress, but no impact on outcomes for five improvement priorities; and
 - limited progress against one improvement priority.
- The evidence we have reviewed broadly supports the Council's evaluation of progress
- 16 Each year the Welsh Government undertakes a national survey to obtain the views of the people of Wales on a range of issues including health, education and local services. The 2012-13 survey showed that just over half (51 per cent) of Wrexham's residents strongly agreed or tended to agree that the Council provided high-quality services. This is below the Welsh average (57 per cent) and placed the Council's performance in the bottom quartile when compared with other local authorities in Wales.

1 Thirty National Strategic Indicators (NSIs) and 24 Public Accountability Measures (PAMs), of which 10 are classified as both NSIs and PAMs.

2 Local Authority Services Performance Report 2012-13 brings together the latest performance data available, which can be used to support the accountability and scrutiny of public services in Wales. The service areas included are Social Care, Education, Leisure and Culture, Housing, Environment, Transport, Community Safety and Wellbeing.

The Council is making steady progress on most of its 'economy' priorities, but does not have robust arrangements to assess the impact of its activities

- 17 The Council set itself three key improvement priorities related to the economy:
- people want to live, work, visit and invest here;
 - business can locate and grow here; and
 - people can prosper as individuals and in their communities.
- 18 The Council assessed its overall progress against these areas, during 2012-13, as 'good, with improving outcomes'. For example, it reports that expenditure by visitors to Wrexham County Borough (Wrexham) exceeded the target set for 2012-13 and that town centre retail vacancy rates remained better than the national average. The Council also assisted more business start-ups and benefited from a higher occupancy rate within its commercial properties than in 2011-12.
- 19 Our review focused on the extent to which the Council understands the impact its activities are having on its improvement priorities. Overall, we found that the Council would benefit from taking a broader view of its progress. Supplementing its local performance data with a greater range of external data could provide a clearer regional and national context for changes within the Wrexham economy.
- 20 In 2013, Wrexham was ranked 295th out of 379 localities within the UK competitiveness index³; in 2010, it was ranked as 263rd. This relative decline in competitiveness mirrors the general situation across Wales, which, the Centre for International Competitiveness notes, has failed to show any overall progress and continues to lose ground against the rest of the UK. This is a worrying trend for Wales as a whole, not just for Wrexham.
- 21 During the year to September 2013, the proportion of economically active Wrexham residents in employment⁴ increased and at a faster rate than the averages for both Wales and Great Britain. However, although the proportion of Wrexham residents claiming Job Seekers Allowance has continued to reduce over the last two years the rate of reduction is less than the Welsh average which is now marginally lower than in Wrexham. **Exhibit 1** explores these reductions in more detail.
- 22 Of the 10 indicators chosen by the Council to demonstrate progress against its economic priorities, its performance against four indicators declined. The remainder showed a range of improvement. The narrow range of indicators which the Council has used to assess its progress against this objective as 'good' suggest that local business confidence is improving, and that the Wrexham economy is more or less keeping pace with the economy across Wales. Based on the evidence included within the Annual Performance Report, this conclusion is not unreasonable. However,

3 The Centre for International Competitiveness provides information on the competitiveness of economies and businesses. It produces the UK Competitiveness Index which provides benchmarking data on the competitiveness of UK regions and localities. The Index is updated every two years or so, most recently in 2013. <http://www.cforic.org>

4 Percentage of economically active residents, in employment, in September 2013 (2012): Wrexham 74.3 (72.1) per cent, Wales 68.3 (67.1) per cent, Great Britain 71.2 (70.5) per cent. Source: Nomis, a service provided by the Office for National Statistics. It provides free access to the most detailed and up-to-date UK labour market statistics from official sources. <http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/default.asp>

our analysis of wider economic data suggests that the impact of local initiatives in Wrexham may not be quite as positive as the Annual Performance Report implies.

- 23 Although the Council has strengthened its overall approach to benchmarking, its economic comparisons are generally based on the Welsh average. This narrow approach to benchmarking – when there is a wider database of information readily available – can mask some less-favourable trends and lead to

over-optimistic conclusions about the extent of progress being made. For example, Wrexham shares a boundary with five other local authorities (three in Wales, two in England) and it is useful to compare statistical economic data for these areas, as well as with the Welsh average.

Exhibit 1 shows that whilst the percentage of people claiming Job Seekers Allowance in Wrexham has reduced over the last two years, the scale of reduction was greater within adjacent authority areas.

Exhibit 1 – Job Seekers Allowance claimant rates (all people)

	January 2012	January 2013	January 2014	Percentage reduction from January 2012
Powys	2.7%	2.6%	1.8%	33%
Cheshire West	3.5%	3.3%	2.4%	31%
Flintshire	3.5%	3.3%	2.7%	23%
Shropshire	2.7%	2.6%	2.1%	22%
Denbighshire	4.6%	4.5%	3.7%	20%
Wales Average	4.3%	4.2%	3.5%	19%
Wrexham	4.2%	4.1%	3.6%	14%

Source: Nomis

24 **Exhibit 1** suggests that efforts to tackle unemployment in Wrexham may be having an impact, but perhaps not as dramatically as the efforts of neighbouring authorities. In practice, drawing such a conclusion from a single data set would be inappropriate. A more comprehensive analysis of labour market data would be needed to form a robust view about the extent of progress being made. However, an analysis like this can highlight opportunities for the Council to explore what its peers appear to be doing better – and to share its experience of initiatives that are working particularly well within Wrexham.

25 Despite some disappointing announcements about job losses within Wrexham – such as over 600 permanent and agency worker jobs at Sharp – the Council expects the local economy to benefit from significant inward investment over the next few years. The most high-profile investment will be the construction of a prison on Wrexham Industrial Estate, which is expected to create about 1,000 new jobs. There have also been several smaller-scale investment announcements. For example, JCB recently publicised plans to expand its existing transmissions plant in Wrexham.

26 The proportion of Wrexham residents with qualifications is lower⁵ than in all five surrounding local authority areas, at all levels from NVQ1 upwards. This is important because a lack of qualifications will often prevent people from getting a job. A key challenge for the Council and its partners will be to assist local residents to acquire the qualifications or skills they will need to compete effectively for these new jobs –

particularly unemployed residents competing for entry-level jobs. Without appropriate support for Wrexham citizens, there is a risk that too many of the new jobs will go to people who live outside the county borough and commute in.

27 The local economic landscape is complex. Local economies are influenced by many external factors and business support initiatives can take a long time to influence labour market data. Nevertheless, our analysis of Job Seekers Allowance claimants does suggest that the Council would benefit from a more comprehensive monitoring model that benchmarks progress against a wider range of comparators. The statistical data is widely available and most is free to access. Developing a better understanding of what is really influencing the local economy and the prosperity of Wrexham residents would strengthen decision-making and help the Council to focus its capacity and resources more effectively.

Despite some important improvements, the secondary school system is not as cost-effective as it should be

28 Education-related achievements highlighted by the Council in its Annual Performance Report relate to high levels of attendance, good progress against recommendations made by Estyn and good, improving performance in primary schools. The summer 2012 secondary school results showed that improved arrangements had not yet influenced academic standards. When the Council published its Annual Performance Report, the summer 2013

⁵ The proportion of residents (age 16 to 64) with NVQ1 qualifications and above in 2012: Wrexham 81.0 per cent, Powys 82.2 per cent, Denbighshire 82.9 per cent, Flintshire 85.1 per cent, Shropshire 86.1 per cent, Cheshire West 89.7 per cent. Source: Nomis.

- results were not available, but the Council was anticipating significant improvement in the results of 16 year olds at Key Stage Four.
- 29 We agree with the Council's assessment of school performance in 2012. Pupils' results at all ages improved in 2013. Outcomes for seven year olds and eleven year olds were slightly above the Wales average and were broadly as might be expected when primary schools are compared with schools with similar levels of deprivation elsewhere in Wales.
- 30 As the Council had anticipated, there were good improvements in the proportion of 16-year olds achieving five or more good GCSE grades and in the proportion that included mathematics and English or Welsh among their higher grades. Results in Wrexham nevertheless remain well below the Wales average on both these indicators.
- 31 The Council's Annual Performance Report rightly focuses on the outcomes in schools. There are, however, a number of factors and trends that contribute to those outcomes, some of which we highlight below.
- 32 There were no permanent exclusions from Wrexham schools during the 2012-13 academic year. However, secondary schools have, for several years, made very high use of fixed-term exclusions as a tool in dealing with poor behaviour. During the 2012-13 academic year, the number of fixed-term exclusions fell significantly; the number of exclusions of five days or less fell from 979 in 2011-12 to 565, while the number of longer fixed-term exclusions fell from 107 to 72.
- 33 Nevertheless, the rate of exclusions remains much higher than in other authorities in Wales. On average, almost one in 10 of Wrexham's secondary school pupils was excluded during 2012-13. This clearly disrupts their learning.
- 34 The Council has, over the years, worked extensively to reorganise its schools provision. The level of surplus places in primary schools in January 2013 was 11.4 per cent; only slightly higher than the Welsh Government target of 10 per cent and well below the Wales average of 16.9 per cent. In secondary schools, however, almost 23 per cent of places are empty, and four of the nine schools have significant surplus capacity. This contributes, in part, to the fact that the gross cost of secondary school provision (whether delegated to schools or not, but excluding home-to-school transport) is £5,611 per pupil, the third highest among councils in Wales.
- 35 Despite these high costs, Wrexham secondary schools have experienced significant financial difficulties in recent years. There are positive signs that the financial position in schools is now improving. Whilst three secondary schools began the 2013-14 financial year with deficits, the scale of these deficits is beginning to reduce, showing that the schools are now beginning to manage within the budgets allocated to them.

The Council is delivering steady improvements in both adult and children's social care, but some aspects of children's services remain below-average despite the Council's efforts over several years

36 The Council acknowledges that, whilst it made some progress against its priority of ensuring that 'children and young people are safeguarded', performance during 2012-13 did not improve to the extent anticipated. The Council streamlined some of its arrangements, which did help to improve its performance in some areas of the service – such as a significant increase in the number of statutory visits to looked-after-children that took place in accordance with regulations. However, despite strong improvements within some areas of children's services during 2012-13, overall performance is less satisfactory; six of the 13 indicators used to monitor performance in this area remain in the bottom quartile. The Council cites a lack of capacity to cope with the increasing demand for children's social care services as a key contributor to its under-performance in this area. The Council reports that performance improved significantly during the first half of 2013-14. However, performance data for the remainder of the year is not yet available, so it is too early to evaluate the impact of recent efforts to improve the performance of children's services.

37 The Council has reported good progress against its key improvement priority for older people – ensuring that all vulnerable older people are safe, have optimal health, independence and wellbeing. The evidence offered by the Council supports this view. Performance for all five of the indicators used to demonstrate progress improved and either met or exceeded the targets set for 2012-13. For example, the time people waited to have adaptations made to their homes, and the waiting time for occupational therapy reduced significantly. It is noteworthy that the Council improved the support it provides to vulnerable adults despite ongoing increases in demand and rising expectations from service users. However, CSSIW's recent response to the Council's Director of Social Services statutory Annual Report notes that the Council has not been as explicit as it could be in relation to the areas for improvement.

38 The CSSIW response explored progress across both adult and children's services. It found that the Council's actions have enabled more adults in Wrexham to maintain their independence. For example, the Council has taken steps to improve community-based services within rural areas and access to support and re-ablement have increased. The Council is also doing more to address barriers to social inclusion. However, progress to increase the amount of suitable and affordable housing for older and vulnerable people has been slow. In 2011-12, CSSIW highlighted the need for this to improve. This is still the case.

- 39 The Council continues to develop effective ways to engage with service users. Feedback on services is generally positive and the comments are used to evaluate performance and take action to improve services. The CSSIW found that some engagement initiatives in children's services have not progressed due to a lack of capacity, and that further progress was required to engage with hard-to-reach groups. The Council is also committed to partnership working and contributes or leads on a number of regional initiatives. The review noted that its main partners recognise the Council's commitment to partnership working. It also noted that organisational change at the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board continues to affect the Council's ability to influence locality-focused strategic planning with the Health Board.
- 40 The CSSIW response found that the Council has a proactive approach to the development of carers' services and that it has made significant progress in providing services for adult carers. However, it also found that more work was required to develop services for young carers, which the Council expected to address during the remainder of 2013-14. The timeliness of reviews also needs to be improved. In 2012-13, fewer adults received a review of their care plan. The number of children on the child protection register receiving reviews also reduced, although the Council's performance remains just above the Welsh average. However, reviews of children in need have improved; the Council's performance is now amongst the best in Wales.
- 41 Despite improvements to the assessment and care management of children's services, the pace of improvement remains slow. The CSSIW identified this as an area for improvement. The quality and timeliness of assessments were inconsistent and there was little recorded evidence of effective risk analysis. The Council is taking action to tackle areas of underperformance. For example, it needs to ensure the effectiveness of its performance management and quality assurance arrangements, particularly in relation to the major service development being taken forward in adult and children's safeguarding.
- 42 The number of children needing to be looked after increased in 2012-13. Although placement stability improved, the Council's performance in this area remains weak and there are ongoing difficulties in recruiting the required number of foster carers. The CSSIW identified that fewer looked-after children had a care plan or personal education plan in place within the required timescales. However, contact with formerly looked-after children has improved. The CSSIW's report notes that the children's service performance indicators remain an area for improvement. Despite improved performance in a number of areas during 2012-13, overall performance remains poor in comparison to the Welsh average.

- 43 The Council has developed strategic planning documents to provide direction in most service areas of adult services but CSSIW identified that further work was needed to complete strategic plans for all service areas. The CSSIW also found that the clarity and effectiveness of business planning are less well evidenced; the Council needs to ensure its business plans are sufficiently specific and achievable to drive improvement.
- 44 The Council shows continued commitment to social services staff training and development and is responsive to operational needs, which will help to promote workforce stability. The social services workforce strategy covers workforce planning, recruitment, development and retention. The Council reports that recruitment and retention of staff working within children's services has improved; the Council anticipates that this will help to improve departmental performance. However, further work is required to improve communication between members, senior managers, and frontline teams within social services. A Council-wide review of administrative support has reduced business support in some areas and raised departmental concerns about the potential impact on front line performance. Although some structures to improve interdepartmental working are in place, this remains an area for further development.

The Council and its partners are helping to reduce crime and the fear of crime, but there is scope to better demonstrate progress and impact

- 45 Helping people to feel safe and secure is an improvement priority for the Council. It assessed progress against this priority as good, based on an ongoing reduction in the level of crime and youth and adult re-offending in Wrexham. The autumn 2013 residents' survey shows that the proportion of respondents who feel 'very' or 'fairly' safe within the County Borough remains high – at 98 per cent, up from 97 per cent in 2011. However, despite access to a wide database of outcome measures, the Annual Performance Report reports progress against this improvement priority using a narrow range of indicators. New, independent data is now available to supplement local survey data on fear of crime collected by the Council and its partners. For example, in a 2012-13 national survey⁶ exploring people's perceptions of public services, Wrexham residents consistently reported feeling less safe than those living elsewhere in North Wales and less safe than the national average. The national survey will be repeated annually; this will allow the Council to monitor changes in perception – about crime and other issues.

⁶ The proportion of residents (age 16 to 64) with NVQ1 qualifications and above in 2012: Wrexham 81.0 per cent, Powys 82.2 per cent, Denbighshire 82.9 per cent, Flintshire 85.1 per cent, Shropshire 86.1 per cent, Cheshire West 89.7 per cent. Source: Nomis.

46 In addition to the activities reported in the Annual Performance Report, the Council has worked closely with the police and its other partners to develop a range of initiatives that contributed to the progress achieved. These initiatives include:

- using social media to provide useful information to the public, raise awareness and address crime trends and potential hot spots in neighbourhoods;
- reducing the instances of alcohol-related incidents, by working with local supermarkets and licensed premises to prevent underage sales of alcohol and the availability of cheap high-volume alcoholic drinks; and
- developing a new Service Level Agreement with Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) to focus on local community contact and issues affecting the quality of life instead of the time spent on patrol.

47 Collectively, these initiatives provide a more balanced picture of performance than that offered by the Annual Performance Report. The Council did consider providing more information on levels of crime to demonstrate the progress being made, but has concerns that this might prove counter-productive to specific crime and anti-social behaviour prevention initiatives. There is scope, however, to develop more qualitative information and to provide a more rounded evidence base, as a way of demonstrating progress.

48 In January 2014, HMI Probation published the outcome of a full joint inspection on Wrexham Youth Justice Service. The report was generally positive. Inspectors found that the service had made substantial progress since the previous inspection in 2010. For example, a recent reorganisation had aligned the Youth Justice Service alongside youth services, under a single senior management structure. This meant that the specialist skills of the Youth Justice Service staff were likely to be maintained and strengthened. The integrated approach also meant that support would continue for many children and young people, once their involvement with the Youth Justice Service ended.

49 The inspection found that much of the case management work was of a high standard and that service users spoke very highly of their involvement with the Youth Justice Service. However, the inspection also identified some significant areas for improvement. For example, governance arrangements were not effective, despite good partnership working in Wrexham and clear commitment to the work of the Youth Justice Service. In particular, the robustness of the partnership work was seriously limited by the poor attendance of some statutory partners at the Youth Justice Service Management Board. Consequently, this critical body could not effectively hold partners to account or, acting as a partnership, hold the Youth Justice Service to account. Work is underway to improve the effectiveness of the Management Board.

The Council has made progress in some aspects of Welsh language provision, but has not yet met its target for increasing the number of staff who can speak Welsh

- 50 The role of the Welsh Language Commissioner was created by the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. It is expected that new powers to impose standards on organisations will come into force through subordinate legislation by the end of 2014. Until that time, the Commissioner will continue to review Welsh language schemes by virtue of powers inherited under the Welsh Language Act 1993.
- 51 The Commissioner works with all councils in Wales to inspect and advise on the implementation of language schemes. It is the responsibility of councils to provide services to the public in Welsh in accordance with the commitments in their language schemes. Every council is committed to providing an annual monitoring report to the Commissioner outlining its performance in implementing the language scheme. The Commissioner analyses every monitoring report, provides a formal response and collects further information as required.
- 52 The Commissioner's latest review of the arrangements at Wrexham concludes that not enough of the Council's front-line staff can speak Welsh in order to offer a completely bilingual service. In addition, despite a small increase, the Council has not succeeded in meeting the target of increasing the number of staff who can speak Welsh. The Council has undertaken to provide language training to all front-line staff by the end of the year. As opportunities to plan the workforce through recruitment are currently limited, the Council will need to invest more in Welsh language training and to plan it effectively. Not every third-party service contract includes a requirement to comply with the principles of the Language Scheme. The Council has provided clear guidelines to tackle this.
- 53 The Council considers that it made good progress during 2012-13 against its priority of increasing support for, and promotion of, the Welsh language and culture. For example, more young people in Wrexham are taking up Welsh-medium education and more young people within English-medium schools are sitting the full GCSE in Welsh as a second language. In the wider community, the Council reports that significantly more people are attending Welsh cultural events and exhibitions. Although the proportion of enquiries to the Council's contact centre received in Welsh is very low (just over one per cent in 2012-13) the Council has recently recruited a number of fluent Welsh speakers, who will help it to provide a fully bilingual service.

The Council is responding effectively to its environmental challenges, but its efforts to address local housing needs and aspirations have had a limited impact in some areas

- 54 The Council assessed its progress at making Wrexham an environmentally responsible place as good and the available evidence supports that view. The Council achieved the Carbon Trust Standard in 2013. The Trust found that the Council had 'demonstrated effectiveness at responding to climate change through governance, carbon accounting and carbon management'. During 2012-13, the Council completed its 2,700-home solar panel installation scheme. It also secured funding to install energy-saving features such as cavity-wall and loft insulation in some 400 homes and it supported 17 schools to reduce their energy consumption. Schools participating in the Schools Power Education Programme reduced their average consumption of gas by six per cent and electricity by two per cent. The unexpectedly cold winter weather meant that the Council did not meet its carbon emission reduction targets for 2012-13. However, its investment in energy-efficiency initiatives will have helped to reduce the impact of bad weather on energy usage.
- 55 The Council's performance at reusing, recycling and composting household waste continued to improve during 2012-13, up from 49 per cent to nearly 53 per cent and slightly ahead of the Welsh Government target of 52 per cent. Despite this performance, the Council sent 47 per cent of its household waste to landfill during 2012-13, almost 95 per cent of its landfill allowance. Natural Resources Wales has identified Wrexham as one of six authorities with the least headroom to meet their future obligations. The Council intends to address this potential problem by revising its contractual arrangements for waste disposal. It anticipates that this will significantly reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill. The revisions would also help the Council to maintain its progress towards the 'Towards Zero Waste' target of 70 per cent of waste being recycled, re-used or composted by 2024-25. A forthcoming review of the Council's waste services by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), on behalf of the Welsh Government, will explore whether the Council has adequate processes in place to meet its recycling targets.

- 56 The Council recognises that, during 2012-13, it made limited progress against its priority to provide homes that meet people's needs and aspirations. For example, only 21 new affordable homes were completed – significantly fewer than originally anticipated and the third year running that the Council's affordable housing targets were not met. Since 2012-13, the pace of construction has accelerated; the Council reports that 104 new affordable homes were completed in 2013-14, against a target of 90 for the year. However, the Council's ambition for 390 new affordable homes by 2016 remains challenging. The Council anticipates just over 300 affordable homes arising from developments already underway or scheduled to start during 2014-15 with the balance coming from sites at the pre-planning or pre-development stage. The Council is also exploring opportunities to increase the supply of homes within the county borough. For example, there may be scope to build more council houses following a review of the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy. The Council is also considering the creation of a local lettings agency, to support the Council's successful bid for loan funding to encourage the renovation of empty private sector properties.
- 57 Some councils are addressing similar challenges by targeting increases in the supply of private sector affordable homes, such as granting planning permission for housing on greenfield sites that includes a high proportion of affordable housing. This might not be an appropriate solution for Wrexham, but exploring the approaches adopted elsewhere could help the Council to make better-informed decisions. Greenfield development and homelessness are emotive issues that can provoke strong feelings. Resolving the tensions between two potentially competing priorities may require some brave decision-making by the Council – which it will need to communicate clearly to residents.
- 58 The situation is also likely to have been aggravated by the Council's failure to agree a Local Development Plan. The Planning Inspectorate rejected the original Local Development Plan because it did not include sufficient residential housing provision. The Council is now developing a new Local Development Plan, covering the period to 2028, which will set out its arrangements for delivering the latest Welsh Government household projections. Getting an approved Local Development Plan in place will provide a clearer framework for planning decisions and may support the Council's efforts to increase the supply of new affordable housing.

- 59 The Council's poor track record in tackling homelessness continued during 2012-13. The Council has subsequently appointed a new homelessness manager and strengthened its arrangements; this has had a positive impact on performance during 2013-14. Fewer people in Wrexham were accepted as being in housing need and priority homeless during 2012-13 and the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation decreased. However, the length of stay in temporary accommodation and the speed of decision-making in relation to homelessness prevention deteriorated significantly. The Council expects the 2013-14 performance data associated with homelessness to show a significant improvement.
- 60 Although the Council has a comprehensive strategy for meeting the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) by the March 2021 deadline, its performance to date is, at face value, amongst the worst in Wales. Only 155 Council homes (out of over 11,300 homes) in Wrexham were fully WHQS-compliant by the end of 2012-13. The reality behind this apparently gloomy picture is nevertheless more encouraging. The Council has made much better progress at delivering individual elements of the housing improvement programme⁷. For example, by the end of 2012-13, 60 per cent of the housing stock had heating systems that were WHQS-compliant and 86 per cent were in a good state of repair. But only 39 per cent of homes had up-to-date bathrooms and only five per cent had up-to-date kitchens.
- 61 A 2012 survey of Council tenants found that only two-thirds (68 per cent) were satisfied with the overall condition of their homes. In addition, less than two-thirds (63 per cent) of tenants were satisfied with the way the Council dealt with repairs and maintenance of their home. The Council may benefit from exploring why some councils receive much higher satisfaction ratings from their tenants.
- 62 The outstanding work needed to meet the WHQS represents a significant challenge. The Council estimates that investment of up to £255 million is required to complete the work. An investment of this scale is unrealistic in the short term, so the Council has consulted with its tenants to prioritise work where the need is greatest. The Council has allocated over £23 million for WHQS-related work during 2013-14 - a significant increase on previous allocations. It has also worked with the Welsh Government to agree an investment strategy for completing the remainder of the work.

⁷ To meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard, social housing must satisfy a range of criteria. For example, homes must be in a good state of repair, be safe and secure, have up-to-date kitchens and bathrooms and be adequately heated, fuel efficient and well insulated. All elements must meet the minimum acceptable standard for a house to be WHQS-compliant.

The Council has improved its self-evaluation for the majority of its improvement priorities and data quality arrangements are more robust

The Council has discharged its improvement reporting duties under the Measure and has acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance

- 63 Councils are required under the Measure to evaluate their performance in the previous financial year, compare this against the performance of other councils, and report the information. We review how well councils complied with this aspect of the Measure, and the associated guidance.
- 64 Our review of the Council's 2012-13 assessment of its performance concluded that the Council had discharged its improvement reporting duties under the Measure and had acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance. The overall quality of the Council's Annual Improvement Report (the Report) – 'Focused on our Performance 2012-13' – has improved. It is now a more engaging document than in the past, although there is still scope to strengthen some aspects when future versions are produced.
- 65 The Report provides a comprehensive and, in the main, well-balanced evaluation of the Council's achievements and its key activities during 2012-13. Under-performance against key local targets, where appropriate, is clearly identified and the report is well written. The layout is clear, easy to follow and describes the Council's progress against each improvement objective.
- 66 Last year we reported that the Council recognised the need to improve its approach to benchmarking. The latest Report includes comparative information for each improvement priority, which helps readers to compare the Council's performance against that of other Welsh councils. However, as discussed earlier in this report, scope remains to broaden the Council's benchmarking arrangements using data from councils and other public and private sector organisations outside Wales.
- 67 The Report includes a self-evaluation of the Council's performance for each of its improvement objectives. The majority of the evaluations are clearly evidenced and balanced. This helps readers to understand how the Council has assessed its overall progress. A minority of the Council's evaluations lack a sufficiently broad and meaningful description of the activities delivered. This makes it harder for the reader to understand the impact that these activities have had on local citizens – an issue the Council has acknowledged and intends to address.
- 68 The Council included details of its comparative performance as an appendix within the Report. However, this offers limited explanation for the mixed picture, other than noting that the suite of national indicators does not closely reflect the local priorities in Wrexham. The Report would have benefited from a more robust analysis of performance against the suite of national indicators; this was a missed opportunity for the Council to explain the reasons for a marginal deterioration in its overall performance.

The Council's actions to improve the quality of performance data have led to the production of more accurate performance information and more focused reporting to councillors

- 69 Our 2013 review of data quality arrangements covered the Council's approach to data quality, exploring its arrangements for compiling management information, for quality assurance and for reporting data and performance indicators. We found that the Council had satisfactorily addressed previous weaknesses in its data systems and that data quality arrangements within the sample of measures we tested were sufficiently robust.
- 70 During 2012-13, the Council revised its performance reporting arrangements in response to requests from elected members for more succinct and transparent performance reporting. It also streamlined data collection processes and strengthened its accountability arrangements. Lead members now deliver committee papers and routinely respond to performance queries. Heads of Service are now held to account by the Senior Leadership Team for the quality of performance data reported by their units. This has helped to encourage ownership of the data by the service heads.
- 71 The Council also introduced a new three-tiered approach to target setting during 2013-14. It now categorises each improvement target as either 'Stretch' (aiming for significant improvement), 'Improve' (improving in line with sector averages), or 'Sustain' (maintaining performance at 2012-13 levels). Transparency about the level of ambition in every area of the Council's activities should help Members to recognise when to celebrate good performance and when to challenge under-performance.

The majority of the Council's arrangements to plan and support improvement remain robust and are becoming more streamlined and efficient

The Council's Improvement Planning for 2013-14 continues to provide a clear strategic direction for the Council, although service-level plans do not always provide a clear route-map for driving service improvement

- 72 In May 2012, the newly elected Council formally adopted the Council Plan that covered the period 2012-16. This forms the Council's overarching strategic plan. Each year, the Council refreshes the Plan and formally adopts the Improvement Priorities for the forthcoming year.
- 73 During summer 2013, we reviewed the refreshed Council Plan for 2013-17 (the Plan), to assess whether it complied with the Measure and associated Guidance. Our review confirmed that the Council has discharged its improvement planning duties under the Measure, and that it has acted in accordance with the Welsh Government Guidance.
- 74 The Plan's greatest strengths lie in its attractive design and in its plain, direct style of communication. The Plan describes the Council's priorities clearly and succinctly, and explains how the priorities reflect the views of the public as well as those of the Council and its partners. The Council also produced a shorter summary version and an even more concise 'Short and Snappy Version', developed in response to a request from Senedd yr Ifanc (Wrexham's Youth Parliament). In addition, the Council worked with a local learning disabilities group to develop an easy-to-read version.
- 75 The Council captured each of its 15 Improvement Objectives in short, bold phrases such as 'People can prosper as individuals and within their communities' and 'All people are enabled to make healthy choices'. These objectives are ambitious in their breadth, especially as many require partnership working. For 2013-14, the Council more clearly defined its expectations for the year ahead by choosing a small set of outcome indicators for the majority of its Improvement Objectives. When setting targets for these indicators, the Council took account of current and past performance and is now more explicit about the level of ambition for each indicator.
- 76 Scope remains for the Council to develop a suite of success measures which fully reflect the outcomes it is aiming for, particularly the impact that its activities have on the citizens of Wrexham. Some of the indicators used to demonstrate progress have been selected because they are convenient and available, rather than because they explicitly reflect progress or impact against the intended outcome. This weakness is not unique to Wrexham. The challenge of developing a meaningful set of indicators is shared by most public sector bodies.
- 77 While the Plan has many strengths in the way in which it communicates the Council's vision, its successful delivery will depend on the quality of the performance, project and resource management arrangements that underpin the Plan. At the time of our review, we identified gaps in departmental business planning. This continues to be the case. Whilst business plans are now in place

the Council recognises that further work is needed to make some departmental plans more robust, so that they become effective tools to drive service improvement.

Despite the challenging financial climate, the Council continues to manage its financial position effectively

- 78 The Council continues to set and manage its budget in the context of the longer-term position and we have reported positively on this approach for some time now. However, the Council now faces a significant challenge following fundamental changes in the financial climate.
- 79 Despite a very challenging grant settlement for 2014-15, the Council has responded positively to the challenge. In accordance with its well-established Budget Policy Framework, the Council developed a range of budget proposals reflecting its Council Plan and priorities. After allowing for a three per cent Council Tax increase, the Council identified a savings requirement of £10.8 million, which it has subsequently addressed. Following extensive consultation on the draft proposals, the Council set a balanced budget for 2014-15 at its meeting in February 2014.

- 80 In the medium term, the Council is faced with addressing an estimated budget shortfall of at least £45 million over the next five years, including an estimated shortfall of £8.2 million in 2015-16. The Council has already identified savings for consultation of £4.2 million and is taking action to address the remainder of the shortfall. The Council is developing a five-year programme to improve efficiency and to reshape its services to meet the financial challenge. It has implemented a Change Programme to oversee this process, including the development of a planned approach for reducing its workforce.

The Council has responded positively to feedback by strengthening arrangements that were previously underdeveloped

- 81 Our letter in September 2013 reported on the Council's likelihood to secure continuous improvement through its work in the delivery of the 2013-14 Plan. The Auditor General concluded that, based on, and limited to, work carried up to that date by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators, he believed that the Council was likely to comply with the requirement to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement during 2013-14.
- 82 Since September 2013 we have carried out a further review of the Council's progress against recommendations and proposals for improvement arising from our earlier work. We have also updated our assessment of the Council's financial management arrangements.

83 Our 2013 Annual Improvement Report identified a total of 11 previous recommendations and proposals for improvement that, at that stage, the Council had not fully addressed. There was a degree of overlap between some of the improvements required; we have grouped these into five broad areas for improvement. Progress against these areas is discussed below and summarised in [Appendix 5](#):

- **Corporate Workforce Planning:** The Council has made good progress in developing a corporate approach to workforce planning. It has implemented an integrated Human Resources and Payroll system and incorporated workforce planning into its annual service process. However, the arrangements are not yet fully embedded, so our improvement proposal remains open. We will revisit this topic during 2014 to assess the effectiveness of the revised arrangements and establish whether the anticipated benefits have occurred.
- **Meeting housing need:** The Council has made limited progress against this improvement proposal. In some respects, the situation has deteriorated since we made the original proposal. Affordable housing targets have not been met for the last three years and significant challenges remain before the housing stock is fully WHQS-compliant. The improvement proposal remains open and we will continue to review the Council's progress in this area.
- **Improving and streamlining business processes:** The Council has introduced more robust arrangements for data quality, target-setting, performance management and monitoring and scrutiny. These changes are making a positive impact on the Council's effectiveness. The recommendations and improvement proposals associated with this topic are now closed. The need for the Council to continue refining and evolving its business processes in response to internal and external pressures remains.
- **Stakeholder Engagement, Consultation and Feedback:** The Council has made good progress in the way it engages with its stakeholders, consults them about important issues and provides feedback on the way it has responded to their views. Its 'Understanding and Responding to Citizens Strategy' and 'We're Listening' annual report provide a robust framework to help people understand and influence the decisions that affect them. The improvement proposals associated with this topic are now closed. Effective ongoing application of the new arrangements may help the Council to transform what was previously an area of weakness into a corporate strength.

- **Clarity and focus on priorities and outcomes:** The Council revised its suite of improvement priorities for 2012-13 onwards and developed a more meaningful set of outcome-based measures, which it now uses to monitor progress. The revisions addressed our original concerns, so the proposal for improvement is closed. However, there is scope for the Council to continue refining some of its outcome measures, so that it is more able to demonstrate progress against all of its improvement priorities.

84 Over recent years, the Council has invested capacity and resources to strengthen its corporate and departmental arrangements. Despite this investment, the Council's overall performance has not improved to the extent expected, although it continues to make clear progress against its improvement objectives. The Council faces the challenge of transforming this progress into significantly improved outcomes for its citizens.

The Council is well placed to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2014-15

- 85 Based on the conclusions outlined in the previous sections of this report the Auditor General for Wales believes that Wrexham County Borough Council is well placed to meet the requirements of the Measure in making arrangements to secure continuous improvement.

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 Wales Audit Office on behalf of the Auditor General to discharge his duties under section 24 of the Measure. The report also discharges his duties under section 19 to issue a report certifying that he has carried out an improvement assessment under section 18 and stating whether, as a result of his improvement plan audit under section 17, he believes that the authority has discharged its improvement planning duties under section 15.

Improvement authorities are under a general duty to 'make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of [their] functions'. Improvement authorities are defined as local councils, national park authorities, 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. The Auditor General will summarise his audit and assessment work in a published Annual Improvement Report for each authority (under section 24).

The Auditor General may also in some circumstances carry out special inspections (under section 21), which will be reported to the authority and Ministers, and which he may publish (under section 22). An important ancillary activity for the 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 Wrexham and Wrexham County Borough Council

The Council

The Council spends approximately £292 million per year (2013-14). This equates to about £2,158 per resident. In the same year, the Council also planned to spend £33 million on capital items.

The average band D council tax in 2012-13 for Wrexham was £1,166 per year. This increased by 2.96 per cent to £1,200 per year for 2013-14. 72.6 per cent of Wrexham's housing is in council tax bands A to D.

The Council is made up of 52 elected members who represent the community and make decisions about priorities and use of resources. The Leader of the Council is Neil Rogers. The political make-up of the Council is as follows:

- 23 Labour
- 10 Democratic Independents
- 10 Wrexham Independents
- 5 Conservatives
- 4 Liberal Democrats

The Council's Chief Executive is Dr Helen Paterson. She is supported by three Strategic and Performance Directors: Clare Field, Philip Walton, and Lee Robinson.

Other information

The Assembly Members for Wrexham are:

- Llyr Huws Griffiths, North Wales, Plaid Cymru
- Lesley Griffiths, Wrexham, Welsh Labour Party
- Mark Isherwood, North Wales, Welsh Conservative Party
- Aled Roberts, North Wales, Welsh Liberal Democrat Party
- Antoinette Sandbach, North Wales, Welsh Conservative Party
- Ken Skates, Clwyd South, Welsh Labour Party

The Members of Parliament for Wrexham are:

- Susan Elan Jones, Clwyd South, Labour Party
- Ian Lucas, Wrexham, Labour Part

For more information, see the Council's own website at www.wrexham.gov.uk or contact the Council at Wrexham County Borough Council, The Guildhall, Wrexham, LL11 1AY. Telephone Number: 01978 292000

Appendix 3

Annual Audit Letter

Councillor Neil Rogers – Leader
Dr. Helen Paterson – Chief Executive
Wrexham County Borough Council
The Guildhall
Wrexham
LL11 1AY

Dear Councillor Rogers and Dr Paterson

Annual Audit Letter

This letter summarises the key messages arising from my statutory responsibilities under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 as the Appointed Auditor and my reporting responsibilities under the Code of Audit Practice.

The Council complied with its responsibilities relating to financial reporting and use of resources

It is Wrexham County Borough Council's (the Council) responsibility to:

- put systems of internal control in place to ensure the regularity and lawfulness of transactions and to ensure that its assets are secure;
- maintain proper accounting records;
- prepare a Statement of Accounts in accordance with relevant requirements; and
- establish and keep under review appropriate arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

The Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 requires me to:

- provide an audit opinion on the accounting statements;
- review the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources; and
- issue a certificate confirming that I have completed the audit of the accounts.

Local authorities in Wales prepare their accounting statements in accordance with the requirements of the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom. This code is based on International Financial Reporting Standards. On 27 September 2013, the Appointed Auditor issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council's financial position and transactions. My report is contained within the Statement of Accounts. The key matters arising from the accounts audit were reported to members of the Audit Committee in my Audit of Financial Statements Report on 26 September 2013. My report concluded that the Statement of Accounts were prepared to a good standard. I also identified a number of additional matters to help the Council further strengthen its systems of internal control. These matters were shared with the Head of Finance on 8 November 2013.

My consideration of the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness has been based on the audit work undertaken on the accounts as well as placing reliance on the work completed as part of the Improvement Assessment under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. Overall, I am satisfied that the Council has appropriate arrangements in place. The Auditor General will highlight areas where the effectiveness of these arrangements has yet to be demonstrated or where improvements could be made when he publishes his Annual Improvement Report.

I issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts has been completed on 27 September 2013.

The financial audit fee for 2012-13 is currently expected to be in line with the agreed fee set out in the Annual Audit Outline.

Yours sincerely

Derwyn Owen
Director

For and on behalf of the Appointed Auditor
26 November 2013

Appendix 4

Wrexham County Borough Council's improvement objectives and self-assessment

The 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 published its improvement objectives for 2013-14 in its *Council Plan 2013-17*, available from the Council's website at www.wrexham.gov.uk. The improvement objectives have not changed since 2012-13 and are based around four strategic themes:

Strategic Theme: Economy

- People want to live, work, learn, visit and invest here
- Businesses can locate and grow here
- People can prosper as individuals in their communities

Strategic Theme: People

- All children and young people have positive aspirations, learn and achieve their potential
- Children and young people are safeguarded
- People feel, and are, safe and secure
- All people are enabled to make healthy choices
- All vulnerable older people are safe, and have optimal health, independence and well-being
- Welsh language and culture is promoted and supported

Strategic theme: Place

- Homes that meet people's needs and aspirations
- An environmentally responsible place
- Communities with sustainable, attractive settlements, neighbourhoods, buildings and spaces
- Well-connected communities

Strategic Theme: Organisation

- Engaged and satisfied customers
- Creating the Conditions for Success

The Council's self-assessment of performance

The Council's self-assessment of its performance during 2012-13 is set out in *Focused on our Performance 2012-13*, available from the Council's website at www.wrexham.gov.uk.

Appendix 5

Previous recommendations or proposals for improvement made to the Council

Over the course of our work since 2010, we have made recommendations or proposals for improvement. The Council has satisfactorily addressed or made progress against, most of these. The status of earlier recommendations or proposals for improvement, not previously identified as complete, is set out below. We will continue to monitor and report on the progress made by the Council in implementing the remaining improvement proposals or recommendations under our future programme of work.

Preliminary corporate assessment 2010		Current Status
P3	Develop corporate workforce planning.	Good progress has been made, but further work is required to ensure that workforce planning arrangements are fully embedded. The improvement proposal remains open. We will review progress against this proposal during 2014.
P5	Continue to improve business processes by streamlining arrangements to ensure they support effective management, monitoring and scrutiny.	The Council has taken appropriate action to address these concerns. The improvement proposal is closed; the Council should continue exploring opportunities to strengthen its business processes.
Annual Improvement Report 2011		Current Status
P1	Ensure that the focus of the Council's priorities is not so narrow that it has limited impact on the wider issues it is seeking to address.	The Council has widened the focus of its priorities so that they address the most significant areas of concern expressed by its citizens. The improvement proposal is closed.
P2	Develop a consistent approach to target setting in areas where improvement is required so it is recognised that targets are intended to drive improvement and may not be achieved.	The Council has introduced a more consistent and transparent approach to target setting. The improvement proposal is closed.
P3	Demonstrate how consultation and feedback from users and residents are used to improve services.	The Council has satisfactorily demonstrated how it uses consultation and feedback from users and residents to improve services. The improvement proposal is closed.

Corporate assessment update letter 2011		Current Status
R1	The Council should outline arrangements to review scrutiny and decision-making and to streamline business processes that increase the pace of change in addressing these issues.	The Council has taken appropriate action to address these concerns. The recommendation is closed. Nevertheless, the Council should continue exploring opportunities to strengthen its business processes.
P1	Complete the development of outcome measures for its improvement priorities, and use performance reporting to highlight progress on achieving outcomes.	The Council has taken appropriate action to address these concerns. The improvement proposal is closed. Nevertheless, the Council should continue to refine the way it demonstrates the impact of its work.
P2	Improve the effectiveness of public engagement, and develop a more coherent approach across the Council.	The Council has taken appropriate action to address these concerns. The improvement proposal is closed. Nevertheless, the Council should continue to refine its engagement arrangements.
Annual Improvement Report 2012		Current Status
P3	<p>Establish and embed in Council arrangements robust methods to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assess whether the public finds it easy to access council services, and take action to improve accessibility to services where needed; • engage with the public, and use this information to; • develop future plans and council services; and • provide prompt feedback to the public, and where appropriate specific groups of customers, on the results of public consultations and the actions taken as a result by the Council. 	The Council has taken action to provide prompt feedback, to improve service accessibility and to use the outcome from consultation to strengthen arrangements and service delivery. The improvement proposal is closed. Nevertheless, the Council should continue exploring opportunities to enhance its stakeholder engagement and feedback arrangements.
P4	Review its strategy to meet local housing need through affordable housing, improving the quality of its housing stock and providing support to those who present as homeless.	Although some progress has been made, this remains an area for improvement; the improvement proposal remains open.
P5	Address weakness in target setting, data quality and performance management, and enable the Council to undertake and publish robust assessments of its performance.	The Council has taken appropriate action to address these concerns. The improvement proposal is closed. Nevertheless, the Council should continue exploring opportunities to enhance the robustness of its performance assessment arrangements.

Letter 2 2013:	Current Status
<p>R1 Implement proposals to improve the quality control of data collection, analysis and reporting, and ensure that an adequate control assurance framework supports this.</p>	<p>The Council has taken appropriate action to address these concerns. The recommendation is closed. Nevertheless, the Council should ensure that its control assurance framework remains fit for purpose.</p>

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