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Follow-up of the Corporate Assessment

Newport City Council

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Summary

- 1 On 19 September 2013, the Auditor General published his Corporate Assessment Report¹ for Newport City Council (the Council). This report concluded that, at that time, the Council was at a pivotal point as it began to address longstanding weaknesses in arrangements that underpin improvement and, with wider ownership and strengthened capacity it had the potential to achieve the scale and pace of change required.
- 2 We came to this conclusion in 2013 because:
 - the Council had a clear vision and the Chief Executive was beginning to create the culture, conditions and strategic direction to deliver it;
 - the Council had been slow to address weaknesses in the governance arrangements that underpinned its decision making to support improvement but was putting arrangements in place to strengthen scrutiny and its change programme;
 - whilst there were improvements in some areas, the Council recognised that it has not managed its resources well enough to support the delivery of its planned improvements;
 - the Council's work with partners was improving but was unable to demonstrate the impact of its collaborative work;
 - the Council recognised that it had not managed performance and risk well enough, and was putting some better arrangements in place to drive improvement; and
 - the Council's education service was mostly performing at or above expected levels, but the Council was not achieving everything it set out to do in some other key services.
- 3 The Corporate Assessment report made six recommendations and seven proposals for improvement, which are listed in [Appendix 1](#).

¹ Corporate Assessment Report on Newport City Council
www.audit.wales/publication/newport-city-council-corporate-assessment-2013

4 During November and December 2014, we reviewed the progress that the Council had made in implementing the recommendations and proposals for improvement. We found that **the Council has made improvements in some aspects of its arrangements, however in other areas the scale and pace of change required has not been achieved, and longstanding governance weaknesses remain.**

5 We came to this conclusion because:

- longstanding governance weaknesses still remain, and there is a lack of collective leadership between Members and officers to drive improvement;
- financial management arrangements have improved, but medium term financial plans need to be developed in more detail so they are balanced over a longer timeframe and some capacity issues in the finance department need to be addressed if improvements are to continue;
- recent progress in resolving weaknesses in people management arrangements is evident and plans are in place to begin addressing workforce planning issues, however initiatives to reduce staff sickness require further evaluation;
- the Council has made progress in addressing our recommendations on ICT, but there are still weaknesses in some governance arrangements and uncertainty on its plans for continuity should an unforeseen event occur; and
- there have been some enhancements to the Council's improvement planning and performance management arrangements, but the scrutiny of performance is not sufficiently challenging to consistently drive improvement.

Recommendations

- 6 Two of the statutory recommendations that were made in the original Corporate Assessment report of September 2013 are still applicable, whilst four others have been updated to reflect the Council's progress since then. In addition, we have added two new statutory recommendations. The Council must respond to all new and outstanding statutory recommendations by preparing a statement of action and proposed timetable within 30 days of receipt of this report.

Recommendations

R1 Updated from 2013 Corporate Assessment (2013, R1)

The Council should ensure that members are routinely and transparently considering robust information at the earliest opportunity to enable them to inform, take and challenge choices and decisions effectively, and ensure that decisions are recorded and reported transparently. This includes the consideration of:

- Options appraisals.
- The implications of the options, recommendations and decisions.
- Fully costed business cases prior to initiating major programmes to support change. The financial impact of any significant proposed service changes should be reflected in medium-term financial plans directly where the change is certain to proceed or as a sensitivity if the change is not certain.

R2 No change from 2013 Corporate Assessment (2013, R2)

The Council should address with more urgency the weaknesses in its governance arrangements that underpin its decision making to support improvement. This would include:

- strengthening committee work programming arrangements to ensure they are timely, meaningful, informative, transparent, balanced, monitored, and joined up;
- reviewing and updating the Council's constitution ensuring that roles, responsibilities and accountabilities are clear, and that all members understand and apply their respective roles in relation to each other without compromising independence;
- empowering members to be more proactive and accountable for their roles and responsibilities;
- strengthening decision-making arrangements to ensure transparency and appropriate safeguards are in place;
- strengthening scrutiny arrangements to more effectively inform and challenge policies, options, decisions and actions, and hold Cabinet members, officers, partners and others to account more robustly to drive an increased pace of progress and improvement;
- strengthening and mandating member and officer development and learning programmes based on competency assessments to improve skills and understanding to enable them to undertake their roles more effectively; and
- addressing information security and business continuity arrangements.

Recommendations

R3 Updated since 2013 Corporate Assessment (2013, R3)

The Council needs to ensure that its arrangements for strategic financial planning and management continue to develop to meet the significant challenges that are being faced by ensuring that:

- robust savings plans are developed in more detail to meet the projected budget shortfall for 2015-16 and to support the delivery of a meaningful medium term financial plan;
- sufficient challenge is applied to ensure that savings/investment plans are delivered and any budget overspends are highlighted and addressed by early intervention;
- financial plans provide clear links to improvement objectives and service plans; and
- sufficient finance staff (both centrally and within individual departments) with appropriate skills and experience are in post to support the development and delivery of future plans.

R4 Updated since 2013 Corporate Assessment (2013, R4)

The Council must continue to develop its people management arrangements, to ensure it has the capacity and capabilities necessary to change and improve. In doing so, it should:

- continue to develop its draft Workforce Plan and associated action plans by, for each action: allocate responsibility to an officer and set a deadline for completion;
- in the absence of a formal approach to 360 degree feedback for all staff, address manager inconsistency in carrying out appraisal and ensure all staff receive a constructive and developmental appraisal to support job performance; and
- put in place a key performance indicator and a challenging target for sickness absence that adheres to the target setting principles agreed by the Council's Senior Leadership Team on 17 March 2015.

R5 Updated since 2013 Corporate Assessment (2013, R6)

To strengthen the arrangements that enable the Council to, scrutinise, its improvement objectives. In doing so, the Council should:

- Enable members to effectively challenge and scrutinise service performance:
 - clarify the respective roles of the performance board and scrutiny;
 - ensure that meeting agendas allow for sufficient time for members to focus on (broad) underperformance in both; and
 - provide training on effective challenge and scrutiny for members.
- Improve target setting to better reflect the service/performance standards the Council wants to achieve.

Recommendations

R6 New recommendation

We recommend that the Council improves the collective leadership by both Members and officers of the delivery of its response to the Auditor General's 2013 Corporate Assessment by agreeing clear accountability and monitoring arrangements for the implementation of recommendations and proposals for improvement.

R7 New recommendation

The Council must ensure that all National Strategic Indicator data is collected and published in accordance with the Welsh Government definitions; particularly NSI. EDU/015a - Final Special Educational Needs statements issued in 26 weeks.

Proposals for improvement

- 7 Two of the proposals for improvement that we made in the original Corporate Assessment report of September 2013 have been updated to reflect the Council's progress since then. In addition, six new proposals for improvement have been made. Where we make proposals for improvement, we would expect the Council to do something about them and we will follow up what happens.

Proposals for improvement

P1 New proposal for improvement

Test the information technology business continuity plan to ensure it operates as anticipated. In particular the Council should test a scenario where both server rooms at the Civic Centre are not available to determine how long it will take to set up an offsite server room and what effect this has on its timetable for restoring its critical systems.

P2 New proposal for improvement

The Council must reallocate the role of the chair for the Information Governance Group to remove the current conflict of interest that the Head of the ICT Division has by chairing the group.

P3 New proposal for improvement

Strengthen the Local Service Board's Communications Plan and One Newport Engagement and Participation Strategy by introducing a delivery plan that includes:

- an explicit statement on intended outcomes and impact;
- a timeframe for delivery with an assessment of progress; and
- robust performance measures.

P4 New proposal for improvement

The Council must ensure that it has robust data collection arrangements for its own self-defined performance indicators that include ensuring that:

- the Council's corporate arrangements for performance management are being rigorously implemented by service departments;
- the Council's own internal information systems (VIEWS) reconcile with the final validated data; and
- a complete audit trail of the Council's own internal processes for validating performance indicator data is retained.

Proposals for improvement

P5 Updated since 2013 Corporate Assessment (2013, P1)

The Council should:

- develop and implement an appropriate engagement and communication strategy that both communicates the new mission and organisational framework, and also supports cultural changes within the organisation; and
- ensure that it has in place the people and resources capable of implementing the organisational framework and delivering subsequent service changes.

P6 Updated since 2013 Corporate Assessment (2013, P6)

Strengthen the LSB's performance management framework to clarify:

- how all the information from all the different partners is collated and managed and who is responsible for this;
- when the Single Integrated Plan will be reviewed and considered for approval; and
- the mechanisms for dealing with underperformance.

Detailed report

Longstanding governance weaknesses still remain, and there is a lack of collective leadership between Members and officers to drive improvement

There are still no transparent safeguards in place for occasions where collective leadership is lacking and political leadership and professional officer advice conflicts

- 8 Elected members are still not consistently considering the full range of options and information to enable them to evaluate choices and take and challenge decisions effectively and decisions are not always recorded and reported transparently.
- 9 The Council has processes in place for planning projects, producing reports that offer a range of options to inform decision making, and the recording and publishing of subsequent decisions. However, these processes are not always followed.
- 10 Some key Council decisions have been considered by senior managers and within informal Cabinet meetings. However, the full range of options and evaluations has not subsequently been referred through formal decision making processes. Such informal decisions are also decisions. A decision not to put forward an option for consideration when the final decision is taken still constitutes a decision. Officers and Cabinet Members are still not recording or reporting these occurrences consistently and transparently.
- 11 Furthermore, final ratification of some key decisions has also been made outside of a formal decision making forum. This practice has resulted in actions being implemented without formal evaluation and agreement and final decisions not appearing on the public record. This has led to confusion, uncertainty and latterly mistrust amongst and between some elected members and officers. Whilst the Council has arrangements in place to take delegated decisions, not following these arrangements has weakened governance and undermined a culture of collective Member and officer leadership and open and transparent government.
- 12 We followed up the progress that the Council had made in reshaping its Senior Leadership Team during 2013 and its plans at the time to review the Heads of Service structure to support its Leadership Team in the delivery of the Council's Prospectus for Change and its Medium Term Financial Plan. There was a proposal in the Medium Term Financial Plan to secure financial savings on the cost of the senior management structure by 'delaying' senior management (Heads of Service). It was also a Council priority to start to build leadership capacity and improve accountability arrangements to help drive forward improvement.

- 13 In October 2103 the Chief Executive started to develop a range of structures for consideration by the Cabinet. The Council also sought advice from external human resources consultants, the Hay Group, on a proposed structure. The Hay Group considered a reduction in the number of Heads of Service from 10 posts to 8. They also benchmarked the existing pay rates as the Council believed it was a relatively low payer and needed to improve its rates of pay at this level. The Council's pay levels were benchmarked against three other sectors (Industrial and Service, Public/Not for Profit and Local Government) but there was no comparison with other similar Welsh local authorities. The Hay Group reported their findings to the Chief Executive in March 2014. The findings supported the Council's proposal to move from 10 heads of service to 8, and also to remove the lowest of the three pay bands, so that the starting point for the grade for all Heads of Service would be uplifted to the next band (incurring additional costs that would be offset by the savings from the reduction of the two posts).
- 14 The Chief Executive formalised a set of proposals and produced a confidential advice note for consideration by Cabinet at an informal briefing meeting in April 2014. The confidential advice note was based on two potential models, one with eight heads of service and a new option with nine heads of service. However, the advice note indicated that the model with nine heads of service was unsustainable in the longer term, as it did not deliver the level of savings anticipated by the Medium Term Financial Plan.
- 15 The Chief Executive prepared and submitted a formal report to a public meeting of the Cabinet in July 2014 which provided a summary of the Council's reasons for restructuring and included an extract from the Hay Group report on pay benchmarking. The report proposed a new structure option of nine heads of service, which had been developed following discussions between the Chief Executive, the Leader and Cabinet members. Significantly, the other potential options were not outlined in this report, such as the eight Head of Service model (that was considered by the Hay Group in their earlier work) or the alternative nine Head of Service model as set out in the April 2014 advice note.
- 16 The Chief Executive prepared a further informal advice note for the Leader in September 2014, to summarise the outcomes of various consultation processes that had taken place. The advice note outlined the various comments received as part of the consultation process and recommended a number of amendments but suggested that there was nothing that would cause a difficulty with moving forward to implement the structure agreed by Cabinet in July, based on the nine Head of Service model. The advice note stated that 'the decisions outlined in this paper would not require a further Cabinet decision'. However, there is no record of this decision and a no final report has been provided to the Cabinet on the final agreed position showing where the final amended responsibilities for delivery of the various Council services would sit, whether there were any changes to the Senior Leadership Team responsibilities, or the anticipated costs/savings implications.

- 17 The Council completed the implementation of the new structure by formalising appointments on 1 December 2014, although some elected members and officers were unaware that the consultation process had come to an end or what the final structure was.
- 18 This was an important decision on a revised structure that was to deliver financial savings, strengthen strategic capacity, and ensure the Council could deliver its corporate priorities. The reports we have seen include figures for cost savings. But the reports do not include a detailed breakdown of how the figures are arrived at, the impact of uplifting the pay rates or any other associated costs (such as the Hay Group review). In our view, there was a lack of transparency throughout this process around who was charged with taking the key decisions. Also, the documentation we have seen is unclear about what was finally agreed as there is no record of the final decision or structure, and not all possible options were considered at key stages. This was also supported by a range of comments we received from both Members and officers, who were very unclear on the process that was being followed and at what stage the Council's restructuring had reached at the time of our fieldwork.
- 19 We also followed up the progress the Council had made in reviewing its agreement with Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council to jointly share a Chief Education Officer for an initial two year period with a review to be undertaken in the first six months. We noted in the Corporate Assessment report in 2013 that there were weaknesses in the Council's processes for agreeing the joint appointment of the Chief Education Officer with Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, which stemmed from the Council not considering the full range of options available and the implications of these options in a balanced and timely way.
- 20 The Council's intention to help and support another Council to improve its service was a credit to Newport Council and was consistent with the regional working approach of the then newly formed South East Wales Consortium, Education Achievement Services. However, whilst a service level agreement (SLA) was drawn up and agreed for the arrangement, it was not signed, and the arrangement continued informally without due diligence or appropriate governance arrangements in place. Despite a lack of evidence of a formal evaluation (as per the SLA), Newport Council initially informed Blaenau Gwent Council in November 2013 that they would withdraw from the shared Chief Education Officer arrangement, although the date was subsequently revised to January 2014. We have been told that this was due to excessive and unsustainable work pressures for key staff, perceived decline in school performance in Newport and funding challenges. We were told that there has been no lasting damage to the performance of Newport Council or to the relationships with Blaenau Gwent Council.

- 21 There are still no transparent safeguards in place for occasions where professional advice and political direction conflicts. Some officer and elected member decisions not to take forward a decision or option are still not being recorded appropriately or reported transparently. To safeguard the interests of its elected members and the professional advice of officers, it is vital that the Council keeps full and transparent record of its decisions, having explicit references to its Constitution.
- 22 There is also limited evidence that different options are considered when deciding on the Council's future involvement in some key collaborative arrangements. The lack of detailed option appraisal to support decision making is perceived as a weakness.

Whilst the Council has made some amendments to its Constitution, it is yet to undertake a full-scale review and evaluation and a lack of clarity and understanding of roles and responsibilities remains

- 23 Whilst the Council has amended its Constitution following a review, there still remains a lack of clarity on and understanding of roles and responsibilities. This lack of clarity particularly relates to: whether it should be the Cabinet member or officer held to account for relevant matters at scrutiny; the role and responsibilities of scrutiny; the status of Scrutiny Policy Review Boards and the new member driven scrutiny sub-groups; and the respective roles and status of Performance Board and scrutiny in managing and challenging the Council's performance. The Council has not supplemented the changes with sufficient training to raise awareness for both officers and elected members.
- 24 New protocols on relationships between the Cabinet and scrutiny have been agreed and are starting to be embedded. Also a cross-party Scrutiny Improvement Group has been established to take forward the Council's Scrutiny improvement action plan. However a fundamental overhaul of the Council's scrutiny arrangements and practice following its review of Scrutiny has not been undertaken. As such, the Council's scrutiny arrangements are still not effective. There is a lack of collective leadership and drive between Members and officers to take a firm grip on improving scrutiny. The ineffective scrutiny arrangements are frustrating both elected members and officers alike and is leading to a deterioration in trust between scrutiny elected members and Council officers. Elected members have felt the need to establish new informal scrutiny sub-groups to drill down into various issues they feel they need more information on, but it is not clear how these link to the wider governance framework of the Council.
- 25 Scrutiny Committee work programmes are still too large and lack prioritisation. Furthermore, the information provided to Scrutiny is still not sufficiently comprehensive or meaningful enough to support effective scrutiny.

- 26 The Scrutiny Improvement Team and many elected members are keen to drive forward improvements but are still not being empowered to play a more proactive role.

CSSIW has reported that the Council's organisational arrangements contribute to significant challenges in delivering its statutory responsibilities for older people with complex needs

- 27 A recent CSSIW Inspection of Adult Social Services, based on some joint fieldwork with the Wales Audit Office in November 2014, concluded that:

'Newport City Council faces significant challenges in delivering on its statutory responsibilities for older people with complex needs. The inspection found that, while individual staff and managers demonstrated a high level of professional commitment and did their best for the people they were helping, often the organisational arrangements including the current structure and operating model did not support effective and efficient practice. There has been a culture of responding to a crisis rather than working in a proactive person centred way supported by identifying outcomes and pre-empting further problems. This way of working had contributed to the problems within the Council's own residential homes as people were placed there inappropriately when other arrangements had broken down and there was an urgent need for a solution. However this was further exacerbated by the failure to complete timely reviews which allowed people to remain in situations which were not fulfilling their outcomes and in some cases putting them and others at considerable risk.

There are some promising signs of improvement such as the hub operated by the hospital discharge team, the Protection Of Vulnerable Adults team and it is encouraging that Senior Managers are aware of some of the concerns outlined here and are taking steps to address them. However the scale of the changes required in adult services; from commissioning to reviewing structures and putting in place the systems and processes needed to support these in the context of significant budget challenges and its enhanced responsibilities under the Social Services and Well Being Act (Wales); will require the full commitment of Members and the Executive to the development and delivery of a shared vision for Adult Social Services.'

Financial management arrangements have improved, but medium term financial plans need to be developed in more detail so that they are balanced over a longer timeframe and some capacity issues in the finance department need to be addressed if improvements are to continue

- 28 The Council's strategic planning has been strengthened by improving the arrangements for developing the medium term financial plan. There is now a fuller consideration of local demographics, future projections of financial pressures and demand for services, as well as the Council's priorities and risks. However, a fully costed and balanced financial plan only covers the first year (2015-16), with the remaining years (2016-17 to 2018-19) projecting various levels of deficit, ranging from £7.3 to £10.7 million, assuming various levels of Welsh Government grant reduction.
- 29 Strategic financial planning needs to be enhanced by developing a medium term financial plan that balances the financial position over a longer timeframe. This planning will involve taking earlier decisions on the development of proposals for financial savings and the reconfiguration of services to support any cost savings that have been identified. The plan will also need to incorporate any increases in costs where investment in services may be required. Assumptions will also need to be made about likely future cost pressures, demand for services, the level of grant support from the Welsh Government and the level of council tax.
- 30 The Council's arrangements for monitoring and reporting of the financial savings that have been achieved have improved. In addition, there have been improvements in the way in which 'invest to save' funds are used to support investment to enable efficiencies to be made in the delivery of services. There has also been a strengthening of the status of financial management through fuller reporting to both Cabinet and the senior leadership team.
- 31 The Council has recently made the Acting Head of Finance a permanent appointment after previously being unsuccessful in appointing to the position. However, the Assistant Head of Finance post is currently vacant, as is the Chief Accountant position. In addition there have been recent resignations and changes to a number of key staff in the Finance Department. We are aware of plans to restructure the Finance Department and also to recruit to key posts. Nevertheless, the Council will need to carefully manage this situation to maintain the improvements that it has made and to ensure that it retains its focus on the significant financial challenges it faces. It also needs to ensure that robust plans are developed and delivered during the financial year 2015-16 and beyond, against the background of reduced funding and the continuing financial pressures.

- 32 We have considered in detail the financial track record of the Council, the out-turn financial position for 2013-14 and the plans that were developed to deliver a balanced budget for 2014-15. We have also recently considered the plans developed for the 2015-16 budget and the updating of the medium term financial plan for subsequent years.
- 33 The main findings of our work to date are set out below:
- In recent years the Council has a history of balancing its annual financial position without recourse to drawing on its general reserve fund, which has stood at £5 million for some time. This is felt by the Council, in line with their Reserves Policy, to be a minimum level to provide security for future unforeseen events that may occur during any year.
 - The Council accurately identified its budget shortfall when planning for 2013 14, developed appropriate savings plans and its final out-turn for the year was a an underspend of £2.5 million. This underspend, together with an unused contingency fund of some £1.5 million, meant that the Council was able to bolster its reserves for future investment and to support the delivery of future savings programmes.
 - The Council effectively identified and delivered a range of savings (specific and general) to meet its budget shortfall. There were some areas where savings plans were still being developed at the start of the year, but these were then developed during the course of the year and were delivered sufficiently to meet the financial out-turn.
 - The corporate framework to support the delivery of financial plans was developed during the year and financial monitoring information is now more transparent. In prior years some of the savings and monitoring information had been difficult to track during the course of the year. The Council was supported by a commercial partner in the development of some of its savings plans and the monitoring and achievement of the resultant savings.
 - The Council has a corporate planning framework to support its corporate improvement plan which translates into improvement objectives and individual service plans. There is scope to improve the links between the financial plans and the improvement and service plans so that investment or disinvestment in service priorities is more explicit.

- The Council developed a medium term financial plan, covering a four-year period from 2014-15 to 2017-18. This plan was an improvement on previous plans as it contained more detail and the following years were developed as far as possible and linked to expected changes in demand and demographics. The uncertainty over the level of annual revenue support grant made forward planning more difficult. However, all other aspects of the plan were developed and the plan was balanced as far as possible on the basis of estimated revenue support grant levels. A new medium term financial plan has now been developed for the four year period from 2015-16 which projects a balanced financial position just for 2015-16 but not the later years.
- The Council has developed clear policies on the use of its reserves, although most are earmarked for specific purposes so there is limited scope to use them in any one year.
- The Council's framework for reviewing and challenging its financial performance has improved in recent years, accountability has been enhanced and greater control is now exercised over department overspends.

Recent progress in resolving weaknesses in people management arrangements is evident and plans are in place to begin addressing workforce planning issues, however initiatives to reduce staff sickness require further evaluation

- 34 We reviewed the Council's progress in improving its people management arrangements in two phases to mirror the development phases of the Council's own plans for improvement. Our phase 1 review assessed the progress the Council had made in addressing our statutory recommendation. In phase 2 we will be reviewing the Council's approach to developing effective arrangements to manage and utilise its workforce at the appropriate time in line with the Council's progress.
- 35 Our Phase 1 review, which was reported to Community Planning and Development Scrutiny on 19 November 2014, concluded that 'good progress was being made in addressing our recommendation but some arrangements are not yet fully implemented'. For example: completing 360° performance appraisal at Head of Service level; developing a People Plan for 2013-2017; addressing deficiencies in the Organisation Development function by redirecting additional expertise and resource via a senior HR expert; and improving the way in which training and development is delivered across the Council. Progress was also noted in delivering specific training and development to managers to assist them to better manage the performance of their staff.
- 36 We found that the Council has made some progress since the Corporate Assessment in 2013 and some further work we carried out early in 2014. For example, the Council continues to make progress towards achieving the Investors in People accreditation; and the Council has addressed our concerns around the Barnardos secondment.
- 37 The Council had undertaken an explorative exercise in considering possible future delivery 'options' for transactional HR services. This exploration evolved quickly from consideration of high level principles in respect of the options, into an early selection of a provider of HR transactional services. However, initial proposals stalled when the preferred supplier withdrew from the option appraisal process. We summarise the events of this exercise as follows:
- On 25 February 2014 decision was taken by the Council to 'establish a Council Wide Strategic Partner – proposal 108 of the Medium Term Financial Plan.
 - On 31 March 2014, options were presented to Community Planning and Development Scrutiny Committee, those options were: to remain in house; a shared service with one or more other local authorities; outsourcing to a public sector provider; or outsourcing to private sector provider.
 - Subject to that Committee agreeing to further involvement in the project, it was suggested that a Policy Review Group be set up to monitor the project as it progressed and for that Policy Review Group to consider further detail on the various options. 'This would be a short scrutiny exercise aiming to complete by May 2014'.

- On 12 May 2014 a Report to Cabinet made by the Community Planning and Development Scrutiny Committee, regarding the development of options for the delivery of Council Wide Corporate/Transactional Services was presented. The proposal put forward at that meeting was to review the comments made by the Community Planning and Development Scrutiny Committee and 'accept the preferred option as identified by Scrutiny Committee and invite the Committee to set up a small Policy Review Group to undertake a more detailed review of the proposed public sector partner model, as compared with the internal model and to make recommendations to cabinet in due course regarding the final business case'.
 - As the identified potential public sector provider withdrew from the option appraisal process the Council has since paused this option appraisal process to reconsider the way forward regarding the four options.
- 38 The Council has introduced an online 360° performance appraisal scheme for its senior officers but costs have prohibited its introduction for all relevant staff. However, the appraisal guidance still expects that senior officers gather a wide range of evidence and opinion for the appraisal process. It is not clear how senior officers will effectively fulfil this expectation of the performance appraisal scheme.
- 39 The Council remains committed to developing an integrated workforce and succession plan to support and develop its current and future workforce to meet the organisational need. It is anticipated that this work will include development of a workforce planning template, comparative data with other organisations and succession planning strategies. It is unclear how delays in completing the senior manager restructure have impacted on this work. The impact of the delayed restructure has varied across the Council. Some staff told us the impact was minimal whilst others said that the uncertainty as an issue. We will review the Council's approach to develop effective arrangements to manage and utilise its workforce again during 2015 as the restructure is implemented.
- 40 Since the completion of our fieldwork in December 2014, the Council has completed a draft Workforce Plan for 2015-16 with an accompanying action plan that contains six clear objectives with related sub actions. The action plan has the potential to provide a more co-ordinated and future-oriented approach to workforce planning, recruitment and retention. It also has the potential to achieve targeted outcomes for improving the diversity of the Council's workforce, so that it is more representative of the population it serves. The action plan, however, lacks an owner for each action and a specified timescale for the completion of each action.

- 41 The Council has also produced a pre-assessment of its people management arrangements under the Investors in People (IIP) Standard Framework. Its report, dated January 2015, concluded that six out of the 10 core standard indicators were not met and recommended a further assessment in March 2016. Notable areas that require improvement are:
- measuring the impact of staff training and learning;
 - ensuring all employees of the Council receive a developmental and motivating “Your Review”, that links to the Council’s own values; and
 - developing the strategic thinking ability and competence of Heads of Service and front line managers.
- 42 Producing this pre-assessment for its IIP work is a positive development and, coupled with the draft workforce plan, has the potential to develop the Council’s arrangements for planning and managing the talent it thinks that it will require in the future.
- 43 The Council did introduce a range of initiatives that led to a reduction in overall sickness levels from 9.26 days lost per full time equivalent in 2012-13, to 8.87 days lost in 2013-14. However, after further improvements in the early part of 2014, by November the cumulative sickness levels for the whole Council was 10 per cent higher than the same month in the previous year. The Council attributed this deterioration in sickness levels on an increase in long term sickness. Initiatives to reduce sickness absence require further evaluation to ensure that they will address the recent increase in sickness and reinstate the desired long term reduction in sickness levels.
- 44 The Council has introduced a ‘Total Reward’ scheme for its employees. This job evaluation scheme, addresses equal pay issues and simplifies the 100+ pay grades that the Council previously operated. The scheme also has the potential to also address the Council’s longstanding recruitment and retention problems. The scheme is currently being implemented on a staged basis, but has taken longer than the Council had first planned.

The Council has made progress in addressing our recommendations on ICT, but there are still weaknesses in some governance arrangements and uncertainty on its plans for continuity should an unforeseen event occur

- 45 The Council has made some progress against the Corporate Assessment recommendations that referred to the Council's information, communications and technology (ICT). For example, the Council has a good record of responding to information security breaches and of reporting these, where appropriate, to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). The Council staff we spoke to felt confident and empowered to report breaches, but they are not always clear on:
- the official method of reporting information security breaches;
 - to whom in the Customer and Information Service they should report breaches; or
 - who is the Senior Information Risk Owner (SIRO).
- 46 Currently, one officer of the Council holds three roles of:
- Head of Customer and Information Service – to provide strategic direction for delivery of ICT;
 - Senior Information Risk Owner for the Council – to take overall ownership of the Council's Information Risk Policy; and
 - Chair of the Information Governance Group – that includes the requirement to scrutinise actions on the annual risk report and responses to information security incidents.
- 47 The combination of one person holding these three roles creates a conflict of interest in that one person oversees both service delivery and scrutiny of that service delivery. The Council has acknowledged the conflict of interest inherent in this situation and has given an undertaking to make alternative arrangements.
- 48 The Council has information security training arrangements in place and staff who have attended this training have found it informative and useful.
- 49 The Council has still not tested business continuity plans and does not know if it would be able to maintain critical services in the event of a catastrophic failure of its critical IT systems. The Council should test its information technology business continuity plan to ensure it operates as anticipated. In particular it should test a scenario where both server rooms at the Civic Centre are not available to determine how long it will take to set up an offsite server room and what effect this has on its timetable for restoring its critical systems.

There have been some enhancements to the Council's improvement planning and performance management arrangements, but the scrutiny of performance is not sufficiently challenging to consistently drive improvement

The Council discharged its duties under the Local Government Measure 2009 in relation to its Improvement Plan 2014-15

- 50 In April 2014 the Council published its Improvement Plan and Improvement Plan summary in both English and Welsh, which was an improvement upon the previous year. The Auditor General for Wales certified on 28 May 2014 that the Council had discharged its duties under section 15(6) to (9) of the Measure and had acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance sufficiently to discharge its duties.
- 51 However, the Council should ensure that sufficient time and care is given to proof reading future documents to avoid the unnecessary errors and omissions that were apparent in the final published Improvement Plans.
- 52 The Improvement Plan provides a description of each Improvement Objective for the Council in 2014-15 and an explanation of why each Objective is important to the Council. The Plan also provides a clear account of the consultation process and the rationale for the selection of objectives.
- 53 Both the Improvement Plan and its Summary were published on the Council's website. However, at the time we viewed the Council's website there was no direct link from the home page. Without sufficiently high prominence on the Council's website, it is unlikely that the number of Newport residents accessing the Improvement Plan can be maximised.
- 54 The Council produces a publication called 'Newport Matters' which is circulated to the homes and businesses of Newport to raise awareness of its priorities and services. A summary of the Council's Improvement Objectives was included within the May 2014 edition of Newport Matters, which is an encouraging investment by the Council to increase citizen engagement with the Council's business.

Performance management arrangements have improved but are not consistently applied across services and weaknesses remain in some data quality systems and the scrutiny of performance

- 55 The Council has made improvements to its performance management arrangements. However, the strengthened processes and controls designed to ensure data quality are not always being followed by service departments. The Council needs to ensure that its corporate arrangements for performance management are rigorously implemented by service departments.

- 56 We examined six of the Council's performance measures and the data systems that support them. We looked at four National Strategic Indicators (NSIs), and two are performance measures that the Council has developed itself. We chose these six measures for a range of reasons, but primarily as they form part of the evidence to support the delivery of the Council's Improvement Plan for 2014-15.
- 57 In undertaking a detailed review of the selected performance measures, we found that the following two measures had data systems that were fit for purpose and effectively run:
- EDU/017 – the Percentage of Pupils aged 15 at the preceding 31 August in Schools maintained by the local authority, who achieved the level 2 threshold including a GSE grade A*-C in English or Welsh first language, and Mathematics.); and
 - SCC/033(f) – the Percentage of young people formerly looked after with whom the authority is in contact, who are known to be engaged in education, training or employment at the age of 19.
- 58 We found significant weaknesses in the data systems used to generate the following two NSIs:
- SCA/001 – the rate of delayed transfers of Care for Social Care reasons per 1,000 population aged 75 or over. There are ineffective arrangements between the Council's Social Services and the Local Health Board to determine what constitutes a 'Social Care' reason for a delayed transfer. There have been procedural improvements since October 2013, and Social Services are now notified by Health Board of the delayed transfer of care cases, for Social Services to validate. However, the fact that the Health Board can still alter the submission after the validation process has been completed is a theoretical systemic weakness that can only be addressed by the Welsh Government as the owner of the delayed transfer of care information system.
 - EDU/015a – Final Special Educational Needs statements issued in 26 weeks. As in previous years, the Council insists upon using the incorrect definition to calculate the indicator. The Council uses the SEN Panel Date as the point at which to 'start the clock' as opposed to the date at which the child has come to the attention of the Council because it believes the 'comes to the attention' test is too vague. As in previous years, the Council is fully aware that they have persistently failed to comply the Welsh Government's definition for this NSI. We had previously highlighted to the Council that it knowingly failed to comply with the Welsh Government's definition for this NSI. We have now made a Statutory Recommendation that the Council must ensure that all National Strategic Indicator data is collected and published in accordance with the Welsh Government definitions.

- 59 We found minor weaknesses in two other data systems. The Council must ensure that it has robust data collection arrangements for its own self-defined performance indicators and ensure that a complete audit trail of its internal processes for validating performance indicator data is retained.
- 60 The Council's control and review environment is built on a combination of mid-year control review, and year end data validation. Service areas complete a self assessment by 31 December using the data and control operation for the first six months of the financial year. At the financial year end, the internal audit function then review a number of performance indicators to validate the accuracy of the data itself. The use of these two tools gives assurance over the accuracy of the data that is reported in respect of the Council's performance indicators. However, some local indicators are defined to include data that, whilst relevant to the financial year, can change in the period beyond 31 March. We found that the data held in the council's service systems is not synchronised with the Council's performance management system– known as VIEWS. Consequently, the performance indicator value substantiated by the self-assessment is not what is held within VIEWS. We have made a Proposal for Improvement to the Council that their own internal information systems (VIEWS) reconcile with the final validated data.
- 61 We reviewed the improved performance reports that are considered by Council, Cabinet, Performance Board and Scrutiny Committees. The reports contain the high level objectives of the Council and detail the supporting measures and target data. The Council uses a Red, Orange, Amber and Green (ROAG) rating to assess the overall performance of each improvement objective. The performance reports also use a RAG (Red, Amber and Green) rating to help assess the Council's actual performance of each of its individual performance measures in comparison with the target is previously set itself. For example, if actual performance is better than the stated target, then the indicator is coloured green. Whereas, if actual performance is below the target, then the indicator is coloured red.
- 62 We found that users of the performance reports heavily rely upon this colour coding when reading the reports. This approach is good in itself, but its effectiveness is largely reliant upon the Council also setting itself challenging targets. Setting challenging targets for performance indicators is key to the impact of the Council's plans and arrangements to improve performance management framework and reflects on the ambition and culture of the organisation.
- 63 The process that the Council uses to set targets for its performance indicators has been strengthened. Officers responsible for service delivery propose targets, which are then ratified initially by the Council's senior officers and then the appropriate cabinet member. Finally, the targets are considered and approved by the appropriate scrutiny committee. However, we found that the targets that the Council sets are not overly challenging when compared with other Welsh Councils and that scrutiny has not challenged any of the proposed targets for performance indicators.

- 64 In March 2015 the Council's Senior Leadership Team agreed a set of principles for target setting. They agreed that all targets for performance indicators will:
- be at least the average for Wales for the previous year;
 - improve upon the Council's own performance from the previous year; and
 - be set above the all Wales quartile 4 level.
- 65 These target setting principles will, if consistently and rigorously applied, provide the necessary ambition in target setting and strengthen the impact of the Council's performance management arrangements.
- 66 The evolving performance reports have been supplemented with strengthened arrangements for data collection, collation and presentation. It is encouraging that the officers responsible for developing the performance management reports and systems were working collaboratively with the users of the reports to identify and incorporate suggestions for further enhancements.
- 67 One of the Council's improvement objectives is Waste Management. In 2013-14 45.08 per cent of municipal wastes were sent to landfill, a 9.3 per cent improvement upon the 2013-13 level. However, when compared with the other Welsh councils, in 2012-13 the Council had the second worst performance in Wales, but improved that ranking position to 19th out of 22 in 2013-14. More importantly, the Council's performance in 2013-14 failed to achieve the statutory target set by the Welsh Government. The Welsh Government can impose financial penalties upon councils failing to achieve the statutory target.
- 68 Despite its low ranking and failure to achieve the Welsh Government's statutory target, and consequently being one of the four Councils of Wales under threat of a financial penalty, the Council rated its own performance on Waste Management in 2013-14 as Green (Excellent). It is felt that the Council's own rating of 'Excellent' is misleading. The Council's use of the ROAG or RAG ratings within their performance reports can be very useful for readers to quickly read through complex reports and to identify potential areas for concern, but its effectiveness is largely dependent upon the Council setting itself challenging targets.
- 69 The Council has begun developing training for officers and elected members on the use of their performance report and effective target setting. This training is essential as we found evidence that, through lack of user knowledge, the impact of the new performance reporting arrangements is not being maximised to enable all elected members to effectively challenge and scrutinise service performance.

- 70 The service planning guidance and template assists managers in writing service plans. The guidance and templates clearly state the structure and content of the plans with examples provided to guide managers. The service plans are logically presented with a sound structure. A review of the service plans confirms the consistent approach taken by managers in completing the plans with all sections completed comprehensively. Whilst the service plan template includes the need for links to be made to the Corporate Improvement Plan, Single Integrated Strategy and other council plans and strategies, the links between service outcomes and priorities to these strategies and plans are not always clear.
- 71 The Council has improved its approach to and presentation of its corporate risk register. The risk register now includes a before and after mitigation risk score at an assessed date and a breakdown of the probability and impact of that risk. The register includes current actions to address each risk and assigns responsibility to senior officers, cabinet member and scrutiny committee. However, the Council should make clear how service level risks could be escalated to the corporate risk register.
- 72 The Council has strengthened its approach to asset management after developing its strategic asset management plan in February 2013. The plan covers a five year period up to 2018. The plan is supported by the strategic director for Property Services and managed by the Strategic Asset Management Group.
- 73 The property information management system has been updated with audited data and the Council is currently compiling data on leases. The lead is being taken by the Property Joint Venture. Prioritised rolling condition surveys have been established and financial information has been reconciled to finance systems. Performance improvement targets have been reviewed and new indicators have been incorporated into business plans.

A Performance Management Framework, Communications Plan and Engagement and Participation Strategy have been produced to support the Local Service Board but these documents provide limited assessment of progress and impact and are of limited value to the work of the Local Service Board

- 74 We reviewed the Council's service plans and found that nine of the ten plans made reference to collaboration and partnership working. The level of detail varied in each plan due to the nature of the service. The Council's Annual Governance Statement now includes examples of partnership and collaborative working and references the Local Service Board and the Single Integrated Plan. The Council, in its Annual Governance Statement, does accept that further work is still required to assess the effectiveness of its collaborative governance arrangement.
- 75 The terms of reference were reviewed for all tiers of the Local Service Board structure and there is now greater clarity on both the roles and responsibilities of the different groups. There is a potential duplication of roles between the Local Service Board and the Executive Group which has been recognised. There is also evidence of the involvement of third sector organisations in the Local Service Board through a review of the terms of reference and minutes of the Local Service Board meetings. A review of the Local Service Board minutes also identifies that attendance at the Local Service Board meetings for certain organisations is sporadic with inconsistent representation.
- 76 To support the Local Service Board, a project plan was compiled to deliver the Unified Needs Assessment for 2014-15. The project plan clearly states key actions and milestones to meet the publication deadline in December 2014. In addition a Communications Plan and a One Newport Engagement and Participation Strategy were also written. However, both the Communications Plan and the One Newport Engagement and Participation Strategy only contain limited performance measures, incomplete progress updates, weak delivery plans and the method for assessing progress and impact.
- 77 A One Newport Performance Management Framework 2014-15 was produced to explain the management of performance and the delivery of the Single Integrated Plan document. Within the timetable of activity for the year, there were a number of dates 'to be agreed' and half the themes of the Single Integrated Plan were not due to be presented until early 2015. The timetable states that each theme will be considered just once per annum and the timing of a number of themes was to be considered during the last quarter of 2014-15. Therefore, it is unclear how any concerns in a theme's performance at the latter stages of the reporting year will be addressed.
- 78 The Single Integrated Plan (SIP) review process for 2015-16 is included within the Performance Management Framework 2014-15 timetable of activity. However, the dates for the Single Integrated Plan to be agreed by the Single Integrated Plan Board and Local Service Board are 'to be arranged'. Greater clarity is therefore required on when the Single Integrated Plan will be reviewed and considered for approval. The performance management framework does not provide a clear statement concerning arrangements and responsibility for collation and management of all the information from all the different partners.

Appendix 1 - Recommendations and proposals for improvement from the Corporate Assessment Report 2013

Recommendations

- R1** The Council should ensure that members are provided with robust information at the earliest opportunity to enable them to inform, take and challenge choices and decisions effectively, and ensure that they are recorded and reported transparently. This includes the provision of:
- Options appraisals.
 - The implications of the options, recommendations and decisions.
 - Fully costed business cases prior to initiating major programmes to support change. The financial impact of any significant proposed service changes should be reflected in medium-term financial plans directly where the change is certain to proceed or as a sensitivity if the change is not certain.
- R2** The Council should address with more urgency the weaknesses in its governance arrangements that underpin its decision making to support improvement. This would include:
- strengthening committee work programming arrangements to ensure they are timely, meaningful, informative, transparent, balanced, monitored, and joined up;
 - reviewing and updating the Council's constitution ensuring that roles, responsibilities and accountabilities are clear, and that all members understand and apply their respective roles in relation to each other without compromising independence;
 - empowering members to be more proactive and accountable for their roles and responsibilities;
 - strengthening decision-making arrangements to ensure transparency and appropriate safeguards are in place;
 - strengthening scrutiny arrangements to more effectively inform and challenge policies, options, decisions and actions, and hold Cabinet members, officers, partners and others to account more robustly to drive an increased pace of progress and improvement;
 - strengthening and mandating member and officer development and learning programmes based on competency assessments to improve skills and understanding to enable them to undertake their roles more effectively; and
 - addressing information security and business continuity arrangements.

Recommendations

- R3** The Council needs to quickly address weaknesses in its strategic financial planning and management to ensure that it is able to deliver its planned improvements. In doing so, the Council needs to:
- strengthen medium-term financial planning with fuller consideration of demographics, projections and priorities as well as the management of risks that are linked to the risk register(s);
 - the delivery of financial savings needs to be monitored and reported more effectively at a corporate level as well as the investments being made to improve/maintain services;
 - strengthen the status of financial management at a strategic level and ensure that responsibility is aligned to corporate objectives and accountabilities; and
 - ensure there is sufficient challenge to ensure that savings/investment plans are delivered and any budget overspends are highlighted and addressed by early intervention.
- R4** The Council should address weaknesses in its people management arrangements with more urgency to tackle long-term deficiencies to ensure it has the capacity and capabilities necessary to change and improve. In doing so, it should:
- ensure that the 360° appraisal process is fully integrated into its arrangements to manage staff performance and development;
 - establish an integrated workforce and succession plan to support and develop the Council's current and future workforce to meet the organisational need;
 - address its longstanding organisational development deficiencies;
 - address manager capacity and capability to manage, both in terms of basic core management skills and in managing the performance of their staff;
 - establish a much clearer and better communicated recruitment and retention strategy linked to workforce development, talent management, personal development and training; and
 - continue to improve the management of sickness levels, focusing on the areas where there is the least improvement.
- R5** The Council needs to increase the pace of change to better exploit and use its information technology and quickly address remaining weaknesses in its arrangements to better support improvement. In doing so, the Council needs to:
- develop and align plans to deliver improvement by using technology that is linked to outcomes, and include clear targets and milestones to support the monitoring of progress;
 - review, evaluate and report on the effectiveness and return on investment of technology projects; and
 - implement robust arrangements to effectively scrutinise and challenge technology projects and service provision at local, regional and national level.

Recommendations

- R6** Put in place arrangements that enable the Council to formulate, scrutinise, approve and publish its improvement objectives in a timely way to meet its statutory obligations under the Measure. In doing so, the Council should:
- Develop a more comprehensive, open and transparent approach to public reporting.
 - Ensure that internal reporting is systematic, regular and getting to the right groups with a stronger focus on priorities.
 - Develop a clear and agreed approach to prioritisation of improvement objectives and the development of measures for these improvement objectives that involve scrutiny members at an early stage and a stronger approach to consultation.
 - Enable members to effectively challenge and scrutinise service performance:
 - clarify the respective roles of the performance board and scrutiny;
 - ensure that both groups receive regular, high-quality, priority-focused performance information;
 - ensure that meeting agendas allow for sufficient time for members to focus on (broad) underperformance in both; and
 - provide training on effective challenge and scrutiny for members.
 - Further embed the approach to business and service planning and ensure that corporate and single integrated plans are included.
 - Improve the corporate approach to risk management.
 - Improve target setting to better reflect the service/performance standards the Council wants to achieve and ensure resources are allocated to deliver desired standards through the Medium Term Financial Plan.

Proposals for improvement

P1 The Council should:

- develop and implement an appropriate engagement and communication strategy that both communicates the new mission and organisational framework, and also supports cultural changes within the organisation;
- ensure that it has in place the people and resources capable of implementing the organisational framework and delivering subsequent service changes; and
- engage the Fairness Commission when developing improvement priorities as well as budget proposals.

P2 Fully implement the proposals for improvement set out in our previous reports on asset management.

P3 Develop a clearer understanding of the collaborative projects taking place across the Council and an agreed and widely communicated approach to the management of collaboration. The approach should help the Council to ensure that collaborations are providing value for money outcomes for Newport's citizens.

P4 Evaluate the new structures of the LSB to ensure that terms of reference are clear, that the groups are inclusive (particularly of third sector and private sector partners), and that roles are not duplicated.

P5 Clarify timescales for updating and reviewing the Unified Needs Assessment and Single Integrated Plan and develop a communication strategy to ensure wider awareness of these key documents. Ensure that the process for selecting priorities is agreed, clear, transparent and widely communicated.

P6 Strengthen the LSB's performance management framework to set out:

- clearer and more detailed roles and responsibilities on what will be delivered by which organisations;
- what performance information will be collected, where and when it will be monitored, and how progress and performance will be monitored;
- mechanisms for dealing with underperformance; and
- a stronger focus on performance and resource management across the LSB.

P7 Maintain the increased momentum of the Neighbourhood Working project and ensure that its planned impact on communities and citizens is achieved.

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