

Sustainable Powys:

Are the Council's governance arrangements effectively supporting its approach?

Powys County Council

December 2025

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at Powys County Council's (the Council) governance arrangements. We considered the extent to which these arrangements support its 'Sustainable Powys' approach.
- 2 The Council adopted its Sustainable Powys approach in July 2024. It describes it as a strategic approach to help it achieve financial and operational sustainability. The approach has a set of principles and uses a place-based approach, which is based on five core geographical areas. The Council intends to apply the approach to everything it does. Therefore, there is no separate decision-making process for Sustainable Powys; the Council's standard decision-making processes apply.
- 3 The Council has also established a 'Transformation Portfolio'. This includes its more significant change projects. The Corporate Leadership Team and Cabinet act as the Transformation Portfolio Board, which oversees the work. Below the Transformation Portfolio Board, there is a programme management structure in place. We did not review the governance of the Council's Transformation Portfolio.

Why this is important

- 4 The Council has projected a cumulative funding gap of almost £40 million over the next five years. In the face of rising demand for services and a challenging financial environment, the Council has identified Sustainable Powys as key to driving change.
- 5 Sustainable Powys could have wide-ranging impact on service design and delivery. It may also impact on service users. It is important that the Council has good governance arrangements in place for taking decisions around proposed service changes, ensuring that:
 - decisions are taken in an open and transparent way;
 - members receive full information on which to base decisions; and

- that there is enough time for pre-decision scrutiny.

Effective oversight and monitoring of the progress and outcomes of service changes are also essential so that the Council understands the impact on service users.

What we have found

- 6 The Council's governance arrangements are not fully supporting the changes that it wants to bring about through its Sustainable Powys approach. Weaknesses in arrangements include:
 - limited explanation in the Council's corporate plan of what Sustainable Powys is and how it aligns to its corporate objectives;
 - the Council has not kept its constitution updated in a timely manner;
 - forward work programmes for committees are not comprehensive;
 - committee reports are often published late;
 - reports on proposed service changes and their impacts are not always clearly set out or fully demonstrate the application of the Sustainable Powys approach;
 - reports are not always provided with enough lead-in time to enable effective scrutiny; and
 - the information used to monitor progress and assess the impact and outcomes of service changes is limited.
- 7 The Council has already started to take action to address some of the governance weaknesses identified.

What we recommend

- 8 We make eight recommendations to the Council to strengthen its governance arrangements. Our recommendations relate to:
 - processes to keep key corporate documentation up to date;
 - forward work programming;
 - timeliness and availability of reports and minutes;
 - clarity of reporting; and

- arrangements for monitoring the progress of service changes and their impact and outcomes.

Our findings

- 9 Overall, we found that the Council's governance arrangements are not fully supporting the changes that it wants to bring about through its Sustainable Powys approach. However, the Council has started to take action to address some of the governance weaknesses identified.

There is limited explanation in the Council's corporate plan of what Sustainable Powys is and how it aligns to its corporate objectives

- 10 The Council updated and re-published its Corporate and Strategic Equality Plan 2023-2027 (CSEP) in July 2025. This is the main corporate plan for the Council. However, despite having adopted Sustainable Powys 12 months earlier, the CSEP does not clearly explain this approach.¹ It also does not set out how it aligns with the Council's well-being objectives.
- 11 The Council's Medium Term Financial Plan 2025-2030 provides a clearer explanation of the Sustainable Powys approach. The Council also has dedicated Sustainable Powys webpages to provide information for the public. However, at the time of our review, key webpages had not been updated since July 2024. This means the Council may be missing opportunities to engage the public on proposed key service changes.

¹ See **Appendix 2** for an explanation of Sustainable Powys.

The Council has not kept its constitution up to date, forward work programmes are not comprehensive and committee reports are often published late

12 At the time of our fieldwork the Council's constitution was out of date in many key areas, including:

- the information on the senior management structure of the Council, officer delegations and those holding Statutory Officer responsibilities was wrong, despite those changes being made in 2023;
- it included references to 'Vision 2025' which was the Council's corporate plan that was replaced in April 2023 by the new corporate plan, 'Stronger, Fairer, Greener';
- the terms of reference for the scrutiny committees remained aligned to Vision 2025.

The Council's constitution is key to providing a framework and sound basis for decision making. Any errors or lack of clarity in the Council's constitution could undermine the decisions and changes that the Council wants to implement. The Council agreed updates to the constitution in October 2025. It intends to undertake a complete review of its constitution by May 2026.

13 The forward work programmes (FWPs) for committees, particularly Cabinet, are not comprehensive. They are also subject to late changes. This can limit their transparency and effectiveness. Comprehensive and up-to-date FWPs are important to ensure that the public and scrutiny are aware of the decisions that the Council plans to take.

14 The Council's website has a dedicated webpage for FWPs for Cabinet and scrutiny committees. However, the Council does not update that webpage. Instead, it publishes the FWPs in committee papers. Accessible FWPs are important for transparency and to encourage public awareness and wider involvement in the decision-making process.

15 The Council's systemic use of supplementary agendas can impact effective governance and transparency. Between December 2024 and July 2025, 78% of Cabinet meetings had supplementary agendas. The use of supplementary agendas means that reports are often published late and not in line with the three clear days in advance requirement, which was set out in the Council's constitution. In October 2025, the Council agreed to extend the three days rule to five clear days.

- 16 The Council's constitution sets out its arrangements for Cabinet Members and officers taking delegated decisions. The Council publishes Cabinet Member decisions on its website. Cabinet also receives a summary report of all Cabinet Member delegated decisions at its next available meeting, which aids transparency. There is a link on the Council's website for officer delegated decisions, but there is no information published at this link. We were told in our fieldwork that this is because officers are taking only operational decisions, which do not require publication. However, we did not see a clear corporate approach or guidance for officers on when officer decisions need to be recorded and published.

Reports on proposed service changes and their impacts are not always clearly set out or provided with enough lead-in time to enable effective scrutiny

- 17 The Council's reports on service changes and their impacts on service users are not always clear. We heard from some members during our fieldwork that reports can be overly long and difficult to understand. Reports do not always set out clearly how the Sustainable Powys principles and place-based planning approach have been applied to proposed service changes.
- 18 Integrated Impact Assessments (IIAs) that accompany reports are often late and consistently unsigned. In one case, two different IIAs were on a meeting agenda for the same proposed service change, one stating that consultation was required and the other stating it was not. IIAs are an important element in the decision-making process. It is important that they are complete, checked and signed off.
- 19 The Council does not always ensure that reports to scrutiny and Governance and Audit Committee (GAC) use the agreed template covering report. Those cover reports are important as they set out the role and purpose of the committee in considering the item.
- 20 The Council does not always provide enough lead-in time for reports on service changes to enable effective scrutiny. Items are coming to scrutiny often just before changes need to be implemented. This limits the function's ability to engage with proposed changes and undertake full pre-decision scrutiny. In May 2025, we published a report on the Council's scrutiny function and made recommendations for improvement.
- 21 We observed scrutiny committees engaging in effective debate and challenge. However, the Cabinet's process for considering their recommendations limited the impact of scrutiny. At the time of our fieldwork, Cabinet could make decisions without first responding to the committees' recommendations. This changed with the updated constitution adopted in October 2025. Cabinet must now provide a written response to scrutiny recommendations before making decisions on related reports. This change is important. It helps to ensure that scrutiny's input is considered in the decision-making process.

- 22 The Council does not always publish minutes of scrutiny committees and GAC meetings in a timely way. For transparency and good governance, minutes should be available as soon as possible after the meeting to which they relate and considered at the next available meeting of that committee.

The Council is improving public reporting on key service changes, but the information used to assess progress and outcomes is limited

- 23 Until recently, the Council's approach to enable public scrutiny of its Transformation Portfolio reports was limited. However, in September 2025, the Transformation Board committed to providing quarterly progress updates to the Finance Panel. This is one of the Council's scrutiny committees. As a result, this information is now available in the public domain.
- 24 In the Transformation Portfolio quarterly report there was limited information on which members could assess progress and outcomes, for example:
- the dashboard in the report shows the savings achieved but does not show what the target savings were, so there is no way to assess delivery against target;
 - the way the Council is calculating return on investment (ROI) is shown as ROI against the Council's expenditure only, not total expenditure (where funding from other sources is also used).
- 25 Monitoring information on wider service changes is also reported in other ways. For example, the Corporate and Strategic Equality Plan performance report, financial reports and specific service update reports.

Recommendations

R1 For greater transparency and to aid understanding the Council should more clearly set out in its corporate plan what Sustainable Powys is and explain how this aligns to and supports the delivery of the Council's strategic objectives (**paragraph 10**).

R2 The Council should establish a system to ensure that its constitution is up to date and kept updated (**paragraph 12**).

R3 The Council should strengthen its Forward Work Programmes for committees, particularly for Cabinet, by:

3.1 ensuring that they are comprehensive and up to date and that late changes are minimised (**paragraph 13**); and

3.2 making them easily accessible on the Council's website (**paragraph 14**).

R4 The Council should ensure that papers for committees are available and published in line with the requirements of the Council's constitution (as a minimum) and stop the systemic use of supplementary agendas (**paragraph 15**).

R5 The Council should develop and embed a clear corporate approach to the recording and publication of officer delegated decisions (**paragraph 16**).

R6 The Council should ensure that reports to committees on service changes:

- 6.1** are clearly set out, easy to understand, and explain the potential impact on service users (**paragraph 17**);
- 6.2** demonstrate how the Sustainable Powys principles and place-based planning approach have been applied to the proposed service changes (**paragraph 17**); and
- 6.3** are accompanied by signed-off Integrated Impact Assessments, where required (**paragraph 18**).

- R7** To support more effective scrutiny the Council should:
- 7.1** ensure that reports to scrutiny and GAC are accompanied by the cover reports that the Council has developed, which set out the purpose of the committee receiving the report (**paragraph 19**);
 - 7.2** ensure sufficient lead in time for reports on significant service changes to allow enough time for effective scrutiny (**paragraph 20**);
 - 7.3** review if the newly adopted arrangements for Cabinet considering scrutiny committees' recommendations are embedding and working as intended (**paragraph 21**); and
 - 7.4** ensure that minutes of scrutiny committees and GAC meetings are made available as soon as possible after the meeting to which they relate and considered at the next available meeting of that committee for transparency and good governance (**paragraph 22**).
- R8** The Council should provide comprehensive information to members to enable more effective monitoring and oversight on the progress of service changes and their impact and outcomes (**paragraph 24**).

Appendices

1 About our work

Scope of the audit

The audit looked at the Council's governance arrangements to support its Sustainable Powys approach.

We undertook our fieldwork between July and August 2025.

Audit questions and criteria

Questions

- Is there a shared understanding of the importance of applying the approach outlined by Sustainable Powys?
- Does the Council have clear decision-making arrangements?
- Are the Council's arrangements working effectively to ensure there is transparency and accountability in decision making when considering changes brought about by Sustainable Powys?
- Does the Council have effective governance arrangements to ensure oversight of the intended outcomes as a result of Sustainable Powys?

Criteria

The criteria for this audit were based on good practice guidelines for effective governance, including reference to CIPFA's Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework.

Methods

We gathered evidence through reviewing documents, observing meetings, and interviewing members of the Council, lay members and officers. We also drew on our cumulative audit knowledge, including findings from recent audit reports.

2 Explanation of Sustainable Powys

Powys County Council, at its Cabinet meeting held on 16 July 2024, approved a report entitled 'Sustainable Powys Programme: Principles.' The purpose of the report was to set out 'the framework for Sustainable Powys, outlining the programme principles together with the place-based planning areas and principles which will be used to plan future services.'

The report stated that the Council needed to, 'redesign Powys County Council and the type and volume of services that we can offer to put the organisation on a more sustainable footing, moving away from year-on-year service cuts. To achieve this transformation, Cabinet and Corporate Leadership Team agreed to establish the Re-Imagining Powys Programme in January 2023 (now referred to as 'Sustainable Powys'). To govern the programme and set the standard for assessing our service visions and blueprints, two sets of principles have been drafted and informally agreed by Cabinet.'

The Sustainable Powys Principles are:

- 'Being open minded and seeking innovative solutions, using all the expertise available.
- Delivering best possible outcomes through transformation to provide better quality services.
- Using evidence – better understand need and model future demand, if we aren't getting results, we should change.
- A continual process of learning and adapting to meet existing and long-term needs sustainably.
- Engaging early with people in agreeing, designing and delivering approaches so we listen, understand, reflect and feedback.
- Addressing the fundamental question: why do we do what we do?
- A strategic whole system approach, with partners, communities and the people of Powys.
- Delivering outcomes that are affordable or no cost.'

The Sustainable Powys Place-Based Planning – Areas and Principles are:

- 'We will provide a hub in each of the four core areas – anything else will only be provided if there is an approved business case to support it.
- We will utilise schools and other community assets wherever we can for community-based solutions and services.
- Travel times can be up to one hour to your nearest hub (even if you are a child). Provision must be digitally supported.
- Public and community transport must align each locality to the hub.
- It is proposed that service visions and associated blueprints for all Powys County Council services apply and adhere to these principles.'

The Council initially agreed four core areas and 13 localities. At a subsequent meeting of Cabinet, on 26 October 2024, the Council changed its place-based planning from four to five core areas.

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