

Use of performance information: service user perspective and outcomes – Ceredigion County Council

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Report summary

- 1 We considered the service user perspective and outcome information provided to senior officers and senior members (senior leaders), and how this information is used.
- 2 Overall, we found **the performance information provided by the Council to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities is limited.**
- 3 We have made three recommendations to strengthen the information given to senior leaders.
- 4 Our findings are based on fieldwork we did between July and August 2023.

What we looked at – the scope of this audit

- 5 We focused on the performance information provided to senior officers and senior members (senior leaders) about service user perspective and outcomes, and how this information is used. We did not undertake a full review of the Council's performance management arrangements or an in-depth review of the quality of the data that the Council collects. Neither did the review focus on engagement with service users on specific service changes or the development of policies and strategies.
- 6 We have set out our audit questions and audit criteria in **Appendix 1**. The audit criteria essentially set out what good looks like and what we would expect to find.
- 7 Overall, we were looking for performance information to be shared with senior leaders to help them understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users and how well they are helping the Council to achieve the outcomes it is working towards. We were also looking to see that senior leaders use this information to monitor progress and take action where necessary to improve outcomes.
- 8 This is an important part of arrangements to ensure that councils are securing value for money in the use of their resources. It is also an important way in which the Council can assure itself that it is acting in accordance with the 'involvement' way of working in taking steps to meet its well-being objectives. Without this information, it is difficult to see how senior leaders can understand whether their policies and actions are having the intended impact and make changes where they are not.
- 9 Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with the Cabinet Member, Director and senior officers with responsibility for the Council's performance management arrangements. The evidence we have used to inform our findings is limited to these sources.

- 10 We set out to answer the question ‘**Does the Council’s performance data enable senior leaders to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities to effectively manage its performance?**’ We did this by exploring the following questions:
- Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the perspective of service users?
 - Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the outcomes of the Council’s activities?
 - Does the Council have robust arrangements to ensure that the data provided is accurate?
 - Does the Council use the information to help it achieve its outcomes?
 - Does the Council review the effectiveness of its arrangements?

Why we undertook this audit

- 11 This audit was undertaken to help fulfil the Auditor General’s duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 (the 2004 Act) and section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.
- 12 We sought to:
- gain assurance that the performance information the Council provides to senior officers and elected members enables them to understand the service user perspective and the outcome of its activities;
 - gain assurance that this information forms part of the Council’s arrangements to secure value for money in the use of its resources and its application of the sustainable development principle; and
 - identify opportunities for the Council to strengthen its arrangements.

The Council’s performance reporting arrangements

- 13 The Council’s Performance Board receives quarterly performance dashboards that include details of service performance and progress towards well-being objectives, along with financial monitoring information.
- 14 The Performance Board uses Business Plan dashboards to monitor service level performance and the Corporate Strategy Dashboard to monitor progress against the Council’s Wellbeing Objectives.
- 15 The Council published its first Annual Self-Assessment (2021-22) in December 2022. Prior to publication, it had been considered by the Governance and Audit Committee in September 2022 in line with the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The Governance and Audit

Committee considered the second Annual Self-Assessment Report in September 2023.

- 16 Our review focused on these key performance reporting mechanisms.

What we found: the performance information provided by the Council to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities is limited

The performance information the Council provides to senior leaders on the perspective of service users is limited

- 17 The Council's performance reports do not generally include information on the perspective of service users, apart from a few limited examples. It is, therefore, difficult to see how senior leaders would be able to understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users.
- 18 The Council recently consulted with residents on the performance measures it wishes to use for 2023-24. The consultation presented a list of measures and asked residents how strongly they agreed with them, if any should be changed, and if they had any suggestions for replacement measures. The consultation exercise also asked residents for their views on the usefulness of the Council's Self-Assessment Report and on the progress made against different aspects of the Council's priorities. This shows the Council has attempted to gain the perspective of service users in determining which information to collect. Involving service users in determining how to measure service performance or progress against corporate objectives can help the Council to ensure it is measuring the things that matter to service users.

The performance information the Council provides to senior leaders largely focuses on activity and output, rather than evaluating their impact

- 19 Most of the information the Council provides to senior leaders describes activities and outputs, rather than outcomes. We found limited examples of where the Council presents information on outcomes and the assessment of progress against the outcomes the Council is seeking to achieve. This limits the ability of senior leaders to understand the impact of the Council's activities and assess whether it is meeting its overall objectives.
- 20 The Council's Corporate Strategy 2022-27 and Self-Assessment Report 2021-22 contain sections on Improving Outcomes which provide examples of the difference

the Council's work has made. The information in these sections is drawn from a range of evidence sources to help provide a holistic view of its performance. However, aside from these sections in the two reports, the reporting of outcomes is limited. This small number of examples does not provide a comprehensive picture of the Council's performance and does not enable senior leaders to fully understand the impact of the Council's activities.

The Council has limited arrangements to ensure that service user perspective and outcomes information provided to senior leaders is accurate

- 21 The Council does not have comprehensive arrangements in place to routinely check the data quality of performance information relating to outcomes and the service user perspective. The Council's Performance and Research Team perform "sense checks" before they publish the quarterly performance dashboards, such as looking at any anomalies in performance. The Council states that the data is owned by the relevant services, and they are responsible for submitting accurate data. However, we could not find any evidence of how the Council checks the accuracy of this data.
- 22 Any questions raised at the Performance Board meeting on the quality of data are followed up by the Performance and Research Team. The Team completes a debrief after each Performance Board meeting to review any issues raised. Any gaps in data or suspected data quality issues are taken to the service in question for officers to correct or confirm that the results are accurate.
- 23 The Council uses a standard template for setting objectives which includes the numerator, denominator, polarity, frequency, and owner. This arrangement provides rigour and consistency for the measures the Council uses, but there are no arrangements in place to check the accuracy of the data used in the calculations.
- 24 The Council's Internal Audit function has not completed any recent data quality reviews of the Council's performance information.
- 25 As a result of the Council having limited arrangements in place to check the accuracy of its service user perspective and outcomes information, there is a risk that the actions and decisions it takes, and the resources it deploys, may be based on inaccurate information.

As the information provided on outcomes and the perspective of service users is limited, the extent to which the Council can use this information to help it achieve its outcomes is also limited

- 26 As set out above, our main finding is that limited performance information is provided to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities. Therefore, it follows logically that the extent to which the Council uses the service user perspective and

outcomes information to help it achieve its outcomes from this performance information is limited.

- 27 Where we did find examples of the Council providing information on the perspective of the service users and outcomes, we found some evidence of the Council using this information to make changes. For example, the Annual Compliments and Complaints Report contains a section on learning lessons where it highlights action the Council has taken to improve future outcomes from the complaints received by specific services.

In reviewing its self-assessment, the Council has identified the need to strengthen its outcomes and service user information

- 28 The Council has committed to improve performance information on the service user perspective or outcomes. In its Annual Self-Assessment 2021-22, the Council recognised the need to strengthen its performance management arrangements.
- 29 The Council formally reviewed its approach to self-assessment in December 2022. It completed further reflection in March 2023 after attending a workshop with the WLGA, Audit Wales, and Welsh Government. One of the key findings from this review was to identify a new way of highlighting the outcomes the Council achieved against each of its Wellbeing Objectives.
- 30 In recognising the need to better include the service user perspective, the Council has engaged with other councils to see how they collect and present this information. The Council is also using a range of informal and formal networks to develop its future approach.
- 31 As the Council develops its performance reporting arrangements, it will be important for it to ensure that it benchmarks its arrangements with the approaches of other organisations. This does not mean comparing performance in general, but learning how other organisations are providing information on the service user perspective and the achievement of outcomes to strengthen its own arrangements. This is an important element of the Council's arrangements to secure value for money.

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

Information on the perspective of the service user

- R1 The Council should ensure that the information provided to its senior leaders enables them to understand the service user perspective. The Council should ensure this information is drawn from the diversity of its service users.

Information on progress towards outcomes

- R2 The Council should strengthen the information provided to senior leaders to help them evaluate whether the Council is delivering its objectives and intended outcomes.

Quality and accuracy of data

- R3 The Council needs to assure itself that it has robust arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of the information it provides to senior leaders relating to service user perspective and outcomes.

Appendix 1

Key questions and what we looked for

Exhibit 2: key questions and what we looked for

The table below sets out the question we sought to answer in carrying out this audit, along with the audit criteria we used to arrive at our findings.

Level 1	
Does the Council's performance data enable senior leaders to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities to effectively manage its performance?	
Level 2	Audit Criteria ¹ (what we are looking for)
2.1 Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the perspective of service users?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The information is:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– relevant to the objectives the Council has set itself;– sufficient to enable an understanding of the service user perspective;– sufficient to provide an understanding of progress towards the outcomes the Council is planning to achieve;– drawn from the diversity of service users including groups who share protected characteristics; and– used to inform comparisons with the performance of similar bodies where relevant.• The Council has involved service users in determining which information to collect.
2.2 Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the outcomes of the Council's activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The information draws on a range of evidence sources to provide a holistic view of progress.• The information enables senior leaders to monitor progress over the short, medium and long term.• The information enables senior leaders to monitor the delivery of outcomes that cover multiple service areas and/or organisations.

¹ Our audit criteria have been informed by our cumulative knowledge of previous audit work, as well as the question hierarchy and positive indicators we have developed to support our sustainable development principle examinations.

Level 1

Does the Council's performance data enable senior leaders to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities to effectively manage its performance?

Level 2

Audit Criteria¹ (what we are looking for)

2.3 Does the Council have robust arrangements to ensure that the data provided is accurate?

- The Council has clear arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of the data it provides to senior leaders.
- Where weaknesses in data quality are identified, the Council addresses them.

2.4 Does the Council use the information to help it achieve its outcomes?

- Where poor performance is identified, the Council uses the information to make changes/interventions.
- There is evidence of the Council improving its progress towards its outcomes as a result of interventions.

2.5 Does the Council review the effectiveness of its arrangements?

- The Council reviews the information provided to senior leaders to ensure it is appropriate and relevant.
- The Council compares the information it collects with the information collected by similar organisations to identify opportunities to strengthen its arrangements.



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