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Dear Will,

## Assurance and Risk Assessment progress update

Following on from our meeting with the Corporate Management Team earlier this year we said that we would more formally feed back on some specific aspects of our assurance and risk assessment work that we have undertaken. This letter provides a progress update on the Council's arrangements for

1. recovering from the pandemic; and
2. responding to the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

This work was undertaken as part of our 2021-22 Assurance and Risk Assessment (ARA) project to help discharge the Auditor General's duties<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> These duties include under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 (the 2004 Act). It may also inform a study for improving value for money under section 41 of the 2004 Act, and/or an examination undertaken by the Auditor General under section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

We recognise that the Council's recovery work from the pandemic and its response to the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 are ongoing. This feedback provides a point in time assurance and risk progress update on the Council's arrangements in these areas.

## **1. Recovering from the Pandemic**

### **What we did**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic Audit Wales has continued to meet with the Council's key contacts on a regular basis to undertake assurance work on the Council's response to the pandemic and provide real-time feedback to the Council.

### **What we found**

The Council has continued to provide vital services and additional support to its communities during the pandemic and adapted its governance arrangements to facilitate the necessary swift decision making. We have been able to see effective working together across departments and a clear commitment by officers and councillors to work collaboratively for the benefit of the people of Pembrokeshire.

## **2. Arrangements for responding to the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021**

### **What we did**

We undertook our assessment of the Council's work in responding to key requirements in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 between January 2022 and April 2022. The evidence was gathered through interviews and document reviews and also drew on relevant findings from our other ongoing and recent work at the Council. Our work looked at the arrangements the Council is putting in place in responding to the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The work was not an assessment of the effectiveness of these arrangements.

### **What we found**

- **Arrangements for Self-Assessment and Panel Assessments**

Due to other competing priorities the Council has only recently agreed its approach for how it proposes to undertake its self-assessment. Its approach is based on several key overarching principles and includes a high-level framework for capturing

the evidence for the self-assessment. The Council recognises that the approach will evolve over time but for this first year it will make use of pre-existing evidence.

To support officers and Members undertaking the assessments, some councils have developed specific corporate tools, such as guidance booklets, example outputs and working groups to share best practice and ensure consistency in approach. The Council should consider whether similar corporate support would strengthen its self-assessment arrangements.

The Council intends to produce a self-assessment output which it will consult on after it has been scrutinised by the Governance and Audit Committee in July and before it is presented to full Council in October 2022. The Council intends to use this self-assessment to help inform its new Corporate Strategy, which it plans to put in place in Autumn 2022.

Originally, the Council had planned to conduct a pilot Panel Assessment in February 2022, however, due to time constraints and other competing priorities, it decided that this would not take place. The Council plans to decide on the arrangements and timing for the statutory external Panel Assessment that is required under the new Act, after the May 2022 election.

- **Arrangements for the Consultation Duty and Participation Strategy**

Whilst the Council has recognised that it has a duty to consult with the statutory consultees on its self-assessment and it has scheduled to conduct this after it has been to the Governance and Audit Committee in July 2022, it is still developing the specifics of how it will undertake this.

The Council has established a working group to prepare its participation strategy. This group has produced a plan for developing the participation strategy, which it intends to design and adopt following engagement with key stakeholders and citizens during 2022. As it develops the strategy, the Council should ensure that it incorporates the wider engagement with stakeholders and citizens required under the new self-assessment arrangements.

- **Arrangements for the changes to Governance and Audit Committees**

The Council has approved the new Governance and Audit Committee composition. Membership of the Committee will be six councillors and three lay members. The three lay members have been recruited and appointed. The Council has developed a new terms of reference for the Governance and Audit Committee and is working with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) to provide training to the new members of the Committee. This training will take place in July 2022.

- **Arrangements for establishing Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs)**

The South West Wales Corporate Joint Committee (SWWCJC) was established on 13 January 2022. Partners on this committee are: Neath Port Talbot, Swansea, Carmarthenshire, and Pembrokeshire Councils, Brecon Beacons National Park and Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. Key statutory decisions were taken at that initial meeting, including agreeing the constitution and other statutory requirements such as those around scrutiny and overview. The approval of its draft budget was taken at a later meeting of the SWWCJC on 25 January 2022.

The SWWCJC has been organised around a sub-committee structure for the key areas of responsibility. However, a decision was taken not to integrate other regional economic development programmes, such as the City Deal, into the CJC, at this point in time, to avoid any disruption to the delivery of the City Deal.

- **Use of the General Power of Competence**

The Council is currently not using the general power of competence and told us that the new power is unlikely to have a significant impact on how the Council works in the short term. However, the Council recognises that this is a complicated and evolving area, and it is exploring how the power might support more innovative and transformative projects in the future.

The Council thinks that the new power potentially will have a bigger impact on future initiatives and projects that are undertaken by eligible Town and Community Councils, and the Council's work to support them with this is still developing.

This letter forms part of the feedback on our Assurance and Risk Assessment work. We will also be reporting in due course on two further subject areas: carbon reduction and an update on financial sustainability. It is intended that the work on these two areas will be reported in Summer 2022.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your officers for the ongoing support you provide to enable us to carry out our work. We look forward to continuing to work positively with you.

Yours sincerely,

Alison Lewis  
**Audit Lead**