

Use of Performance Information: Service User Perspective and Outcomes – Powys 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 that the performance information provided to senior leaders does not enable them to have a comprehensive understanding of the service user perspective and outcomes. This restricts their ability to understand the impact of the Council's services and policies.
- 3 We have made three recommendations to strengthen the information given to senior leaders.
- 4 Our findings are based on fieldwork we did between May to September 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 Cabinet receives performance reports every three months. These reports include details of service performance and progress towards the Council's well-being objectives.
- 14 The Executive Management Team (Corporate Directors, Head of Finance and Head of Legal and Democratic Services) and Senior Leadership Team (Corporate Directors and Heads of Service) also consider performance information every three months.
- 15 Our review focused on these key performance reporting mechanisms.

What we found

The performance information provided to senior leaders does not enable them to have a comprehensive understanding of the service user perspective and outcomes. This restricts their ability to understand the impact of the Council's services and policies

The performance information provided to senior leaders to help them understand the perspective of service users varies considerably across services, limiting their ability to get a comprehensive understanding of the views of service users

- 16 The Council collects and reports on a wide range of measures and indicators of performance. These include some examples that seek to reflect the service user perspective, such as customer satisfaction measures. The majority of these examples relate to housing and social services. In all other service areas, information about the service user perspective is extremely limited or not present. Therefore, information to help senior leaders understand the service user perspective varies significantly across service areas.
- 17 In addition to the performance information it reports regularly, the Council was able to provide examples where housing and social services officers had proactively sought out the perspective of service users. However, this activity is not integrated into the Council's performance reports. Consequently, there is a gap between the information on the service user perspective that some Council services collect and the information that is routinely reported to its senior leaders.
- 18 The Council's self-assessment 2021-22 highlights engagement activity the Council has carried out and outlines the Council's plans to gather a greater range of views from the local community to inform future self-assessments. However, the current self-assessment includes minimal information on the service user perspective on existing services.
- 19 Overall, therefore, the information provided to senior leaders does not allow them to understand the impact that it is having on service users across all its services and policies.

Recent changes to the Council's performance reporting have led to greater clarity about the outcomes relating to its corporate objectives but do not reflect the impact of the broader range of activity that the Council is undertaking to meet its objectives

- 20 At the time of our initial fieldwork in summer 2023, we found that the volume of information included in the performance data dashboard¹ meant that, although the Council was reporting a mix of outcome and output focused measures, it was difficult to have a clear understanding of the outcomes achieved.
- 21 Since that time, the Council has adopted a new Corporate Plan and has made significant changes to how it reports progress against its objectives. We found that it is now easier for senior leaders to identify outcomes data in its performance data dashboard and therefore to understand the impact its actions are having.
- 22 However, the outcomes information highlighted in the revised performance data dashboard does not reflect the broader range of activity that the Council is undertaking to meet its objectives. For example, under Objective three (tackling poverty and inequality), the majority of the outcome measures highlighted in the performance data dashboard relate to housing and homelessness. Yet the narrative section of the scorecard sets out a much greater range of activities to tackle poverty and inequality, but the impact and outcomes of those actions are not as clearly set out in the report. This means it is difficult for senior leaders to have a comprehensive understanding of what impact the Council's actions are having.

The Council's arrangements to ensure that the performance information reflecting the service user perspective and outcomes information is accurate are limited

- 23 We reviewed the Council's arrangements for verifying the accuracy of its data. We did not review the accuracy of the data itself.
- 24 The Council's individual service areas are each responsible for ensuring that their own performance data is accurate. Whilst the Council has central arrangements in place for ensuring measures are robust and for challenging poor performance, the Council's arrangements to verify the accuracy of the data provided by service areas are limited. This increases the risk that senior leaders may take decisions based on information that is inaccurate.

¹ Q3 Performance report to Cabinet 7 February 2023 – this reflects the reporting arrangements against the Vision 2025 Corporate Improvement Plan.

The Council does not comprehensively use its performance information to help it achieve its intended outcomes across all service areas

- 25 As set out above, our main finding is that performance information provided to senior leaders does not enable them to have a comprehensive understanding of the service user perspective and outcomes across all service areas. Therefore, it logically follows that the extent to which the Council uses that information to help it achieve its outcomes is also not comprehensive.
- 26 The Council was able to provide us with examples in Children's services and in Housing, where it had sought out the views of service users and acted on the information it had received.

The Council has reviewed the effectiveness of its arrangements which has resulted in greater clarity around outcomes but has had less impact on reporting the service user perspective

- 27 The Council has reviewed and developed its performance management framework over several years and is currently working towards introducing a Results Based Accountability approach. At the time of our fieldwork, we did not find that this process had resulted in a stronger focus within the performance data on the service user perspective, although it has resulted in greater clarity about the outcomes of the Council's activity.
- 28 Although the Council looks to use comparative information where it is available, it does not routinely compare its arrangements for collecting and reporting performance information on outcomes and the service user perspective with the approaches of other organisations. Doing this will help the Council understand and learn from how other councils are providing information on service user perspective and outcomes. This is an important element of arrangements to secure value for money.

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

- R1 Information on the perspective of the service user:
- the Council should strengthen the information it provides to its senior leaders to enable them to understand how well services are meeting the needs of service users.

R2 Information on progress towards outcomes:

- the Council should ensure that the information provided to senior leaders about outcomes reflects the range of the actions it is taking to deliver its objectives.

R3 Information on the quality and accuracy of data:

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

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 ² (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.

² 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 2	Audit Criteria ³ (what we are looking for)
<p>2.3 Does the Council have robust arrangements to ensure that the data provided is accurate?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
<p>2.4 Does the Council use the information to help it achieve its outcomes?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
<p>2.5 Does the Council review the effectiveness of its arrangements?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.

³ 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.



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