

Use of Performance Information: Service User Perspective and Outcomes – Wrexham County Borough 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 at Wrexham County Borough Council (the Council).
- 2 Overall, we found senior leaders are provided with limited information to help them understand the perspective of service users and the outcomes of the Council's activities, making it difficult for them to manage performance effectively.
- 3 We have made three recommendations to strengthen the information given to senior leaders.

What we looked at – the scope of this audit

- 4 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 nor the development of policies and strategies.
- 5 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.
- 6 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.
- 7 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.
- 8 Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with the Cabinet Member, Head of Service and senior officer with responsibility for the Council's performance management arrangements. The evidence we have used to inform our findings is limited to these sources. We undertook this work during June 2023.
- 9 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

10 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.

11 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

12 The Council produces quarterly scorecards on progress against the Council Plan’s objectives. Each of these are monitored by the Council’s Priority Boards and available on the intranet for all members to access. The quarter two and four scorecards are also submitted to the Senior Leadership Team, Executive Board and scrutiny committees. The Council has recently developed a new Corporate Plan, but at the time of our fieldwork, the performance reports were focused on the Council’s previous Corporate Plan.

13 The Senior Leadership Team, Executive Board and scrutiny committees are also presented with various annual reports, some of which are statutorily required. These include its corporate self-assessment and the Director of Social Services’ report.

14 Our review focused on these key performance reporting mechanisms.

What we found

Senior leaders are provided with limited information to help them understand the perspective of service users and the outcomes of the Council's activities, making it difficult for them to manage performance effectively

Senior leaders are provided with minimal information to help them understand the perspective of service users

- 15 We found some examples of information in the Director of Social Services' annual report which would help senior leaders understand the perspective of service users. Complaints and compliments information is also shared with senior leaders in the annual complaints report. However, overall, we found that there was limited information in the Council's main performance reports which would enable senior leaders to understand the perspective of service users.
- 16 We found very few examples of measures around the perspective of service users in the quarterly scorecards. As a result, it is difficult to see how senior leaders would be able to understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users from its performance information.

Performance information provided to senior leaders for the previous Council Plan includes limited information on outcomes of the Council's activities, but the Council is taking action to address this

- 17 Whilst the Council did have some examples of outcome measures, overall, we found there was very little information to help senior leaders understand the outcomes of the Council's activities from its previous Corporate Plan. The Council's quarterly reports featured very little outcomes information and focussed on output and actions. This limits senior leaders' ability to understand the impact of the Council's activities and whether it is meeting its objectives.
- 18 The Council is developing outcome measures for its 2023-28 Council Plan. The format of the proposed new template performance reports on the 2023-28 Council Plan show that they will have a greater focus on outcomes and the new format could enable senior leaders to monitor the Council's outcomes over the duration of the plan. However, as these measures were still being developed, they were not being reported to senior leaders at the time of our fieldwork.

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

19 Overall, we found that the Council does not have comprehensive arrangements to check the accuracy of its service user perspective and outcomes information as they are not a prominent feature of its performance information. We did, however, see examples of arrangements which help assure senior leaders there is rigour behind the performance information they are given. For example, the Council conducts spot checks on its performance data sets to understand any anomalies in performance, but these do not routinely cover data on service user perspective. It has also introduced standards for inputting data and we were provided with a data quality card for a service user perspective measure which set out the method of calculation. However, unless the Council is assured that its data accuracy arrangements cover service user perspective and outcome data, there is a risk that decisions and action may be taken, and resources deployed, based on inaccurate information.

As 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

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

21 Where we did find examples of the Council providing information on the perspective of service users and outcomes, we found that it uses this information to make changes. For example, the Council changed the Blue Badge applications process because of complaints it had received about the length of time assessments took.

The Council has begun to strengthen its outcomes information as part of its recent review of its performance management arrangements, but this has not resulted in strengthening its service user perspective performance information

22 The Council has reviewed its performance management arrangements for its new Council Plan and as part of that has specifically incorporated greater outcome measures, which it will then report against, enabling senior leaders to get a better understanding of the impact of the Council's activities.

23 However, the Council has not reviewed how it can strengthen information to help senior leaders understand the views of service users within the proposed format

for its new performance reports. For example, the template for reporting on the 2023-28 priorities includes a section on 'customers' with a sub-heading referring to customer satisfaction surveys. However, the template its Housing and Assets department has completed as an example describes the engagement activity, rather than providing information to enable senior leaders to determine how well the service is meeting the needs of its users.

- 24 The Council does not compare the service user perspective or outcomes information it collects with the information collected by similar organisations collects or collection methods. We do not mean comparing performance per se, but to help it learn how other organisations are providing information about service user perspectives and outcomes to help strengthen its own arrangements. 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 and policies are meeting the needs of service users.

R2 Outcomes information

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

R3 Arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of data

The Council should ensure that its data quality assurance arrangements cover service user perspective information so it can assure itself that this information is accurate.

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 2	Audit Criteria ² (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.

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.



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