

Chief Executive  
Carmarthenshire County Council  
County Hall  
Carmarthen  
SA31 1JP

24 Cathedral Road / 24 Heol y Gadeirlan  
Cardiff / Caerdydd  
CF11 9LJ  
Tel / Ffôn: 029 2032 0500  
Fax / Ffacs: 029 2032 0600  
Textphone / Ffôn testun: 029 2032 0660  
[info@audit.wales](mailto:info@audit.wales) / [post@archwilio.cymru](mailto:post@archwilio.cymru)  
[www.audit.wales](http://www.audit.wales) / [www.archwilio.cymru](http://www.archwilio.cymru)

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Dear Wendy

## Assurance and Risk Assessment progress update

Following on from our meeting with Corporate Management Team earlier this year we said that we would more formally feedback 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 Election (Wales) Act 2021.

This work was undertaken as part of our 2021-2022 Assurance and Risk Assessment (ARA) project to help discharge the Auditor General's duties<sup>1</sup>.

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<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 Carmarthenshire.

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

### **What we did**

We undertook our assessment of the Council's progress in responding to key requirements in the Local Government and Elections and (Wales) Act 2021 between January 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 and (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**

The Council has developed a new process for business planning and performance management which it intends to be self-reflective and improvement focused. These new processes have several positive attributes including:

- the use of a broad set of data to challenge performance and set improvement goals. This includes integrating performance and financial data, risk management information and data related to complaints.
- proactive corporate engagement by the Council's Corporate Management Team and Cabinet on performance. There are now dedicated sessions held to review performance, with officers providing enhanced analysis and interpretation of the data to ensure more effective corporate understanding and management of performance.
- the use of internal Engagement and Assurance Panels, using a core group of internal peers to ensure effective support and challenge to service business planning and to help provide corporate oversight. These panels also create opportunities for services to view performance and improvement through a wider cross departmental lens.

The Council's new business planning and performance management approaches will be the primary way in which the Council will gather evidence for the future self-assessments it is required to undertake under the new Act. The Council has arranged, with support from the WLGA, for an independent assessment to be conducted of its proposed approach to self-assessment to ensure it is robust going forward.

The basis for the Council's 2021-22 self-assessment will be its service self-assessments that were undertaken as part of its business planning process in October 2021. The Council intends to report the outputs from its self-assessment within its Annual Improvement Report (AIR). It plans to draft the AIR in May-June 2022, present it for review to scrutiny committees in July 2022, and then to take it for approval by Cabinet and Council prior to publication in October 2022. The Council has told us that the outputs from its self-assessment will also inform its new Corporate Strategy, in which it is proposing to set-out its refreshed thematic Well-being Objectives.

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. However, the current thinking is that the external Panel Assessment is likely to take place mid-term of the new administration.

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

The Council is currently in the process of reappraising the way it engages citizens, and some of its initial thoughts include:

- surveying citizens in late May 2022, incorporating some performance information in the survey to facilitate an informed response.
- establishing Citizens' Panels – based around the Well-being Objective themes, where citizens will be able to engage on the self-assessment/ performance aspect but also on wider issues.
- improved feedback processes to participants to ensure they can see the impact of their engagement.

The Council told us that it currently engages with other stakeholders through existing groups such as the Business Advisory Group and with staff through its regular staff engagement arrangements. However, the Council is still developing its consultation approach which will include a new IT platform for public and stakeholder engagement, and establishing a staff forum.

At the time of our work the Council was preparing an early draft of its participation strategy. This document is currently focused on how the Council makes its decisions and providing information on how to become a Councillor, rather than on broader engagement and consultation with citizens and other stakeholders. The Council recognises that there is more work to do to ensure that their participation strategy reflects these broader aspects.

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

The new arrangements for the Council's Governance and Audit Committee have been established and the Committee's new composition was approved by the Audit Committee, and by Council in its review of its constitution in May 2021. Under the new arrangements the Council's Governance and Audit Committee will have 12 members (8 elected members and 4 lay members).

Despite a disappointing response to the initial recruitment campaign for lay members, the Council's subsequent recruitment campaigns have been more successful and at

the Governance and Audit Committee on 8 April 2022 the Committee unanimously resolved to recommend to Council the appointment of three named lay members for the period 25th May 2022 to 24th May 2027. The Council is in the process of readvertising to recruit its final fourth lay member.

The Council plans to undertake specific induction training for the new Governance and Audit Committee lay members in July 2022.

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

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 decision to approve its draft budget was taken at a later meeting of the SWWCJC on the 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 told us that it has no immediate plans to use this power.

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.

I 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 going forward.

Yours sincerely,

Alison Lewis

**Audit Lead**