

Use of Performance Information: Service User Perspective and Outcomes – Rhondda Cynon Taf 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.
- 2 Overall, we found that performance information provided to senior leaders does not generally enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities.
- 3 We have made two 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 perspectives 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.
- 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. Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with the Cabinet Member and senior officers with lead responsibility for the Council's performance management arrangements. The evidence we have used to inform our findings is limited to these sources.
- 8 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

- 9 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.
- 10 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 key performance reporting arrangements

- 11 The Council's key performance reports are its quarterly performance reports and its annual performance report. These provide the main opportunity for members and the public to understand how well the Council is performing. Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committees consider the quarterly performance reports. They include details of service performance, progress towards well-being objectives and financial monitoring information. Members also receive other reports that include performance information, for example, service reports.
- 12 The Council published its Annual Self-Assessment 2021-22 in February 2023. Prior to this, the Governance and Audit Committee considered it in December 2022, in line with the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.
- 13 Each service area produces an annual self-evaluation. The Council does not publish these documents, but they are reviewed by the respective Cabinet Members. The service self-evaluations are required to be signed off by the Group Director and subject to challenge from the Chief Executive.

14 Our review focused on these key performance reporting mechanisms.

What we found: performance information provided to senior leaders does not generally enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities

Performance information provided to senior leaders on the perspective of service users is limited, so it is difficult to see how they can fully understand the perspective of service users to enable them to manage performance

- 15 The Council's public 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.
- 16 The template for the service self-evaluations contains prompts designed to help capture the service user perspective. We found examples within those self-evaluations that we reviewed that captured the service user perspective. However, the extent and breadth of the information on the service user perspective vary with some service self-evaluations containing more detail and examples than others. Overall, the information provided is relatively limited and so does not enable senior leaders to fully understand the service user perspective. Where there is information about the perspective of service users, this is not then reflected in the quarterly performance reports. Some self-evaluations referred to engaging with service users but did not go on to provide information about what that engagement told the Council and how the Council used this information. This is a missed opportunity to give senior leaders information which would help them understand the views of service users and to take action to address any issues.
- 17 The Director of Social Services annual report 2021-22 went to scrutiny and Cabinet and included some good examples of information about the perspective of a diverse range of service users. We also saw some positive examples of Social Services seeking to understand the service user perspective which are shared with the Corporate Parenting Board. This included the 'get involved' survey for care experienced children and young people and the fostering quality of care annual report. This information would help senior leaders to understand how the Council's social services policies and services were being received by users.

Performance information provided to senior leaders largely focuses on outputs and activities rather than evaluating their impact

- 18 Despite some exceptions, the Council's core performance reports generally provide a narrative of activities and outputs as opposed to an assessment of progress against the outcomes the Council is seeking to achieve. This limits senior leaders' ability to understand the impact of the Council's activities and whether it is meeting its objectives.
- 19 The service self-evaluations that we reviewed include some examples of outcomes information. However, overall, the information provided in these self-evaluations did not enable senior leaders to understand the impact and outcomes of the Council's activities.
- 20 The recent Estyn report¹ includes a recommendation about sharpening approaches to self-evaluation. The report also states that: 'In a few instances self-evaluation focuses on the completion of actions rather than the impact of this work.' Our findings from this review work concur with this finding.

The Council does not have arrangements to ensure that the performance data reflecting the service user perspective and outcomes information is accurate

- 21 The Council does not have arrangements in place to routinely ensure the data quality of performance information relating to outcomes and the service user perspective. This means that even when performance information is presented to senior leaders it may be inaccurate, which increases the risks of action being taken and resources deployed on the basis of inaccurate information.
- 22 The Council has data quality teams in place in its Education and Social Services directorates. These teams review and cleanse data which is included in the quarterly performance reports. But they do not check the accuracy of service user perspective and outcomes information. As set out above, such information is limited in the quarterly performance reports in any case.
- 23 The Council's Internal Audit team has previously undertaken data quality checks prior to the pandemic. Internal Audit intend to undertake a data quality review during 2023-24. This may help address some of the existing gaps in the Council's arrangements.

¹ Estyn, A report on education services in Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, January 2023 Estyn, https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files?file=2023-03/Inspection%20report%20Rhondda%20Cynon%20Taf%20County%20Borough%20Council%202023_0.pdfA report on education services in Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council , January 2023

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

- 24 As set out above, our main finding is that performance information provided to senior leaders does not generally enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities. Therefore, it logically 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 limited.
- 25 Where we did find examples of the Council providing information on the perspective of service users and outcomes, we found some examples of the Council then using this information to make changes. For example, the Social Services complaints annual report sets out what the Council is going to do in response to the complaints that have been raised.

The Council recognises that it needs to make better use of the information available to it

- 26 In its annual self-assessment report published in February 2023, the Council has identified that it needs to make better use of the information available to it and to strengthen its engagement and involvement with service users. Our review would support this.
- 27 As the Council does this, it will be important for it to ensure that its arrangements help senior leaders benchmark and compare its arrangements with other organisations. We have previously commented that this is an important element of arrangements to secure value for money. Doing this will also help the Council understand and learn from how other councils are providing information on service user perspective and outcomes. We hope to be able to provide some examples in our national summary report following the completion of our work at other councils.
- 28 We acknowledge that targets, trends, and comparative information was something that the Council did include within its performance reports prior to the pandemic, and that it made a conscious decision to not do this during the pandemic. The Council has said that it is an area it will address for 2023-24.

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 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 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 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 Criteria² (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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