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Our reference 462A2012
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Pages 1 of 10

Dear Helen

Improvement Assessment

I am required, under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) to report my audit and assessment work in relation to whether Wrexham County Borough Council (the Council) has discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure.

This letter summarises:

- my views on whether the Council has discharged its statutory duties in respect of improvement planning;
- my views on the Council's compliance with requirements to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement, based on work carried out to date by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators, including:
 - the Council's progress on areas for improvement and recommendations identified in my previous assessments;
 - any relevant issues that may have emerged since my last report, including comments on how the Council is addressing financial challenges; and
 - a brief summary of any reports of relevant regulators issued since my last report.
- my further proposals for improvement and/or recommendations; and
- updates to the Wales Audit Office work plan and timetable for delivering my Improvement Assessment work.

I shall update my views during the year and will provide a further letter by the end of November 2012.

Developments since my last report

Following the local government elections in May 2012 the Council appointed a new Executive Board and a new Leader. The Board remains politically balanced, and seven of the 10 members have Lead Member responsibilities for a portfolio of Council activities.

The new access road to Wrexham Industrial Estate has now been opened. The £30 million funding for this project was provided by the Welsh Government, and locally managed by the Council.

Work has recently commenced on the Western Gateway project. As part of this development, the Council has provided £1.8 million funding to enhance access to Wrexham Technology Park through improved footpath and road links.

The Council has discharged its improvement planning duties under the Measure and has acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance

I have reached this conclusion because:

- the Council Plan 2012-2016 (the Plan) outlines the Council's improvement objectives, which comply with the Welsh Government guidance and appear achievable;
- the results of previous consultation activities with the public and relevant partners have informed the development of the Improvement Priorities; and
- the Council has set out high-level targets for achievement during the life of the Plan.

The Council has developed a publicly-focused Plan that is reasonably easy to understand. The Plan is supplemented with a short and attractive summary version, which the Council is actively promoting. In the Plan, the Council has described the high-level outcomes it wants to achieve in 15 Improvement Objectives. The breadth of these is ambitious, especially as many objectives require partnership working. The targets set for improving educational standards are also ambitious, but many other targets reflect only limited challenge.

There is scope for the Council to further improve the quality of the Plan. Each Improvement Objective has a description of what it can contribute to the Borough. But there is generally no rationale for why it was chosen in relation to criteria such as past performance, the need for cashable efficiency savings or implementing national policy. The Improvement Objectives could be described more precisely in terms of the anticipated outcomes. At present the measures associated with each priority outcome do not, in many cases, reflect the breadth of the ambitions outlined in the description.

Based on, and limited to, work carried out to date by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators I believe that the Council is likely to comply with the requirement to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement during this financial year

I have reached this conclusion because the Council:

- has made good progress in several areas for improvement identified in previous audit letters and reports;
- remains well placed to manage the financial challenge through savings programmes and 'Transformation' projects;
- has arrangements for developing, using and supporting technology that are likely to support continuous improvement; and
- the CSSIW has reported that the Council has taken steps to improve the services provided to vulnerable children and young people.

As in most organisations, there are some aspects of the Council's arrangements that require further attention. In particular:

- the Council's arrangements for the governance of its information assets present some risks and have the potential to limit the Council's ability to improve; and
- despite the steps noted above, CSSIW also reported that the Council needs to further improve many aspects of the services provided to vulnerable children and young people.

The Council has made good progress in several areas for improvement identified in previous audit letters and reports

I have previously reported a number of recommendations and proposals for improvement and also noted some areas where we would undertake further work. Progress on these matters is summarised below and described in more detail in Appendix 1:

- During 2011-12, the Council reviewed and revised its scrutiny and decision-making arrangements, and has made a promising start to implementing the changes. Senior members and officers are clearly committed to seeing through the changes, and we will continue to monitor progress.
- As outlined above, the Council has largely addressed the proposals for improvement relating to its Improvement Plan. The Council has started to develop balanced scorecards to monitor delivery of the Improvement Priorities.
- The Council has begun the process of allocating resources to the Improvement Priorities as part of its medium-term financial planning and budget setting for 2013-14.

Further information about our findings in some of these areas is provided separately in interim updates where appropriate.

The Council remains well placed to manage the financial challenge through savings programmes and ‘transformation’ projects

The Council is continuing to update its medium-term financial plans. Departmental service reviews have resulted in cashable savings of £5.4 million in 2011-12. The Council is more closely integrating the transformation work with its day-to-day business. The Council plans to embed change through the introduction of Strategic Assessments within the transformation programme. These assessments will be cross cutting reviews that will consider how the Council can further improve its service delivery. Work is underway to realise the planned savings of £3.5 million during 2012-13. Members are already actively involved in setting the budget for the forthcoming year.

The Council’s arrangements for developing, using and supporting technology are likely to support continuous improvement.

The Council has established a sound technology infrastructure, and is starting to use technology to transform services and achieve efficiencies. However, it could improve strategic planning and decision-making arrangements, and use performance information to demonstrate achievements and savings arising from the use of technology. The Council has focused on developing technology-based customer access channels, which are performing well, and is starting to exploit the potential of other aspects of technology to enable back-office service transformation. However, the Council needs to improve approaches to identify the return on investment in its technology projects.

The Council’s arrangements for the governance of its information assets present some risks and have the potential to limit the Council’s ability to improve.

I came to this conclusion because:

- The Council’s governance of information is not strong enough, the Council lacks a corporate information strategy, and ownership, accountability and responsibilities for information are unassigned.
- The Council has sound technical information security. However, it lacks knowledge about its information assets, and the fragmented approach to information management means it cannot fully understand those areas that represent the highest risk or opportunity. The Council cannot therefore focus its efforts on the areas that need the most improvement.

The Council has taken steps to improve the services provided to vulnerable children and young people but further improvements are needed in many aspects of these services.

The CSSIW undertook an inspection of the arrangements for the assessment and care management of children in need in the Council. This was published in May 2012.

The main findings were:

- The service had experienced increased demand coupled with instability in the workforce during 2010 and 2011.
- The number of agency staff has fallen, as the number of permanent staff has increased, and there are indications that staff morale has improved.
- The Council has directly provided and commissioned additional preventative services to try and reduce demand for social service intervention.
- Statutory partners such as the police generally reported positive working relationships with the Council. There were some good examples of services that had been provided in partnership.
- The Council's performance, as measured by performance indicators, shows improvement in some key areas including the percentage of decisions made within one day of receipt of referral.
- Some performance management and quality assurance arrangements are in place, with information and data collection providing a basis for understanding and influencing performance.
- Some performance management and quality assurance arrangements are in place, and information is used to review service performance.

The Council had identified a number of performance and efficiency issues and had taken steps to address these. Despite this, the inspection found a number of issues that remained to be addressed, including:

- the high rate of re-referrals, and the timeliness and quality of initial and core assessments;
- the need for formal documented risk assessment and risk management to support decision-making at the referral and assessment stages;
- the need for improved quality and completeness of recording in case files, and consistent recording in both the paper and electronic files;
- the need for clarity regarding the classification of referrals to the service;
- the need for improved oversight, timely visits to children and prompt implementation of care plans;
- the need for further development and embedding of the performance management and quality assurance arrangements; and
- the need to further improve some aspects of interagency working.

In some key areas, the Council was unable to demonstrate improved outcomes for children and young people referred.

Further proposals for improvement/recommendations

No further proposals for improvement are being suggested in this letter. We will continue to monitor and report on the progress made by the Council in implementing the proposals set out in my previous reports and letters.

Updates to the work plan and timetable

My Improvement Assessment Team will keep the Council informed of the detailed arrangements for the delivery of my assessment work.

The regularly updated work plan and timetable provides more detail on the work being delivered during this year's assessment and in particular, how we will add value by focusing on jointly identified areas or services.

The work plan and timetable takes account of my consultation with improvement authorities over my proposals for 2012-13 performance audit work. In particular, I shall be asking my Improvement Assessment Team to consider during the year the reliance that we can place upon the self-assessment processes (including your review of governance in producing the Annual Governance Statement and your Annual Performance Report). I shall comment on this approach in my Annual Improvement Report.

I am grateful to the Council for the way in which it has helped to facilitate our work and hope to see even more effective and efficient arrangements developing over time. I remain committed to providing appropriate levels of public assurance while supporting you in mitigating the inevitable risks to services and accountability that stem from reducing resources and consequential change.

Yours sincerely



HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS

AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES

CC: Carl Sargeant, Minister for Local Government and Communities

Huw Lloyd Jones – Manager

Karen Lees – Performance Audit Lead

Appendix 1

Proposals for improvement made in the Annual Improvement Report 2012	Progress
<p>P12.1 Pursue recent work to develop the Council Plan 2012-16 and address issues of the ambition, governance and performance management of the Council.</p>	<p>The Council has developed a publicly focused Plan that is reasonably easy to understand. The Plan is supplemented with a short and attractive summary version, which the Council is actively promoting. In the Plan, the Council has described the high-level outcomes it wants to achieve in 15 Improvement Objectives. The breadth of these is ambitious, especially as many objectives require partnership working. However, most of the individual targets within the Improvement Objectives do not appear to be stretching, with the notable exception of education.</p> <p>During 2011-12, the Council reviewed and revised its scrutiny and decision making arrangements. The changes were accepted by the newly elected Council, and included in a refresh of the Constitution in May 2012. The new scrutiny committees have been aligned to the Council's priority areas, which may help to improve the focus and impact of their work. The Council has made a promising start to implementing the changes. Senior members and officers are clearly committed to seeing through the changes. The benefits from this new way of working will take a little while to impact on service delivery and the general operation of the Council. As such, we will continue to monitor the situation.</p>
<p>P12.2 Increase the pace of change in meeting the Human Resources strategy and developing workforce planning.</p>	<p>We will report on progress later in the year.</p>

Proposals for improvement made in the Annual Improvement Report 2012	Progress
<p>P12.3 Establish and embed in Council arrangements robust methods to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assess if the public finds it easy to access Council services, and take action to improve accessibility to services where needed; • to engage with the public, and use this information to develop future plans and Council services; and • provide prompt feedback to the public, and where appropriate specific groups of customers, on the results of public consultations and the actions taken as a result by the Council. 	<p>We will report on progress later in the year.</p>
<p>P12.4 Review its strategy to meet local housing need through affordable housing, improving the quality of its housing stock and providing support to those who present as homeless.</p>	<p>We will report on progress later in the year.</p>
<p>P12.5 Address weaknesses in target setting, data quality and performance management, and enable the Council to undertake and publish robust assessments of its performance.</p>	<p>The Council has started to develop balanced scorecards to monitor delivery of the new Improvement Priorities. The economic development service is leading this work, with support from corporate services. This new methodology has the potential to streamline aspects of the Council's overly complex business processes. We will report on further progress later in the year.</p>

Proposals for improvement made in the Corporate Assessment update Letter 2011	Progress
P11.1 Complete the development of outcome measures for its improvement priorities, and use performance reporting to highlight progress on achieving outcomes.	We will report on this later in the year.
P11.2 Improve the effectiveness of public engagement, and develop a more coherent approach across the Council.	We will report on further progress later in the year.
Recommendations for improvement made in the Corporate Assessment Update Letter 2011	Progress
R1 The Council should outline arrangements to review scrutiny and decision making and to streamline business processes which increase the pace of change in addressing these issues.	See comment on P12.1 above.
R2 The Council should set out how it will integrate the processes for developing future improvement objectives and allocating resources to them as part of its medium-term planning and budget setting process.	The Council has begun the process of allocating resources to the Improvement Priorities as part of the Council's medium-term financial planning and budget setting for 2013-14. Senior officers and Members are involved in this work. Progress is in line with the Council's action plan, and we will continue to monitor this work.