



WALES AUDIT OFFICE
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Auditor General for Wales

Follow-up Review of Proposals for Improvement – **Conwy County Borough Council**

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Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This document is also available in Welsh.

The team who delivered the work comprised, Gwilym Bury and Sara-Jane Byrne under the direction of Huw Rees.

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Summary report

Summary

- 1 The purpose of this review is to gain assurance that Conwy County Borough Council (the Council) has effective arrangements for addressing proposals for improvement and recommendations made by the Wales Audit Office and is evaluating the extent to which its actions are contributing to delivering improved service performance and outcomes for citizens.
- 2 In May 2016, the Auditor General published his local report 'Review of Arrangements to Raise Standards in Schools'. The report concluded that the Council should reflect in its Partnership Agreement with school governing bodies and in its relationship with GwE¹ the fact that GwE is a shared service working across North Wales, rather than a commissioned service.
- 3 We came to this conclusion because:
 - members, officers and partners co-operated well within an improving governance framework, addressing local priorities and arrangements that the Council recognised were not working well;
 - the Council had taken steps to address weaknesses in its strategic use of resources, but more work lay ahead in the face of financial challenges;
 - the Council had made good progress against its key improvement priorities;
 - the report made six proposals for improvement (PFIs); and
 - the Council had made good progress against its key improvement priorities.
- 4 To gain assurance that the Council has effective arrangements for addressing the proposals for improvement, we reviewed the progress that the Council had made in implementing these proposals for improvement and the effectiveness of its arrangements for doing so.
- 5 We found that the Council has satisfactory arrangements for addressing proposals for improvement and recommendations from the Wales Audit Office. We came to this conclusion because:
 - the Council has satisfactory arrangements for responding to proposals for improvement and recommendations; and
 - the Council has addressed most of the proposals for improvement issued in our report of arrangements to raise standards in schools.

Proposals for improvement

- 6 There are no proposals for improvement in this report.

¹ GwE is the School Effectiveness and Improvement Service for all six councils in North Wales

The Council has satisfactory processes for addressing proposals for improvement and recommendations from the Wales Audit Office

The Council has satisfactory arrangements for responding to proposals for improvement and recommendations

- 7 The Council has clear processes in place to feed findings and recommendations from all external reviews, including from CiW (Care Inspectorate Wales) and Estyn (Education and Training Inspectorate in Wales) to the Senior Management Team (SMT) who prioritise the recommendations according to risk and their alignment with corporate priorities. Heads of Service advise SMT on the relevance of recommendations in Auditor General of Wales national reports, where not all findings may apply to the Council.
- 8 Heads of Service develop actions to respond to the recommendations and these are incorporated into service plans. Services track progress against the plans on a six monthly basis and a panel of senior officers and elected members review and challenge progress at annual service performance reviews. When the Council requires additional assurance, it can establish task and finish groups to oversee and monitor the implementation of high priority recommendations. The SMT determines which external reports go to Council scrutiny committees. Reports that SMT considers priority or high risk are routinely reported at Scrutiny Committees, with follow-up reports on progress as necessary. In addition, the Audit and Governance Committee can refer reports to Chairs and Vice Chairs of Scrutiny where the committee felt there should be further scrutiny of external reports. Currently, all Wales Audit Office national and local reports and other inspection reports are sent to the Audit and Governance Committee. All members have had the opportunity to read and debate all external reports which are published in full and placed as agenda items for the Audit and Governance Committee.
- 9 The Council officers produce comprehensive Action Plans with clear timescales for all Wales Audit Office national and local reports and other inspection reports. This helps promote greater transparency by ensuring that Committee members are well informed and able to follow up on any issues of interest or concern. The Council also provides the Audit and Governance Committee with a bi-annual report on progress against all Wales Audit Office (and other external inspection reports such as from CiW) report recommendations and proposals for improvement. This also helps to monitor progress and facilitate accountability.
- 10 The Council has similar arrangements for following up Internal Audit recommendations. Services take ownership of identified risks and issues and develop the actions needed to address them. Service review meetings then hold senior officers to account for progress against recommendations. Internal Audit routinely follow up recommendations from audit reports with limited and minimal

assurance shortly after planned actions are scheduled for completion. This provides assurance that the actions have been completed and that they have addressed the issues. Furthermore, services cannot amend the target completion date for actions without approval from Internal Audit. The Audit and Governance Committee provides effective oversight, receiving regular update reports and calling in services to account for lack of progress when required.

The Council has addressed most of the proposals for improvement issued in the selected report

- 11 In our report Review of Arrangements to Raise Standards in Schools we made three proposals for improvement (PFIs). Our assessment of the Council's progress in addressing these is set out in **Exhibit 1** below:

Exhibit 1: Council's progress in addressing our proposals for improvement

Proposals for improvement – Wales Audit Office Report 'Review of Arrangements to Raise Standards in Schools'	Our evaluation of progress by the Council
<p>1. The Council should reflect in its Partnership Agreement with school governing bodies and in its relationship with GwE the fact that GwE is a shared service working across North Wales, rather than a commissioned service.</p>	<p>Addressed.</p> <p>The Council's response was to undertake a comprehensive review of its joint working with GwE. Fortnightly monitoring meetings were established between GwE and the Council to review the new joint Business Plan. Data sharing arrangements were strengthened and Council and GwE representatives both attend all accelerated improvement Board meetings in schools. Following a restructuring of GwE, the operational working arrangements with GwE were revised with clearer lines of accountability between GwE and the Council. A regional partnership agreement with GwE across North Wales was agreed and implemented in full in September 2018.</p>
<p>2. The Council should work with GwE and representative school leaders to revise the Partnership Agreement with schools' governing bodies, ensuring that it includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • further distinction and clarity between the role of the Council's school effectiveness officers and that of GwE's challenge advisers; and • sections that set out respective roles for the Council and 	<p>Addressed.</p> <p>A regional partnership agreement with GwE across North Wales was agreed and implemented in September 2018. The new Partnership Agreement clarifies the role of the Council's school effectiveness officers and that of GwE's challenge advisers. The roles for the Council and schools' governing bodies with regard to financial and HR support in those schools that may not choose to buy the Service Level Agreement are comprehensively set out in the new Partnership Agreement.</p>

Proposals for improvement – Wales Audit Office Report ‘Review of Arrangements to Raise Standards in Schools’	Our evaluation of progress by the Council
<p>schools’ governing bodies with regard to financial and HR support in those schools that may not choose to buy the Service Level Agreement.</p>	
<p>3. Having revised its Partnership Agreement with schools’ governing bodies, the Council should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use its Scrutiny and Cabinet arrangements to ensure that the Agreement is owned corporately; • assure itself that all schools’ governing bodies have adopted the Agreement or, where governors feel unable to agree, that the Council is fully aware of their concerns; and • revise the job descriptions of school effectiveness officers, ensuring that they accurately reflect the duties specified in the Agreement, and that other duties are subordinate to those set out in the Agreement. 	<p>Mostly addressed.</p> <p>Scrutiny and Cabinet receive regular reports on progress on all matters of Educational Performance including progress of the new Partnership Agreement. In addition, Council officers established a School Effectiveness and Standards group which oversees the detailed operation of the new partnership Agreement and acts as an additional tier of challenge for all Conwy schools. Each secondary school is invited to the Member led challenge on an annual basis and the primary schools are invited on a three-year cycle. Officers from the Council education service and GwE also attend the challenge meetings. The meetings are to discuss specific areas of school progress and ensure the Council has clear understanding of the direction of progress of the school.</p> <p>Following the agreement of a regional partnership agreement with schools, the new arrangements began to be adopted by all Conwy school governing bodies. The process of all schools adopting the Partnership Agreement is not yet complete.</p> <p>Job descriptions of school effectiveness officers have all been revised.</p>

12 Progress on the proposals for improvement is regularly reported to the Council’s Audit and Governance Committee and in Autumn 2018 the Committee agreed that there had been enough progress for the first two proposals for improvement to be signed off by the committee as completed. The third proposal for improvement is not yet fully signed off by the Audit and Governance Committee. The latest report in February 2019 on the new Partnership Agreement to the Council’s Audit and Governance Committee stated that officers are still waiting final confirmation that all schools in Conwy have adopted the partnership agreement before they can recommend that there had been enough progress for the third Wales Audit Office proposal for improvement to be signed off by the Committee as fully completed. Officers believe that by the Spring of 2019 the process of adoption will have been fully completed by all schools and the proposal for improvement can be signed off.

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