

Use of performance information: service user perspective and outcomes – Merthyr Tydfil 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 doesn't generally enable them to understand the perspective of service users and the outcomes of the Council's activities. This restricts their ability to understand the impact of the Council's services and policies.
- 3 We have made 3 recommendations to strengthen the information given to senior leaders.
- 4 Our findings are based on fieldwork we did between May and June 2023.

What we looked at – the scope of this audit

- 5 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 or the development of policies and strategies.
- 6 We have set out our audit questions and audit criteria in **Appendix 1**. The audit criteria sets out what good looks like and what we would expect to find.
- 7 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.
- 8 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.
- 9 Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with the Cabinet Member, Director and senior officers with responsibility for the Council's performance management arrangements. The evidence we have used to inform our findings is limited to these sources.

- 10 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

- 11 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.
- 12 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

- 13 The Council monitors and manages performance through its self-assessment report, Quarterly Performance and Improvement Reviews (QPIRs) and, at a service level, through its Strategies on a Page (SOAP) which contain performance indicators. However, the Council is currently in the process of reviewing its performance management and quality assurance framework.
- 14 Corporate Management Team considers data presented in a performance dashboard. This is provided on an exception basis prior to a QPIR or self-evaluation, when scrutiny have requested a report or when the performance team or a director have identified an issue.
- 15 When the Council reports to Cabinet or Scrutiny on a specific issue, these reports will sometimes contain performance information.

16 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 perspective of service users and the outcomes of the Council's activities. This restricts their ability to understand the impact of the Council's services and policies

The performance information provided to senior leaders includes limited information to enable them to understand the perspective of service users

- 17 With the exception of the annual Corporate Self-Assessment and complaints information, the Council does not provide performance information which would help senior leaders understand the perspective of service users.
- 18 The Council's Corporate Self-Assessment 2021-22 draws on a range of information that relates to the service user perspective. For example, it draws on information from the Council's survey of residents, which seeks residents' perceptions of the Council and satisfaction with specific services. The self-assessment also contains case studies, some of which include information relating to the service user perspective. Case studies can help senior leaders understand the impact of the Council's activities, although they tend to relate to a small number of individuals and so do not provide a comprehensive picture of performance.
- 19 The QPIR papers and the corporate dashboard contain information on the number of complaints received, broken down by service area. This would give an indication of the views of service users but is not necessarily representative. However, the corporate dashboard is not considered by Corporate Management Team on a regular basis, and QPIR meetings have not been taking place regularly, so senior leaders have not received this information consistently over time.
- 20 However, the majority of the information contained in the QPIR papers, and the corporate dashboard is focused on activity and numerical information, which does not provide information about the service user perspective. Overall, therefore, the Council cannot be assured that it understands the impact that its services and policies are having on service users.

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

- 21 Overall, we found very limited examples of outcomes information being provided to senior leaders for example through the Quarterly Performance Information Reviews (QPIRs), service level Strategies on a Page (SOAPs) and the corporate dashboard. Although we found some examples in the Council's annual self-assessment, most of the performance information overall related to outputs and activities. The limited reporting of outcome measures limits senior leaders' ability to understand the impact of the Council's activities and whether it is meeting its objectives.

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

- 22 The Council's individual service areas are each responsible for ensuring that their performance data is of sufficient quality and accuracy. However, the Council does not have arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of this data and specifically the limited amount of information on service user perspective. This limits senior leaders' ability to understand the impact of the Council's activities and whether it is meeting its objectives.

As the 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

- 23 As set out previously, our main finding is that performance information provided to senior leaders does not 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.

The Council is reviewing its performance management arrangements which provides an opportunity for it to strengthen its information on service user perspective and outcomes

- 24 The Council is currently in the process of reviewing its performance management and quality assurance framework. As part of this, in line with our findings and recommendations, it has an opportunity to strengthen the information it provides to senior leaders to enable them to understand the views of service users and the outcomes of its activities.
- 25 It will also be important for the Council to ensure that it compares its arrangements for collecting and reporting performance information on outcomes and the service

user perspective with the approaches of other organisations. This is an important element of arrangements to secure value for money. Doing this will also help the Council learn from how other councils are providing information on service user perspective and outcomes.

- 26 As part of our 2023-24 performance audit work, we will be doing a review of the Council's performance management arrangements so will be keen to see how the Council addresses our recommendations in this report.

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 Information on progress towards outcomes

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

R3 Information on 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 data it provides to senior leaders.

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 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 Criteria¹ (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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