



WALES **AUDIT** OFFICE  
SWYDDFA **ARCHWILIO** CYMRU

# Annual Improvement Report

## **Wrexham County Borough Council**

January 2011



## Annual Improvement Report by the Auditor General for Wales

This report is written by the Wales Audit Office on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales. (An explanation of what the Auditor General does is at Appendix 1). It is a new report that he is required to publish about how well Welsh councils are improving their services. With help from other inspectors like Estyn (for education) and the Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales, we have brought together a picture of what the council is trying to achieve; how it is going about it; and what it needs to do to improve its approach to improving services.

This Annual Improvement Report sets out that picture and each year we will produce a report to let you know what progress Wrexham County Borough Council (the Council) has made. We have not covered all the services the Council provides. We have focused on a small number of things, especially those things that the Council has said are its priorities for improvement. The report reflects the position at the end of October 2010 (unless otherwise stated).

We want to find out what you think of the services the Council is providing in your area and will be giving you an opportunity to comment in the future. In the meantime we would like to know whether this report gives you the information you need, and whether it is easy to understand. You can let us know your views by emailing us at [info@wao.gov.uk](mailto:info@wao.gov.uk) or writing to us at 24, Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF11 9LJ.

The Wales Audit Office study team that assisted in preparing this report comprised Stephen Martin and Karen Lees under the direction of Alan Morris.

This report has been prepared by the Wales Audit Office on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales as required by the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. The Auditor General for Wales assesses the compliance of Welsh improvement authorities (county councils, county borough councils, national park authorities and fire and rescue authorities) with the improvement requirements of Part 1 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009.

The Auditor General for Wales and his staff together comprise the Wales Audit Office. For further information about the Wales Audit Office please write to the Auditor General at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9LJ. Telephone 029 2032 0500, email: [info@wao.gov.uk](mailto:info@wao.gov.uk), or see website [www.wao.gov.uk](http://www.wao.gov.uk).

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# What kind of area is Wrexham?

## Background information

- 1 It is helpful to understand the kind of area Wrexham Borough is and some of the challenges it faces. We have included some background information below and at the start of several sections in this report. Further information about Wrexham and the Council is included in [Appendix 2](#).
- 2 Wrexham County Borough has a population of over 133,000. There are around 25,000 children and over 22,600 people aged 65 and over. The population for the county borough is projected to increase to 151,451 by 2033.
- 3 Wrexham is the administrative centre of the county borough, and the largest town in North Wales, located to the east of the region. It is situated between the Welsh mountains and the lower Dee Valley close to the border with Cheshire. As the largest town in North Wales it is a major centre of the region's commercial, retail and educational infrastructure.
- 4 In 2008, the employment rate in Wrexham was 77.1 per cent; this was one of the highest amongst the 22 Welsh local authorities. In 2008, Wrexham had one of the lowest rates of children living in workless households amongst the Welsh local authorities. In July 2010, 3.5 per cent or 3,000 residents of the working-age population declared they were out of work by claiming the Jobseekers Allowance and National Insurance credits. This is similar to the Welsh average of 3.6 per cent.

employment rate  
77.1%  
//////////

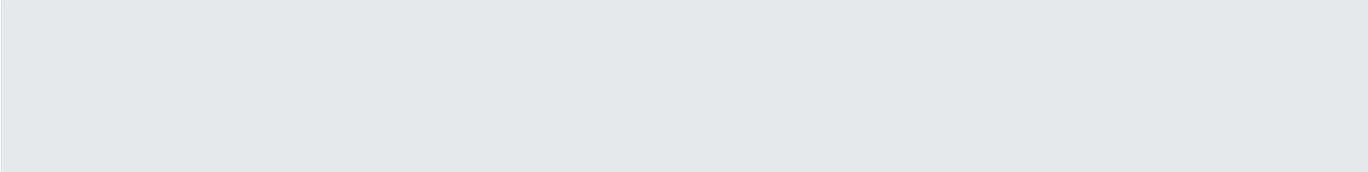
population  
over 133,000  
//////////

25,000 aged <16  
22,600 aged >65  
//////////

# Is Wrexham Council well managed?

- 5 **Wrexham County Borough Council has developed a clearer focus on priorities and some aspects of its arrangements support improvement while others provide only partial support.** This was the overall conclusion of a report the Wales Audit Office produced in August 2010 called the Preliminary Corporate Assessment which gives some detail on how the Council is organised and managed. Our findings are set out in [Appendix 3](#). If you want to read the whole Corporate Assessment Report you can find it on the Council's website, [www.wrexham.gov.uk](http://www.wrexham.gov.uk) or on the Wales Audit Office's website at [www.wao.gov.uk](http://www.wao.gov.uk).
- 6 The main messages were that both the political and managerial leadership are giving the Council a clear focus and a vision of where they want the Council to improve its services. The Council will need to be clearer in the future on which services it will and will not improve as it will have less resources due to the reductions in public funding.
- 7 The Council has strong and well developed financial management and a history of not overspending on its annual budget. The Council was in the early stages of developing a plan to deal with the likely reduction in its funding. This work includes making the Council work in a different way, as it responds to the current financial challenges. The Council is calling its plans for change the Transformation Programme.
- 8 The Council is working with other partner organisations such as the police, health board and voluntary organisations, to help improve services for people across the whole community. The Council needs to improve the way councillors get involved in Council business by making executive and scrutiny committees work more efficiently. The Council needs to improve the way it manages and looks after its staff and plans its workforce.
- 9 Since the publication of the Preliminary Corporate Assessment, the Council has continued to work to improve the way it is run, although the overall conclusions above are still relevant. Some of the recent developments include the Council reviewing the roles of their senior management posts, and it has decided to reduce the number of chief officer posts. The Council wants to speed up the time it takes to make some decisions. One way it is doing this is to make sure managers take the decisions where they have the power to do so. The Council has also given councillors more information to help them with their work on scrutiny committees.
- 10 The Council knows that it needs to do more to improve the way it manages and looks after its staff. It has developed a Human Resources Strategy for the next two years, which explains how this work will be done. This strategy also says that the Council will do more work to plan the numbers and types of staff it will need to deliver services in the next few years.
- 11 Since we produced the Corporate Assessment the pressure has grown on all public services to make the very best use of all their resources. Due to the financial climate, almost all public services face reductions in funding. Revenue funding is the money that councils spend running and managing their services. Wrexham Council will see a reduction of around £2 million (1.2 per cent) in the revenue funding it gets from the Assembly Government for 2011-12. Once inflation is factored in, that means a real terms<sup>1</sup> cut of around £5 million (3.1 per cent). Indicative Assembly Government figures show further real terms reductions in the Council's revenue funding for 2012-13 and 2013-14.

<sup>1</sup> Real terms means the effect of inflation is taken into account. There are lots of different measures of inflation. The figures used for public sector budgets come from the Treasury's GDP deflator series.

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- 12 Capital funding is the money that councils spend on infrastructure, for example new buildings and new equipment. The capital funding available to the Council is set to reduce considerably. Because councils make bids for capital funding, it is not possible to be entirely clear about how much each council will get. The total sum of capital available to councils will fall by 14 per cent in 2011-12 (a real terms cut of 18.5 per cent). There are no official figures for local government capital spending beyond 2011-12 but it is likely to be in line with a general reduction in the Assembly Government's capital spending, which will be cut by around 34 per cent (around 40 per cent in real terms) between 2010-11 and 2013-14.
- 13 The Council has continued to develop its 'Transformation Programme' which aims to identify savings of £20 million over the coming three years. A programme manager, shared with Flintshire County Council, is in post; the way the programme will be run has been agreed; and councillors and senior officers have begun to develop proposals. The Council has recently decided that it will keep the same set of priorities for 2011-12 but noted that developing and implementing its transformation programme may affect the delivery of its priorities.
- 14 The Council has continued to identify opportunities to make savings. It has also agreed to set aside £750,000 to go towards the cost that are incurred when staff take early retirement or are made redundant. There is a good collection rate for council tax, but the Council was still dealing with accumulated arrears of £3.2 million at the end of 2009-10.
- 15 The auditor appointed by the Auditor General has given his issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements, confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council's financial transactions. His annual audit letter, which provides information regarding the accounts, use of resources and the Council's Improvement Plan is included in this report in [Appendix 4](#).
- 16 There is more information about people's rights in relation to council accounts in the Wales Audit Office leaflet, *Council accounts: your rights*, which you can find on our website at [www.wao.gov.uk](http://www.wao.gov.uk).

# Does Wrexham Council know what it needs to do to improve?

- 17 **The Council has a clear set of priorities and plans to achieve these are either in place or being developed. These meet the requirements of the Assembly Government.**
- 18 The Assembly Government requires all councils to publish their plans for improving what they do and how they do it. They must also publish a list of the main things they are aiming to improve each year – their improvement objectives. Wrexham Council agreed a set of priorities for the three years from 2009 to 2012. These priorities fulfil the requirement for councils to set improvement objectives. There are three ‘council priorities’ which are focused areas where the Council wants to make significant changes. These are:
- helping to increase the number of affordable homes that are available in the County Borough;
  - helping people to get a better education and the skills they need for employment; and
  - reducing the amount of energy used and lowering carbon emissions.
- 19 The Council also has a set of ‘improvement priorities’. These are the areas from existing strategies and plans where the Council wants major improvements to take place. There are eight ‘improvement priorities’ which we have summarised as:
- helping older people to live independently;
  - helping people to eat a more healthy diet and be more active;
  - making it easier for people to use its services, and also asking the public how their services could be improved;
  - promoting equal opportunities for children and young people to become bilingual in Welsh and English, and the Council promoting the Welsh culture;
- reducing anti-social behaviour and substance misuse, and helping to improve the perceptions of crime;
  - reducing the amount of waste by increasing the rate of recycling;
  - delivering the Transformation Programme; and
  - improving the safeguarding of children (added for the year 2010-11).
- 20 The Council has published information about its priorities for the three years 2009-2012 in its quarterly magazine *Connect*. There was a particular feature in the winter 2009 issue and it has used other issues of the magazine and press releases to highlight its priorities and progress. A series of leaflets also highlight the aims of the community strategy produced by the Council and its partners. We think the Council is doing a good job of sharing its plans with local people.
- 21 We wanted to be sure the Council is clear how people will be better off if it improves in the ways it intends to. We reviewed its objectives and most of them are clear and it should be possible for the Council to measure what it is doing in helping to achieve them. However, in some cases it will be more difficult to say if they have achieved the benefit they want. For example, the objective about ‘healthy eating and being more active’ is intended to make people fitter and healthier and reduce deaths from heart disease. The Council is measuring its programmes to improve school meals and increase visits to leisure centres but it is not able to say how much impact this might have on overall obesity and fitness.

- 22 We think the Council needs to work on ways of measuring its success that take the full picture into account; including how willing and able it is to work with other organisations. This is especially important when there is less money available to each public organisation working on its own. We also found that in many service areas the Council set low targets that were not helping drive improvement. There is a need for a clear and consistent approach to target setting.
- 23 The Council has chosen specific areas to focus on through its improvement objectives but sometimes they are very narrow. For example, the Better Education and Skills for Employment priority focuses on a very small number of school leavers and the wider issues of helping people have the skills for success at work may be overlooked. The priority about affordable housing is important but focuses on trying to provide a fairly small number of additional homes each year and there is a risk that improving the condition of many thousands of Council properties is overlooked. The Council should ensure that its priorities will address the most significant issues for citizens.
- 24 We also looked at how well the Council involved local people and those that work with and for it, in deciding what it should make a priority. The priorities are linked to the Community Strategy for Wrexham that was agreed in 2009. There was consultation with partners and communities over this and other shared plans. The Council considered the results of the consultations when councillors decided the priorities for the Council. We think the Council will need to consider how its staff, partners and communities will contribute to decisions about reductions and changes to services that will arise from the Transformation Programme, and in deciding priorities from 2012 onwards.
- 25 We asked how well the Council's plans will support its efforts to do better and if it could afford to pay for these improvements. We found that the cost of delivering many of the priorities was not clear and we reported in the Corporate Assessment that the Council needed to do more to plan how it would use its funds to deliver the priorities. The Transformation Programme is now expected to contribute to the development of the financial plans for the future.
- 26 We also reported that more needed to be done to improve the service plans and reporting arrangements. We are pleased that the Council is intending to streamline plans and improve the challenge and scrutiny of them.
- 27 The Council's objectives and plans meet the requirements of the Assembly Government. The annual report on performance could be improved by more clearly describing progress towards achieving the better outcomes for residents it is seeking through its priorities.

## Is Wrexham Council serving people well?

- 28 Through the Auditor General's Improvement Assessment we will build a picture of how well the Council is serving local people. Each year we will examine the Council's services and some of their objectives for improvement as they relate to three important aspects of life in Wrexham. We think that together, these aspects cover the main things that councils do. They are:
- helping to support people in need;
  - helping people develop; and
  - helping to create a safe, prosperous and pleasant place to live.
- 29 We have carried out an initial review of all 11 of the Council's improvement objectives, and we will look at some of them in greater detail in our report next year. We describe progress with each objective in the following section (except progress with its Transformation Programme which was commented on in paragraph 13).

# Is Wrexham Council supporting people in need?

## Background information

- 30 Within the County Borough of Wrexham, there are a small number of areas that have a high level of deprivation. The levels of teenage pregnancy, adult mental wellbeing, obesity and smoking are not significantly different from the Welsh average.
- 31 Figures for 2006-2008 suggest that women in Wrexham have a life expectancy of around 81 years, which is slightly lower than the Welsh average although men's life expectancy is slightly higher than average at around 77.3 years.
- 34 2009-10 is the first full year of the new framework with the purpose being to establish a baseline of current performance. The key messages of the letter issued in December 2010 are summarised below.
- 35 For adults, including older people, the Council has helped more people to access direct payments so that they can manage their own care support should they wish to. There is also an increased uptake of assistive technology and the Independent Living Fund. The Council is proactively engaged with carers to better understand how they can improve services for individuals who provide informal care. The CSSIW inspection of adult protection procedures published in January 2010 indicated that there was an effective response to referrals.

## Is the Council supporting people in need through social care services?

- 32 The role of the Care and Social Services Inspectorate in Wales (CSSIW) is to make professional assessments and judgments about social care, early years and social services and so encourage improvement by the service providers. It works on behalf of Welsh Ministers, but there are a number of safeguards in place to ensure its independence. Under new legislation there is a new framework in place for local authority social services inspection, evaluation and review.
- 33 Directors of social services are required to produce an annual self-assessment report on how well services are being delivered. The CSSIW will then undertake a review and analysis of evidence underpinning the report, including evidence from other regulators and inspectors. This analysis will result in an individual inspection and review plan for each council. The CSSIW's analysis, and the inspection and review plan, will be set out annually in a published letter.
- 36 The Council needs to do more to develop the range of community support and preventative services and increase the percentage of older people able to live independently. The time taken to provide care services following assessment and the waiting times for occupational therapy assessments need to be reduced.
- 37 Consistent standards of case recording, including risk assessment and risk management document need to be improved and applied consistently, in both adults and children's services.
- 38 For children, the Council is developing with partner agencies an integrated assessment process in the child health disability service. The Council performed well in the percentage of reviews of children on the child protection register. The CSSIW Review of Children's Safeguarding Arrangements in October 2009 found that the investigations were seen to be speedily allocated and immediate risks and investigations were dealt with effectively.

- 39 However, the Council needs to improve the timeliness and performance of several areas including initial and core assessments, the review of children in need cases, and the statutory visits to looked after children. The rates of re-referrals and the reasons for this need to be reviewed. There also needs to be a provision of a wider range of services locally for looked after children.
- 40 Overall the Council has included several aspects of social care services in its improvement priorities. There is active member engagement, and the Council has used its performance management process to provide regular reports. This process has identified areas of concern, such as procedures and practice within children's services. The Council has evaluated the services and recognises the need to address major challenges to ensure children's services are providing effective procedures to respond to referrals and a timely and appropriate service. The Council provides targeted training opportunities for social care staff including those in the independent and voluntary sector, and has one of the highest qualified social care workforces in Wales. There is a commitment to working with partner organisations as part of services planning, and a number of joint developments are underway.

## Is Wrexham Council improving the safeguarding of children?

- 41 The Council and the partner organisations such as the police and health board, have said they want to improve the safeguarding of children. In other words they want to work together to try and keep children safe from harm. This was adopted by the Council Board in May 2010 as an additional improvement priority in response to a review by CSSIW.
- 42 The number of children and young people who are referred to social services because they may be at risk of being harmed has increased following high-profile deaths such as Baby Peter in Haringey Council. This means that the social services teams have more work to do. The Council has reported that they have not been able to respond to referrals as quickly as required.
- 43 During 2009, the Safeguarding and Support Department experienced difficulties with maintaining performance levels and delivering services within its set budget. Action was taken by the Chief Executive to address the situation, with additional officer and financial support provided, more intensive monitoring for the department and the introduction of revised working practices in some areas of the service. In February 2010, the Chief Executive commissioned a 'Safeguarding Summit' to assess the impact of the actions and to identify what, if any, further actions were needed to ensure sustainable improvement is achieved and maintained. An action plan has been developed and is being implemented.

## Is Wrexham Council helping older people to live independently?

- 44 **More services to help older people to live independently are being provided in Wrexham, but further progress is needed.** Many other Welsh councils are able to demonstrate that they are providing more support to help older people to live independently. So Wrexham still has a lot of work to do to become one of the best councils in Wales for this objective.
- 45 The Council wants to help more older people to be able to stay in their homes for longer, if they choose to, and be able to get the advice, support and care they need. This is an appropriate objective as most older people want to be independent rather than live in care homes and the number of older people in Wrexham is increasing.
- 46 The Council is making progress on increasing the range of services available to older people including the reablement service, extending the use of telecare and increasing access to direct payments. There remains scope for the Council to continue to develop these services and other projects such as extra care housing and the support provided to carers of older people.
- 47 However, the Council has not set itself stretching targets, even though it acknowledges it needs to continue to improve this service. The time it takes the Council to deliver some of the services to older people is slow, so sometimes people wait too long for these services. One example is the time taken to deliver an adaptation funded by a disabled facilities grant. The length of time people wait for this has improved in Wrexham. However the average waiting time is 387 days which is still a long time, although a long wait is common across many councils in Wales.

- 48 Most of the measures the Council uses focus on what actions it will do, or the number of people on a scheme. It is not clear how the Council will measure if they have been successful in meeting the objective of enabling older people to live independently if they want to.

## Is Wrexham Council helping people to eat a more healthy diet and be more active?

- 49 **The Council and its partners have a plan and a range of activities to promote healthy eating and being more active. But the Council and its partners do not know if these activities are working effectively.**
- 50 In Wrexham the percentage of adults who regularly take part in sport and active recreation is better than the Welsh average. The percentage of obese adults for 2007 and 2008 in Wrexham was similar to the Welsh average, but slightly fewer people in Wrexham eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. The Council and its partners want to increase healthy eating and the levels of exercise even more. They have made this an improvement priority, because this can help people to keep well, and avoid longer-term health problems such as heart disease.
- 51 Many people are taking part in the activities the Council and its partners have developed. There have been changes to school menus to increase the use of healthy food options, and three new safe walking and cycling routes have been introduced. They know they need to do more to understand the impact these activities are having on the people of Wrexham, and be clear on which are most effective in improving people's wellbeing. Some of the funding for the activities is likely to end, and without clear information about the

benefits from different activities they will find it difficult to make good decisions about which to continue.

## Is Wrexham Council helping to increase the number of affordable homes in Wrexham?

- 52 **The Council has struggled to increase the number of affordable homes that have been built in the County Borough in recent years.**  
In 2008-09 fewer affordable homes were built in Wrexham than in any other county in Wales. The Council has not met its targets for increasing affordable homes for several years.
- 53 Affordable housing is for people whose income is not enough for them to otherwise be able to buy or rent a suitable home on the open market. Housing associations get a grant from the Assembly Government to help build some of the affordable homes but others are not subsidised and are sometimes a condition of granting planning permission to private developers.
- 54 The Council has made increasing the number of new affordable homes in the County Borough one of its three top Council priorities, as it wants to make a big improvement in this area. This is a valid objective as there is a shortage of affordable housing in Wrexham, and more people are likely to need affordable homes in the current economic difficulties. The Council had set a target of 388 new affordable homes in 2010-11, but when it realised this target would not be met it reduced this target to 160. The Council is on track to deliver these.
- 55 The Council has been monitoring the progress on its actions, but there is little information on why the Council has not been able to actually increase the number of affordable homes. One reason put forward was the recession, which means very little new house building is taking place. As a result, the Council has not been able to get the developers to build some affordable homes as part of their new housing developments. But this difficulty has not stopped other councils in Wales from increasing the number of affordable homes. The Council is now focusing its work on finding land that it owns that affordable homes can be built on and this is progressing well.
- 56 The Council still owns its own Council houses after the tenants voted not to transfer them to a social landlord in 2004. Many of these homes do not meet the standards set by the Assembly Government known as the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) - for instance over 90 per cent of kitchens and bathrooms need to be improved to meet the minimum standards.
- 57 The Council has made very little progress in combining its work on building new affordable homes with improving its existing Council houses and flats to meet the WHQS Standards. The Assembly Government has expected councils and registered social landlords to meet the standards by 2012 but the Council has no plan in place to achieve this.

## Is Wrexham Council making it easier for people to use its services, and also asking the public how their services could be improved?

- 58 **There are now more ways to contact the Council, but it is not clear how well these work.** Wrexham Council wants people to find it easy to get in touch with them, and find the services they are looking for. The Council wants people to have a good quality service from them, and feel that the Council listens and responds to their comments. This is an appropriate improvement objective because improving access to services can improve fairness, and listening to service users and the public can help the Council design more effective services.
- 59 The Council has opened a town centre 'shop', near the bus station in Wrexham, which people can call into and get help and advice on many Council services. The Council has its own website and it has won a national award for the quality of its website design. We found the website easy to use, and you can use the website to contact the Council, find Council services, ask for more information, or to pay for Council services. The Council is also expanding its online presence by using social networking sites to disseminate information.
- 60 People can let the Council know what they think of its services through the website, and the feedback from respondents was generally positive. While this information tells the Council what these people think of that contact experience, it does not tell the Council if it is achieving its overall aim of people believing that it is easier to contact the Council. Nor is it clear how the Council makes best use of this feedback to improve the services.

## Is the Council supporting people in need in other ways?

- 61 Youth offending services in Wrexham are average compared to other councils. A recent Criminal Justice Joint Inspection found that in Wrexham action taken to minimise the risk of a child or young person coming to harm and the risk of harm to other members of the public was effective in less than two-thirds of cases. Similarly the inspection found that work to make it less likely that individuals will reoffend was done well enough in just over 6 in 10 cases. The inspection found that processes were mostly followed – for example assessments and screenings were completed within agreed timescales and documentation was filled in properly. Areas for improvement were focused on quality – for example individual circumstances not being taken into account in assessment. The inspection recognised that improvements had been made but recommended further actions to make youth offending services in Wrexham better.
- 62 A Wales Audit Office national study, *Housing services for adults with mental health needs*, November 2010, identified concerns across North Wales, including Wrexham, in response to the housing needs of adults with mental health problems.

# Is Wrexham Council helping people to develop?

## Background information

- 63 In Wrexham, there is one nursery school, 61 primary schools and nine secondary schools. Together these schools serve just over 16,000 pupils. However, over a quarter of the schools have a significant number of unfilled places whilst one in six schools is over-subscribed.
- 64 Five of the primary schools and one secondary school teach through the Welsh language.
- 65 The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals has risen to just under one in five children, close to the average for Wales. This is largely due to the Council improving how it collects this information. The rate of pupils taking up their entitlement of free school meals has not increased at the same rate.
- 66 School attendance is good. Pupil attainment at most key stages is close to the average for Wales although below average at age 11 and above average for some measures at age 16 and 18.
- 67 The percentage of working-age adults with no qualifications in Wrexham was 14.3 per cent in 2008, which was just below the Wales average of 14.6 per cent.
- 68 Estyn, the inspectorate of education and training in Wales, looks at how well councils are helping children and young people develop knowledge and skills. They carry out inspections of schools, further education colleges and training organisations as well as making judgements on how well councils support these education providers. Estyn, through its regional teams, analyses performance information, visits schools and has regular meetings with directors of education to come to a view about the role of the Council and about education performance in the area.
- 69 Estyn inspected the Council's education and young people's services in December 2010. The findings and recommendations from this will be published in the spring of 2011. The progress and improvements the Council makes in response to the Estyn report will be included in our next Annual Improvement Report.

## Is Wrexham Council helping people to get a better education and the skills they need for employment?

**70 The Council has focused on, and achieved a big reduction in the number of 16 year olds who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs).**

71 This improvement objective is clearly important, as in Wrexham in 2008 nearly one in ten young people who left in school year 11 (aged 16 years) were not known to be in education, employment or training. By 2009, this had reduced by half to be slightly better than the average for Wales. But the Council aims to keep reducing this number over the next couple of years. For 2010-11 the Council has agreed an additional budget of £65,000 to continue this work, as this is a priority for the Council.

72 In April 2010, the Council decided to set extra measures to monitor and improve the level of year 12 and 13 school leavers (aged 17-19) who are NEETs and the proportion of pupils aged 16 remaining in full-time education. This is because the Council's performance in these areas worsened between 2008 and 2009, compared with the average for Wales.

73 It is reasonably easy for the Council to measure the number of young people who left in school Year 11 (aged 16 years) who were classed as not in education, employment or training as this is collected by the annual survey by Careers Wales. But this only tells the Council what the young person is doing on a single day a few weeks after the beginning of the new academic year. The Council does not currently know what actually happens to all the young people after this time. However, the proportion of Wrexham's year 11 pupils continuing in full-time education was the lowest in Wales in 2009.

74 Wrexham Council is performing well on areas that are closely linked to young people ending up as NEETs. These include:

- having one of the lowest proportions (0.1 per cent) of pupils leaving without an approved external qualification (such as a GCSE or NVQ);
- the third highest primary school attendance rate in Wales;
- the second highest secondary school attendance rate in Wales;
- no permanent exclusions in its primary schools for the last four years, one of only three councils in Wales to achieve this; and
- the fourth lowest exclusion rate in secondary schools and this has fallen steadily from 2006 to 2010.

75 We think that the Council's plans to improve education and skills need to focus more attention on the wider needs to develop the skills of young people and adults to help them to succeed in employment.

## Is Wrexham Council promoting equal opportunities for children and young people to become bilingual in Welsh and English, and is the Council promoting the Welsh culture?

76 **It is hard for Wrexham Council to know how well it is increasing the opportunities to learn in Welsh, because it has not set itself specific measureable targets.** This is unusual, as the Council set itself measureable targets in most areas it wanted to improve in. Nevertheless, the Council is taking action to improve the opportunities to learn in Welsh and this should lead to increasing numbers of pupils who are bilingual in the coming years.

77 In 2009, fewer people living in Wrexham could speak Welsh compared with the average for Wales. Wrexham had one of the lowest rates for being bilingual of local authorities in Wales. Less than one in ten pupils were assessed in Welsh as their first language at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 in Wrexham in 2009. This is below the Welsh average.

78 The Council wants to enable all children and young people in the County Borough to be able to learn Welsh, to learn in Welsh if they want to, and to become bilingual. The Council also wants to promote the Welsh culture and heritage. This is an appropriate improvement objective, as not all children and young people who live in Wrexham currently have the opportunity to learn in Welsh.

79 The Council has some information about the pupils who continue to learn in Welsh as they get older and move up through the school system from primary to secondary school. The Council has set itself some fairly challenging targets to enable

pupils to do this. But these measures do not tell the Council if all pupils who want to learn through Welsh can do so, or if pupils are able to become bilingual.

- 80 There is a particular shortage of places to learn in Welsh in the North of Wrexham, and the Council has been awarded a grant of £4.1 million from the Assembly Government to help build a new Welsh medium school in Gwersyllt. This should be built by 2013, although the Council will need to go through a full planning and community consultation process before this happens.
- 81 The Council has set itself targets for the number of people visiting or taking part in a Welsh cultural event. But these targets are much lower for 2010-11 than they achieved back in 2008-09. The Council explained this was due to the refurbishment of Wrexham Library. But as improving the access to Welsh language and culture is a priority, we would have expected the Council to have worked with the community to find alternative ways of providing opportunities for people to attend such events.
- 82 The Council is hosting the National Eisteddfod in 2011. Many councils that host the Eisteddfod find that the demand for Welsh medium school places increases. Wrexham is likely to find that this happens in their borough too. The Council tested an immersion project at Ysgol Morgan Llwyd that enabled 17 pupils to enter a Welsh medium education for the first time. But this only catered for about half of the pupils who wanted to take part. The Council will need to develop a clear plan of how it will increase the opportunities for pupils and young people to learn through Welsh if it is to meet the likely demand of its residents for learn in Welsh medium education after the Eisteddfod.
- 83 The Welsh Language Board<sup>2</sup> has praised the Council's efforts to mainstream the Welsh language into its corporate planning agenda by including relevant questions in the Wrexham Integration Tool. The Council regularly commissions independent monitoring to make sure that it complies with its Welsh Language Scheme and includes subsequent recommendations in its improvement plans.
- 84 The Welsh Language Board has found that the Council's websites, electoral documentation and statutory and recruitment adverts comply with the Welsh Language Scheme. However, the Council has no up-to-date record of the language skills of its staff, although less than five per cent of people who work for the Council can speak Welsh. If this situation persists, the Council is at risk of being unable to offer services to the public that meet the statutory requirements of the Welsh Language Scheme. This risk has already been identified by the Council and a Language Skills Strategy has been adopted to address the situation.

<sup>2</sup> The Welsh Language Board works with local authorities to help them develop their statutory Welsh language schemes that outline the way in which they provide services to the public in Welsh.

## Is Wrexham Council helping to create a safe, prosperous and pleasant place to live?

### Is Wrexham Council reducing the amount of energy used and lowering carbon emissions?

- 85 **Wrexham Council has developed ambitious aims for reducing carbon emissions and energy usage and has laid some foundations for future progress.** The Council made reducing carbon emissions and energy usage across Wrexham County Borough one of its three top Council priorities for 2009-2012. This is a relevant improvement objective as it will help improve sustainability of services and reduce the risk of financial penalties if it doesn't reduce its carbon and energy usage.
- 86 The Council, with help from the Carbon Trust and Energy Saving Trust, has found out how much energy it is using in different parts of the Council. Most energy is used in Council houses (59 per cent), followed by Council buildings and municipal waste (both 18 per cent). Now that the Council has this information it can work out how much energy it uses or saves each year.
- 87 The Council has £2.4 million for 2010-11 to help reduce carbon emissions. Some of this money is a grant from the Assembly Government and some from Salix Finance, who provide interest-free funding to public sector organisations in the UK, to invest in carbon saving technologies. This money will help the Council replace central heating boilers in Wrexham's council houses, and replace the street lights.
- 88 The Council has an ambitious long-term plan to reduce its energy usage and lower its carbon emissions, but it needs to do more to encourage its service departments to address the issue.

- 89 In the first year of this objective the Council has made limited progress at encouraging business and residents to reduce their use of energy and carbon footprint. This is an area the Council needs to work on over the next couple of years, and also decide how it will measure that it is being successful.

### Is Wrexham Council reducing anti-social behaviour and substance misuse, and helping to improve the perceptions of crime?

- 90 **Steady progress has been made, and Wrexham's community safety partnership was rated the best in Wales for its work on reducing substance misuse.**
- 91 Wrexham's annual recorded crime rate is 83 crimes per 1,000 population, which is close to the average for Wales. The highest proportion of these crimes are criminal damage (23 per cent) and violence against the person (23 per cent). It has reduced over the past seven years (with minor fluctuations), but rates have been increasing slightly in the last couple of years.
- 92 The Council wants to reduce the levels of anti-social behaviour and substance misuse (such as illegal drug use) in the County Borough. The Council also wants to help the residents and visitors to Wrexham to feel safer, and feel crime is less likely to happen. This is an appropriate improvement objective as it is something that residents continue to be concerned about.

- 93 The Council works with other organisations to help reduce the level and fear of crime, such as the police, fire and rescue service. Steady progress has been made, with, for example, the number of anti-social behaviour incidents reducing. Wrexham's community safety partnership was rated the best in Wales for its work on reducing substance misuse.
- 94 The Council has set some targets to reduce crime, substance misuse and the fear of crime. But some of the targets are based on the amount of work it does, and it is less clear how much difference the actions will have in reducing crime, substance misuse or the fear of crime.
- 97 Wrexham Council has a good track record in waste management, and they are performing better than the average for Wales for recycling and composting rates. The Council waste officers have a lot of experience and they are putting this to good use as they roll out new collections for food waste. The Council is developing long-term plans to make sure it meets Assembly Government targets for future years, thus avoiding potential fines and also reducing the high costs of disposing of the waste.
- 98 The Council listens to feedback from residents on the waste service, and makes changes as a result of residents' suggestions. Special effort is made to ensure that all householders are made aware of how the services operate and help is given to overcome any problems they have in using the services. By encouraging maximum use by householders of the recycling and composting collection services this will reduce service costs and meet the Council's environmental sustainability objectives.

### Is Wrexham Council reducing the amount of waste by increasing the rate of recycling?

- 95 **Wrexham's waste and recycling service continues to perform well.** The Council provides a waste collection and disposal service to 60,000 households in the County Borough.
- 96 The Council has introduced kerbside recycling and composting collections over many years. It has used a wide range of activities to make sure householders are aware of both how the collections operate and the reasons why recycling was being introduced.

# What should Wrexham Council do?

- 99 Given the wide range of services provided and the challenges facing the Council it would be unusual if we did not find things that can be improved. The Auditor General is able to:
- recommend to Ministers of the Assembly Government that they intervene in some way;
  - conduct a special inspection and publish the report with detailed recommendations;
  - make formal recommendations for improvement – if a formal recommendation is made the Council must respond to that recommendation publicly within 30 days; and
- make proposals for improvement – if we make proposals to the Council, we would expect them to do something about them and we will follow up what happens.
- 100 In the light of our work, the Auditor General is not making any formal recommendations but we also think the Council needs to consider our proposals to help it improve:

## Proposals we made in the Corporate Assessment

The Council should:

- further develop appropriate outcome measures for objectives;
- ensure Executive Board member and scrutiny roles support effective decision making and enable scrutiny to focus on priority issues;
- develop corporate workforce planning;
- improve the Medium Term Financial Strategy so that resources are increasingly linked to priorities; and
- continue to improve business processes by streamlining arrangements to ensure they support effective management, monitoring and scrutiny.

## Additional proposals

The Council should:

- ensure that the focus of its priorities is not so narrow that it has limited impact on the wider issues it is seeking to address;
- develop a consistent approach to target setting in areas where improvement is required so it is recognised that targets are intended to drive improvement and may not be achieved; and
- demonstrate how consultation and feedback from users and residents is used to improve services.

# Appendix 1

## About the Auditor General for Wales and this report

### The Auditor General

The Auditor General is independent of government and is appointed by Her Majesty the Queen. He leads the Wales Audit Office and is held accountable by the Public Accounts Committee of the National Assembly for the Wales Audit Office's work.

The Wales Audit Office helps the Auditor General by examining various aspects of how Welsh public bodies work. It was created in 2005 when the National Audit Office in Wales and the Audit Commission in Wales merged.

The Auditor General is the external auditor of the Assembly Government and its sponsored and related public bodies; the National Assembly for Wales Commission and National Health Service (NHS) bodies in Wales. He also appoints the external auditors of Welsh local government bodies, including unitary authorities, police, probation, fire and rescue authorities, national parks and community councils.

As well as carrying out financial audit, the Auditor General's role is to examine how public bodies manage and spend public money, including achieving value in the delivery of public services. The law which created the Wales Audit Office also expanded the powers of the Auditor General to follow the 'public pound' wherever it goes.

### This report

The Local Government Measure (June 2009) introduced new responsibilities for the Auditor General, including a responsibility to publish his assessment of each council/authority's arrangements to secure continuous improvement.

This report has been produced by the Auditor General to discharge his duties under section 24 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure). The report also discharges duties under section 19, namely; to issue a report certifying that he has carried out an audit under section 17 and an improvement assessment under section 18.

Improvement authorities are under a general duty to 'make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of [their] functions.' Improvement authorities are defined as local authorities, national parks, and fire and rescue authorities.

The main piece of work for the Wales Audit Office, to enable the Auditor General to fulfil his duties, is an annual Improvement Assessment<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> This assessment will be conducted for each improvement authority, under section 18 of the Measure. For each authority, it will determine whether the authority is likely to comply with the requirements of Part 1 of the Measure. The Wales Audit Office will also undertake an improvement information and planning audit, as required under section 17 of the Measure, in order to ascertain whether the authority has discharged its duties under section 15(1) to (7).



This will be informed by a:

- Corporate Assessment – a forward-looking assessment of an authority’s likelihood to comply with its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement; and
- Performance Assessment – a retrospective assessment of whether an authority has achieved its planned improvements in order to inform a view as to the authority’s track record of improvement.

The output(s) from these assessments will be issued by the Auditor General as Audit and Assessment Report(s), under section 19 of the Measure. In publishing this report under section 19, the Auditor General is certifying that we have undertaken a section 17 audit and a section 18 improvement assessment.

The Auditor General may also in some circumstances carry out special inspections (under section 21), in respect of which he will provide a report to the relevant authorities and Ministers, and which he may publish (under section 22).

The Auditor General will summarise audit and assessment reports in this published Annual Improvement Report (under section 24). This will also summarise any reports of special inspections.

An important ancillary activity for the Wales Audit Office is the co-ordination of assessment and regulatory work (required by section 23), which takes into consideration the overall programme of work of all relevant regulators at an improvement authority. The Auditor General will also take account of information shared by relevant regulators (under section 33) in his assessments and this report will summarise any work undertaken by them.

The Auditor General sets out the fee for his performance audit work undertaken to discharge his duties under the Measure at each local authority in a Regulatory Programme agreed each year with the authority. The fee for November 2009 until March 2011 is currently expected to be in line with that set out in the Regulatory Programme.

## Appendix 2

### Useful information about Wrexham and Wrexham County Borough Council

Wrexham County Borough Council spends approximately £207 million per year (2010-11). This equates to about £1,558 per resident.

The average band D council tax in 2010-11 for Wrexham is £1,101 per year and is slightly below the average for Wales of £1,127.

The Assembly Members for Wrexham are:

- Lesley Griffiths, Wrexham, Labour Party
- Karen Sinclair, Clwyd South, Labour Party

The Members of Parliament for Wrexham are:

- Ian Lucas, Wrexham, Labour Party
- Susan Elyn Jones, Clwyd South, Labour Party

There are 52 Councillors for Wrexham who represent the community and make decisions about priorities and use of resources. The Council is made up of Members from the following political groups:

- 14 Liberal Democrat/Independent Alliance
- 12 Labour Party
- 6 Wrexham Independents
- 6 Democratic Independents
- 5 Conservatives
- 4 Independent
- 4 Plaid Cymru
- 1 not aligned to a party

#### **Council governance arrangements**

Scrutiny committees consist of all Members (also known as Councillors) who are not Members of the Executive Board. Their main purpose is to review and improve Council services, to make recommendations on future policy options and to act as a check on the Executive Board by holding it to account for its decisions.



The scrutiny committees in Wrexham are:

- Children and Young People
- Corporate Governance & Policy, which also meets as the Crime and Disorder scrutiny committee
- Environment and Regeneration
- Finance & Performance
- Social Affairs, Health and Housing

The Executive Board consists of 10 members appointed annually to reflect the balance of political groups on the Council. The following Lead Member appointments have been made by the Leader:

- Children (Additional Learning, Families and Support) – Councillor Arfon Jones
- Communities and Performance – Councillor Bob Dutton, OBE (Deputy Leader and Vice-Chair of Executive Board)
- Corporate Leadership and Children (Schools and Corporate Parenting) – Councillor Aled R. Roberts (Council Leader and Chair of Executive Board)
- Environment and Transport – Councillor David Bithell
- Finance and Asset Management – Councillor R. Alun Jenkins
- Housing and Planning – Councillor Mark Pritchard
- Regeneration and Corporate Governance – Councillor Rodney Skelland
- Social Care and Health – Councillor Joan Lowe

Principal officers:

- Chief Executive – Isobel Garner
- Strategic and Performance Director – Clare Field
- Strategic and Performance Director – Lee Robinson
- Strategic and Performance Director – Phil Walton

# Appendix 3

## The Auditor General's Preliminary Corporate Assessment

The main conclusions of the Auditor General's Corporate Assessment which was issued to the Council in August 2010 are set out below:

### Overall conclusion

The Council has developed a clearer focus on priorities and some aspects of its arrangements support improvement while others provide only partial support.

### How the Council has approached improvement over time

Following a period of steady performance but limited ambition the Council has a clearer focus on priorities for improvement and has started to put some arrangements in place to support this agenda:

- in the early part of the last decade, the Council maintained steady performance but lacked ambition;
- in recent years the Council has developed a clearer focus on priorities and improvement, and has put some building blocks in place to help achieve its priorities; and
- some arrangements to support change are beginning to take shape but others are not yet ready for the future challenging environment.

### Analysis of the Council's arrangements to help it improve

The Council has a greater focus on improvement, a clear policy framework, sound financial position and a newly established transformation programme, but some areas for development remain:

- political and officer leadership is providing clear focus and ambition for improvement;
- strategic direction and objectives are defined, but the future will require greater clarity on what is not a priority;
- sound management of financial resources and early stages of the transformation programme and planning in response to financial challenges will give a basis for supporting improvement;
- the Council is committed to proactively working with partners towards achieving community-wide objectives, and further tangible benefits;
- democratic processes are satisfactory but could more fully support improvement;
- the Council recognises that people management remains a risk, and a plan to address this is being developed; and
- extensive processes are in place for business management, but these are not currently sufficiently focused to drive a step change in performance required for the future.

For the full report see our website at [www.wao.gov.uk](http://www.wao.gov.uk) or contact us at the address on the inside cover of this report.

## Appendix 4

### Appointed Auditor's Annual Audit Letter to the Members of Wrexham County Borough Council

The Local Government Measure 2009 has provided the Wales Audit Office with an opportunity to rethink how to report the findings from both the financial audit and the performance audit work to local government bodies. As you will be aware the Auditor General for Wales will be issuing an Annual Improvement Report (AIR) to each local authority over the next few months and many of the issues that were traditionally reported in the Appointed Auditor's Annual Audit Letter will be included in that report. Therefore, I have taken the opportunity to summarise the key messages arising from the Appointed Auditor's statutory responsibilities (the accounts, the value for money conclusion and the audit of the improvement plan) into this short letter which forms the Annual Audit Letter. The letter is designed to be a standalone document, but will be presented to the Council and the public as part of the Annual Improvement Report and therefore discharges my reporting responsibilities under the Code of Audit Practice.

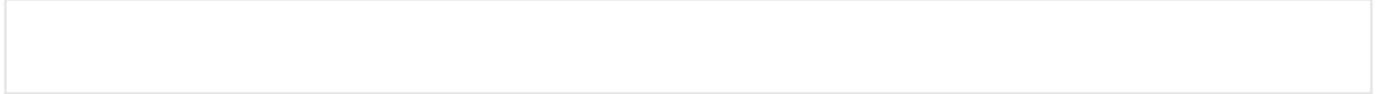
#### **Wrexham County Borough Council complied with financial and performance improvement reporting requirements but faces significant financial challenges ahead**

It is the Council's responsibility to:

- put systems of internal control in place to ensure the regularity and lawfulness of transactions and to ensure that its assets are secure;
- maintain proper accounting records;
- prepare a Statement of Accounts in accordance with relevant requirements;
- establish and keep under review appropriate arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources; and
- publish its Improvement Plan by 31 October.

The Code of Audit Practice issued by the Auditor General (the Code) requires me to:

- provide an audit opinion on the accounting statements;
- review the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources;
- consider whether the Improvement Plan is prepared and published in accordance with statutory requirements; and
- issue a certificate confirming that I have completed the audit of the accounts.



On 30 September 2010 I issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements, confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council's financial transactions. My report is contained within the Statement of Accounts. The following issues were identified:

- I did not identify any material weaknesses in your internal controls, good progress continues to be made to improve the bank reconciliation and a number of minor issues were discussed and agreed with officers.
- The accounting statements preparation processes have continued to improve, resulting in good quality draft statements supported by comprehensive working papers for most areas of the accounts. These could be further improved with the addition of lead schedules cross-referenced to file content and working papers prepared in advance of the audit for all account areas.
- Revised arrangements for accounting for the PFI scheme were reviewed and agreed as correctly implemented and significant progress is being made in preparation for the International Financial Reporting Standards.
- The Whole of Government Accounts' return was prepared effectively and in accordance with the Assembly Government's timetable.

My review of the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness has been based on the audit work undertaken on the accounts as well as placing reliance on the work completed as part of the LG Measure. The main findings from this latter work will be set out in the Annual Improvement Report. In addition, I also bring the following issues to your attention:

- Effective budgetary control arrangements are in place and medium-term financial planning is developing well but the Council faces significant financial pressures in the future. This will be referred to further in the Annual Improvement Report.
- Improvements have been made within the Internal Audit function and our annual assessment identified that 9 of the 11 CIPFA standards were met.

The Council's Improvement Plan 2010-11 meets statutory requirements and the Improvement Assessment Report will include suggested further improvements.

I issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts had been completed on 30 September 2010. The financial audit fee for 2009-10 is currently expected to be in line with those set out in the Financial Audit Strategy.

John Herniman  
Partner  
For and on behalf of the appointed auditor  
29 November 2010

# Appendix 5

## Wrexham County Borough Council's improvement objectives

The Council published its improvement objectives in its Council Plan which can be found on the Council website at [www.wrexham.gov.uk/english/council/documents/council\\_plan.htm](http://www.wrexham.gov.uk/english/council/documents/council_plan.htm).

They are:

### Council priorities

These are the small number of very focused areas where the Council will continue to make significant change over the next two years:

- Affordable Housing
- Better Education and Skills for Employment
- Carbon Emissions and Energy Use Reduction

### Improvement priorities

These are the areas from existing strategies/plans where the Council will focus significant attention to achieve change or where departments, individually or collectively have identified major improvements will take place:

- Healthy eating and people being more active
- Anti-social behaviour, substance misuse and perceptions of crime
- Assisting older people to live independently
- Waste minimisation and recycling
- Access to services and listening to and engaging the public in influencing services
- Promote equality of opportunity for children and young people to become bilingual and to promote the Welsh culture
- Organisational development projects (*now the Transformation Programme*)
- Safeguarding our Children (*added by Executive Board in May 2010 as an Improvement Priority for 2010 to 2012*)

# Appendix 6

## References

The data referred to within the report is drawn from one of the following sources:

- Welsh Assembly Government, StatsWales
- Welsh Assembly Government, local area summary statistics
- The Council's website and improvement plans
- The Wales Yearbook
- The Home Office
- Members' Research Service
- Office for National Statistics
- Estyn