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Mr Mark James CBE
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Reference 593A2012
Date 17 December 2012
Pages 1 of 4

Dear Mark

Improvement Assessment Letter

This letter summarises the key conclusions arising from my work in respect of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure).

I am required to report my audit and assessment work in relation to whether Carmarthenshire County Council (the Council) has discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure.

Further to my Improvement Assessment letter of 28 September 2012, this letter summarises:

- my views on whether the Council has discharged its statutory duties in respect of improvement planning;
- my views on whether the Council has discharged its statutory duties in respect of improvement reporting;
- my views, and the views of relevant regulators, on the reliability of the Council's self-evaluation; and
- my further proposals for improvement and/or recommendations.

Further to this I will undertake more detailed work on the arrangements that support the Council's performance management and reporting over the following months.

I shall summarise all of my work and that of relevant regulators during 2012-13 and publish an Annual Improvement Report for the Council by the end of March 2013.

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

The Council published its Improvement Plan describing the Council's plans for improvement in the coming year by the 31 October as an integral part of its annual report. The Council acknowledges that the Improvement Plan was published later in the year than normal however it did this to enable the new administration to take an active role in setting the current years priorities. Due to its integrated nature, the plan sections are brief, however further detail is available in the technical annex, which is comprehensive.

The Improvement Plan sections are straightforward and clear, technical terminology is minimised and overall it is accessible and easy to read. The Council has further developed its key improvement objective priorities (KIOPs) refining their scope reflecting on progress already made. The Council still has six KIOPs having amalgamated two pre-existing ones, it has created an additional KIOP focused on making better use of resources and building a better council through the delivery of value for money services and directing resources to the top priority front line services. This objective is wholly appropriate in the current economic climate. Each KIOP is presented in a consistent way, embedded within each Community Strategy theme, illustrating the broader range of activity that the Council is involved in.

The plan is easy to find on the Council's website, and is produced in both Welsh and English, meeting the Council's Welsh Language Scheme requirements.

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

By publishing its Annual Report by the deadline of 31 October 2012, the Council has complied with the statutory requirements outlined within the Welsh Government's guidance for the Local Government Measure 2009, under Section 15 (7).

The Council's Annual Report provides a clear and comprehensive self-assessment of progress on the Integrated Community Strategy, not just the Council's Improvement Objectives. The report includes a concise statement about the Council's general duties and the context within which the Council is trying to improve.

In accordance with Welsh Government guidance the publication reports performance as measured by all statutory performance indicators, whether or not these relate directly to improvement objectives. The publication includes the Council's own assessment of its performance in relation to current and previous financial years, and in relation to other improvement authorities in Wales.

The Council summarises its activity and the publication includes details of the ways in which the Council has exercised its powers of collaboration during the reporting year and includes details of whether a collaborative activity has achieved its intended outcome.

The Council clearly summarises results and includes sufficient evidence to demonstrate whether or not it has achieved improvement and maintains arrangements to secure continuous improvement.

The Council has produced a clear and concise summary which clearly links through to the main report. The Council has been careful this year to use the same words and colours to describe KIOPs as in the main document and has also improved consistency in wording making the document set as a whole work better together.

The plan, its summary and the technical annex are easy to find on the Council's website, and they are produced in both Welsh and English, meeting the Council's Welsh Language Scheme requirements.

The Council's self-evaluation of its performance is comprehensive and, whilst positive, represents a broadly fair and balanced assessment of the extent to which it is meeting its improvement objectives and the impact of its improvement actions upon citizens and service users

The Council's report is broadly positive although full details of where it has not met its targets or milestones are set out in the comprehensive technical annex

Overall the report is broadly positive, although it does reference areas where the Council has not met its targets or milestones. Due to the necessary brevity in the report detail is contained in the comprehensive technical annex.

Full details are provided in this annex providing the reader with comprehensive information as to the extent to which the Council is meeting its Improvement Objectives, and where action is needed to address under performance. This information allows the reader to undertake their own evaluation on success to put alongside the Council's statements.

Partnership and collaborative working is fully integrated within the Annual Report in an effective and inclusive way. The report clearly expresses the Council's strong commitment to engaging with others in the delivery of the shared goals captured in the Integrated Community Strategy.

The Council uses case studies consistently and effectively to help illustrate the outcomes of its improvement activity for citizens

The Council continues to have a genuine attempt at assessing outcomes for citizens. The use of case studies clearly personalises and illustrates the outcomes achieved for specific people. The section of the report aimed at analysing 'is anyone better off' is supported by specific actions further evidencing the progress or lack of progress that Council has made. Positive progress is marked with a tick whilst failing to meet a target or milestone is denoted with a cross.

The Council has coherent and robust improvement planning and monitoring arrangements

The Council has developed a model for improvement planning and monitoring that is well embedded throughout the organisation. The Council's five tiered 'wedding cake' model based on a plan-do-review approach illustrates the different levels of planning and monitoring, each of which draws information from a range of sources. These sources include citizens and regulators as well as the usual array of performance information stemming from the services themselves.

Performance is reported to the scrutiny committees every six months. Members are presented not only with performance statistics but also with summary narrative. The Council's Performance Information Management System (PIMS) is also available providing on line access to current performance and progress information as well as being the source for the statistical reports that are used at all levels within the Council.

The Council has robust performance management arrangements and the Council's methods for collecting and reporting performance indicators are generally reliable

As we noted in our previous letter the Council has robust arrangements in place to report and debate performance information. The Council's in-house PIMS is used effectively and is designed to deliver a range of outputs aimed at various users including Members.

My initial audit of a sample of three National Strategic Indicators (NSIs) resulted in a correction to one indicator and the qualification of another. I have undertaken further testing of the Council's processes looking at a further 10 indicators. This work resulted in the correction of one indicator. However overall I am satisfied that the Council's methods for collecting and reporting performance indicators are generally reliable.

Further proposals for improvement/recommendations

No 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.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Huw Vaughan Thomas'.

HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS

AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES

CC: Carl Sargeant, Minister for Local Government and Communities

Jane Holownia, Group Director

Colin Davies, Manager

Jeremy Evans, Performance Audit Lead