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Pages	1 of 4

Dear Bronwen,

Improvement Assessment Letter

This letter summarises the key conclusions arising from my work in respect of improvement reporting under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure). I am required to report my audit and assessment work in relation to whether Ceredigion County Council (the Council) has discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure.

Further to my Improvement Assessment Letter of 5 October 2012, this letter summarises:

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

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 reporting duties under the Measure. However, it should ensure that it acts more in accordance with Welsh Government guidance.

The Council has complied with the statutory requirements outlined in the Welsh Government's guidance for the Measure, under Section 15 (7). The Council published its *Improvement Plan – Performance* (the Plan) for 2011-12 before the deadline of 31 October and has also published a summary. Both the full version and the summary are available in Welsh and in English on the Council's website. A press release was issued when the Plan was launched and the Council has also provided a link on its Facebook site and invited comments via Twitter.

The Plan sets out the Council's performance against all statutory indicators and includes current and previous year performance figures. The Council has acted upon my previous recommendation in comparing its performance with other Welsh improvement authorities where appropriate. For example, data is used extensively to demonstrate how the performance of the Council's education services compares year on year, and with those of other Welsh councils. The Plan also includes examples of how the Council is working collaboratively with partners to deliver its improvement objectives.

While the Plan contains a lot of information, it is not easy to read making it difficult for the reader to easily understand how well the Council is performing. The Plan makes very little use of different ways of presenting data, relying almost entirely on tables of text and figures.

The summary is very brief, effectively presenting citizens with a list of performance indicators. The summary does not provide the reader with clarity regarding the Council's priorities, nor is it a fair reflection of the progress made over the year towards their achievement.

The Council's *Improvement Plan – Performance 2011/12* does not provide citizens with a fair and balanced assessment or meaningful evaluation of the Council's performance in delivering its improvement objectives

The Measure has now been in place for three years and this is the second year the Council has been required to publish a backward-looking performance plan. In my Annual Improvement Report in January 2012, I emphasised that the Measure requires councils to be more self-critical and robust in evaluating how they deliver their services. Councils need to focus much more clearly on the impact of services and the outcomes for citizens.

The results of my audit of the Plan indicate that the Council has much work to do to develop its improvement planning arrangements. The Council's stated improvement objectives, the 'priority areas' that underpin them and the outcomes described are insufficiently clear, and the Plan lacks any robust analysis and clear evaluation of the Council's performance.

The Plan contains a narrative *Summary Assessment* for each improvement objective. This narrative presents a variable range of information describing what the Council is aiming to achieve, related activities undertaken and planned, and selected performance measures. However, with the possible exception of *Improve learning opportunities*, the narrative lacks overall evaluative statements of the Council's progress in achieving its improvement objectives. It is left up to the reader to form their own opinion as to whether the improvement objectives are being achieved.

In the tables of performance measures used to illustrate *What differences did we make*, baseline performance data and targets are often missing, making it difficult to assess whether the performance being described by the Council is good or poor, or in line with expectations. For example, in relation to its *high quality and safe environment* improvement objective, the Plan reports that the Council achieved 61 tonnes CO₂ reduction through its vehicle fleet efficiency programme. However, no other data is provided in relation to performance in previous years or in relation to targets set, meaning that the reader is unable to assess whether this reflects good or poor performance.

Reporting in some areas is inconsistent and confusing. For example, the Council reports in the Plan that it achieved a 27 per cent improvement in the number of carers' assessments offered and includes a graph showing that the Council is the most improved in Wales in relation to this measure. However the summary, quoting the same figure, records the Council as failing to meet its target in relation to this measure, noting that the Council's performance is ranked 17th in Wales.

Where targets have been set, they are not consistently challenging or explained to set performance in context. For example, the 2011-12 target for the timely reviews of child plans for children in need was set lower than the Council's actual performance in the previous year, and below the Welsh average, without explanation being provided.

Further proposals for improvement

I have previously identified my concerns that the Council's improvement plan lacks differentiation between prioritised improvement actions and 'business as usual' making it unclear what the Council intends to do differently to improve its services, and how this will affect the lives of its citizens. It is clear that this identified weakness has contributed to the Council being unable to provide citizens with a reliable assessment and evaluation of its performance in delivering its improvement objectives over the 2011-12 period.

The Council faces a significant and urgent challenge to identify its priority outcomes for the period 2013-2016 and lead the development of a new Single Integrated Plan with its partners, in the context of the changed political priorities emerging from the new administration. In developing its plans, more work is needed by the Council to:

- identify its priorities over the medium-term and evaluate their financial, workforce and asset implications so that they can be costed and resourced; and
- review the terminology of improvement objectives, and the nature of their related actions and measures of success to ensure that they are clearly expressed and prioritised, and capable of allowing local citizens to monitor the difference the Council is making to their lives.

I set out my proposals for improvement in these respects in my previous Improvement Assessment Letter to the Council dated 5 October 2012. Some new proposals for improvement are being made in this letter. I 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.

Proposals for improvement

P1 The Council's *Improvement Plan – Performance*, and the public summary should provide a more fair and balanced assessment of its performance.

P2 The Council needs to better evaluate its progress in meeting its improvement objectives. It should look beyond simply reporting progress against actions and measures, to analyse a wider basket of evidence to be able to determine the outcomes for service users and citizens, and provide a more rounded picture of Council performance.

Yours sincerely



Huw Vaughan Thomas

Auditor General for Wales

CC: Carl Sargeant, Minister for Local Government and Communities