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Iwan Davies
Chief Executive
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Date 27 August 2013
Our reference 446A2013
Pages 1 of 5

Dear Iwan

Improvement Assessment

I am required, under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) to report my audit and assessment work in relation to whether Conwy County Borough Council (the Council) has discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure.

This letter summarises:

- My views on whether the Council has discharged its statutory duties in respect of improvement planning.
- My views on the Council's compliance with requirements to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement, based on work carried out to date by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators, including:
 - the Council's progress on areas for improvement and recommendations identified in my previous assessments;
 - any relevant issues that may have emerged since my last report, including comments on how the Council is addressing financial challenges; and
 - a brief summary of any reports of relevant regulators issued since my last report.
- My further proposals for improvement and/or recommendations.
- Updates to the Wales Audit Office work plan and timetable for delivering my Improvement Assessment work.

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

The Council published the results of its annual review of its Corporate Plan in May 2013. The Improvement Plan (the Plan) provides a clear commentary on what the Council aims to achieve for each of its improvement objectives over the next five years. It explains planned associated activity during the period 2013-14 and the measures the Council will use to evaluate success. The Council has produced a plan that is straightforward and concise, outlining what it wants to achieve and how it will go about it. The plan is well written and easy to understand. The rationale for why improvement objectives have been chosen is briefly but clearly explained and supported by extensive consultation and research.

The Plan includes eight improvement objectives relating to: education and skills; feeling safe; housing; health and independence; a thriving economy; a sustainable environment; heritage, culture and the Welsh language; and people are informed, included and listened to by the Council.

The Council has defined appropriate measures of success, set some targets and established baseline data for its improvement objectives. Each objective is presented in a consistent way that establishes what the Council wants to improve, what it plans to do and the actions needed to support this.

The Council has chosen over 70 measures of success. Although the majority of the targets that the Council has set for 2013-14 are ambitious, such as on percentage of municipal waste recycled, there are three targets that have been set for 2013-14 that are not ambitious and there is limited explanation in the Plan. Where the Council chooses to set less ambitious targets it should explain why so that readers of its Plan understand the challenging national, financial and political contexts in which the Council operates. The measures of success for the improvement objective that 'people in Conwy live in safe and appropriate housing', for example, are focused on preventing homelessness but the target set for 2013-14 is lower than that achieved by the Council in 2012-13. The Council therefore acknowledges that it is unlikely to be able to prevent homelessness for as high a proportion of its clients as in the past but it does not explain why.

The plan is relatively easy to find on the Council's website and hard copies are provided at key sites. The plan and the 2012-2017 Corporate Plan summary have been produced in both English and Welsh, and meet the Council's Welsh Language Scheme requirements.

Based on, and limited to, work carried out to date by the Wales Audit Office, I believe that the Council is likely to comply with the requirement to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement during this financial year

I have reached this conclusion because:

- the Council continues to make good progress in addressing the proposals for improvement identified in previous assessments;
- the Council engaged well with other councils in North Wales and with the Wales Audit Office during our recent Improvement Study on the effectiveness of scrutiny; and
- the Council recognises the financial challenges it faces and has appropriate arrangements in place to manage them.

The Council continues to make good progress in addressing the proposals for improvement identified in previous assessments

I have made a number of proposals for improvements in previous improvement assessments. Progress on these matters is summarised below:

- as part of its own cycle of improvement, the Council has completed implementing the proposals for improvement included within our themed reviews into Technology, Information Management and Public Engagement; and
- the Council is reviewing its equality impact assessments for each improvement objective and they are being monitored by the central performance team to ensure consistency of approach across the Council.

Further information about our findings in some of these areas, is provided separately in interim updates where appropriate. I will report further on the performance of services, including local work on homelessness services, in my Annual Improvement Report.

The Council engaged well with other councils in North Wales and with the Wales Audit Office during our recent Improvement Study on the effectiveness of scrutiny

During the autumn of 2012 and spring of 2013, the Council took an active part in our all-Wales Improvement Study into the effectiveness of councils' scrutiny arrangements. We shall be reporting the results of this work later in 2013 and hosting a shared learning event in November 2013.

During the study, the Council's Peer Learning Exchange Team, consisting of both members and officers:

- took part in regional workshops along with peer learning exchange teams from other North Wales councils;
- observed scrutiny committee meetings at Isle of Anglesey County Council, providing feedback to committee members;
- discussed the way that scrutiny works in Isle of Anglesey County Council with a group of committee chairs and vice-chairs; and
- drawing on its discussions and observations, provided an external perspective to Isle of Anglesey County Council by evaluating its scrutiny function against criteria developed jointly by the Wales Audit Office, the Welsh Local Government Association, the Welsh Government and the Scrutiny Officers' Network.

We have provided the Council with an analysis of its self-evaluations, and how they compare with those in other councils throughout Wales. We expect the Council to consider these and decide how it is to further improve its scrutiny arrangements. We will comment on the Council's final self-evaluation once they have been agreed by the Council, as part of our ongoing Improvement Assessment work.

The Council recognises the financial challenges it faces and has appropriate arrangements in place to manage them

Several recent announcements by the UK government will impact significantly on all councils' budgets for 2014-15 and beyond. In addition, the Council also recognises the financial demands arising from its own local priorities, such as the regeneration of the Colwyn Bay area and the need to implement the schools modernisation programme over the next five years.

The Council has produced a Medium-Term Financial Framework but this does not currently provide a financial interpretation of the impact of reduced funding levels on Conwy's strategic plans. At present, the Council feels it is unable to make further progress in planning for the medium term until more guidance is produced by the Welsh Government following its recent announcement that local government in Wales should plan on the basis of 'funding reductions experienced by local government in England for the period to come'. The Council has produced plans to identify the required savings for 2014-15, although the impact upon services will depend upon the final settlement from the Welsh Government.

I shall review the effectiveness of the Council's corporate arrangements during the forthcoming corporate assessment

I am making no new proposals for improvement in this letter. The work that we have carried out so far this year leads me to believe that the Council is likely to fulfil its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement during 2013-14. In November 2013, my staff will undertake an in-depth corporate assessment of the Council. I shall report my findings in my Annual Improvement Report early in 2014, and the findings will include a further assessment of the Council's likelihood to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement during the remainder of the current year and in 2014-15.

Updates to the work plan and timetable

My Improvement Assessment Team will keep the Council informed of the detailed arrangements for the delivery of my assessment work.

The regularly updated work plan and timetable provides more detail on the work being delivered during this year's assessment and in particular how we will add value by focusing on jointly identified areas or services. The work plan and timetable take account of my consultation with improvement authorities over my proposals for 2013-14 performance audit work.

I am grateful to the Council for the way in which it has helped to facilitate our work. I remain committed to providing appropriate levels of public assurance while supporting you in mitigating the inevitable risks to services and accountability that stem from reducing resources and consequential change.

I shall publish this improvement letter on the Wales Audit Office website as soon as the letter has been debated by one of the Council's committees or two months after the letter is issued, whichever is the sooner.

Yours sincerely



HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS

AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES

CC: Lesley Griffiths – Minister for Local Government and Government Business
Huw Lloyd Jones – Manager
Gwilym Bury – Performance Audit Lead