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Mr S Phillips,  
Chief Executive,  
Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council,  
Civic Centre,  
Port Talbot  
SA13 1PJ

Reference 639A2012  
Date 21 December 2012  
Pages 1 of 5

Dear Steven

## Improvement Assessment

This letter summarises the key conclusions arising from the Auditor General's work in respect of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure),.

I am required, under the Measure to report my audit and assessment work in relation to whether Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council (the Council) has discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure, and also whether the Council is aligning more closely with the suggested practices.

Further to my Improvement Assessment letter of 12 September 2012, this letter summarises:

- 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.

My views were informed by:

- a review of the Council's Annual Report 2011-12 'Doing What Matters' (the Report);
- an audit of a sample of the Council's Performance Indicators (PI's); and
- regular liaison with the Change Management and Innovation Team and a review of performance management arrangements within a sample of service areas.

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**

The Council has discharged its improvement reporting duties under the Measure. It published its Annual Report by the deadline of 31 October 2012, and provided an assessment of performance against each of its improvement themes.

## **There is scope for the Council to act more in accordance with Welsh Government guidance**

The Measure requires the Council to have regard to any guidance issued about the discharge of its duties. There is potential for the Council to develop its reporting arrangements in line with Welsh Government guidance as follows:

- Reporting of Past Performance and use of performance information:
  - The Council has included National Strategic Indicators and some local Performance Indicator data supplemented by some quantitative and service user satisfaction data. This range of evidence could be broadened (drawing on systems reviews) to present a fuller picture of service quality and of user's experiences.
  - The assessment of performance does not explain sufficiently how the Council has evaluated its performance, for example by means of peer reviews, scrutiny assessment or benchmarking.
  - The Council has explained the extent of collaboration activity during the reporting year, but this could be improved to include details of whether such collaboration has achieved its intended outcomes and supported the achievement of improvement objectives.
- Publication and Public Engagement:
  - The Report is available in a variety of formats, the Council could also make it directly available to particular interest groups and partners (such as NPT Homes, community organisations)

**The Report provides a reasonably balanced picture of performance, but there is scope to make outcomes clearer and the report more readily accessible to specific interest groups**

**The range of evidence used to support improved performance could be broadened to present a fuller picture of service quality and user experience**

The Council's report relies primarily on performance indicators as its key measures of success. Welsh Government Guidance suggests using a broader range of performance information, such as perceptions of elected members, partners, peers, internal audit, scrutiny reviews, and staff. For example, the Council's 'theme 5' is about improving council services with the aim of making services easier for people to use, more efficient and better quality. Given that one intention is that people find services easier to use, there is very little information about service user experiences. We are aware that user views are sought when service system reviews are undertaken, so this could be relatively easy to resolve by ensuring information obtained during reviews is fed into the Council's annual assessment.

In response to our comments of last year, the Council has made reference to both service improvements and declining performance for most service areas. The overall assessment at the beginning of the document covers a wide range of services and clearly explains the Council's view of where it has been successful and where challenges remain.

The adoption of systems review methodology across the Council has led to services not setting specific improvement targets, although information available from systems review enables the Council to show 'direction of travel'. There is scope to use available information to more clearly explain improvements at service level in the Report. The Council has sought to make its Report concise but, in the case of disabled facilities grants, this has meant that some useful information about the improvements for service users during 2011-12 has been excluded. Appendix 2 of the report provides useful comparison with all available performance indicators with performance in the previous three years and with the Wales average.

The Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) provides an annual overall assessment of social services, making reference to the Council's Director of Social Services own evaluation. CSSIW considered that the director's report gave a comprehensive and accurate account of the Council's performance in adult's services and highlighted some areas of poor performance in children's services.

### **The impact of service scrutiny and collaboration is not always clearly explained**

The Report refers to 2011-12 being a year of increased activity for scrutiny; it does not explain the impact achieved by the scrutiny reviews. Reference is made to reviews of equalities, community engagement activities, of the Safer Neath Port Talbot Partnership, as well as the performance management arrangements of the Council, but no explanation is offered of the benefits achieved and links with Improvement Objectives.

The Council has recognised the need to develop its performance reporting arrangements so that it is better placed to identify the outcomes achieved and is working towards this. Performance management information is being used to inform and target resources such as in Children's Services and Disabled Facility Grants and to inform scrutiny and cabinet on a quarterly basis.

The Council assesses its partnership arrangements as strong, but does not provide sufficient evidence of the outcomes achieved to support this assessment. Section 5 of the report summarises key collaborative ventures for the Council and the region, but does not explain whether they have achieved intended outcomes and whether they will contribute towards the Council's priorities.

### **The Council has sought to make its publication accessible to citizens and stakeholders, but there is potential to ensure it is found more easily on the website and to promote its availability to specific interest groups**

The Council is placing reliance on the internet as the key medium to access the report, and has produced posters to highlight its existence and signpost its location on the Council's website. The Council's website homepage highlighted its existence for one week following publication and (as at 18 December 2012) remains on the features page, which provides a link to the Annual Report.

Some steps have been taken to make the report accessible, for example; the document is available in braille, large print and other languages on request. There are also other potential interest groups that the Council engages with and other methods of communication used by the Council that could be accessed as a means of promoting the availability of the Report, for example making copies available to:

- town/community councils;
- partner organisations such as NPT Homes, Grwp Gwalia, Celtic Community Leisure etc; and
- community groups/ the voluntary sector

Under its 'theme 5' the Council describes a range of ways in which people can access Council services, such as increased use of social media sites such as twitter and

facebook. The potential for using these as an additional means of promoting the report could be explored further.

### **Further proposals for improvement**

The Council has recognised the need to develop its performance reporting arrangements so that it is better placed to identify the outcomes achieved and work is progressing towards this. For this reason, no new proposals for improvement are being suggested in this letter, but we will continue to monitor and report on 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  
Steve Barry – Manager  
Samantha Spruce – Performance Audit Lead