



24 Cathedral Road / Heol y Gadeirlan
Cardiff / Caerdydd
CF11 9LJ
Tel / Ffôn: 029 20 320500
Fax / Ffacs: 029 20 320600
Email / Epost: wales@wao.gov.uk
www.wao.gov.uk

Sian Davies
Managing Director
Vale of Glamorgan Council
Council Offices
Holton Road
CF63 4RU

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Dear Sian

Improvement Assessment Audit 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 the Vale of Glamorgan Council (the Council) has discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure.

Further to my Improvement Assessment letter of 11 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 Council's arrangements to undertake effective self-evaluation; and
- my further proposals for improvement and/or recommendations.

My views were informed by:

- a review of the Council's Improvement Plan 2012/13 (the Plan);
- an audit of a sample of the Council's Performance Indicators;
- reviewing the three pilot service plans for Visible Services, Customer Relations and Public Protection;
- interviews with Directors and Heads of Services;
- observation of the 'Corporate and Customer Services' workshop for the creation of the 2013/14 service plan; and
- a review of scrutiny committee meeting minutes.

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

In publishing its Improvement Plan by 31 October 2012, the Council has discharged its improvement reporting duties under the Measure.

In accordance with the Measure guidance, the publication reports performance as measured by all statutory performance indicators, whether or not these relate directly to improvement objectives.

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

There were elements in the approach taken which could be developed to reflect guidance such as:

- 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.
- Performance indicators are the prime measure of achievement used in the Plan, however we are aware that other methods are being used and developed by the Council. Reference to a wider range of evidence in the future would present a fuller picture of service quality and of users' experiences.
- The Council has included an assessment of the authority's performance over time but not against other comparable bodies.
- The Council has detailed the extent of collaboration during the year, but this could be improved to include details of whether a collaborative activity has achieved its intended outcomes and whether collaboration supported the achievement of improvement objectives.

The Council is improving its performance reporting arrangements by developing outcome-focused measures but the information available for 2011-12 meant the Plan could not provide a complete picture of performance and there is scope to make the Plan more readily accessible

Outcome-focused measures are being developed

Performance reporting arrangements are improving. The Council has clearly understood the issues it needed to address and is in the process of dealing with them. The Council is responding to the proposal for improvement in our Annual Improvement Report 2012-13, to "*continue the development of outcome-focused measures*" moving from reporting arrangements that focus primarily on performance indicators and on the completion, or otherwise, of an action ensuring:

- intentions are expressed in a way in which allows progress to be measured; and

- reporting arrangements consistently provide members with an evaluation of performance in the context of the objective the Council is aiming to achieve.

Our assessment of the three pilot areas for the new approach identified that proposals for improvement are being implemented and reporting arrangements are more outcome focused. The Council is currently in a transition period while it implements these new arrangements across all services and it will take time for these to underpin self-evaluation. The transition means that arrangements are not yet fully embedded because the Council is in the process of defining its outcome measures for the year ahead. We are confident that by 2014 arrangements will be streamlined.

The Council's self-evaluation relies too heavily on performance indicators as a reflection of performance

The Plan relies primarily on performance indicators and all Wales averages as the reference point for describing performance. The Plan appropriately focuses on improvement objectives but often cites performance indicator results as evidence of achievement. The Plan needs to include information from other sources such as the performance of comparable public sector bodies, peer reviews and feedback from stakeholders. Qualitative information is available in some areas of the Council which will enable it to present a more balanced range of measures and help members evaluate achievement of performance aspirations.

This year's Plan does not provide a consistent picture of the Council's performance, some evaluations are good but others need more detail

The quality of performance evaluations reported is variable. The Plan did not fully explain the outcomes achieved and some data presented did not link clearly with the intended objective.

Some evaluations were good with explanations giving a clear picture of performance. For example, the detail provided for the improvement objective 'provide a comprehensive range of education, training and learning opportunities' clearly showed a number of performance indicators which are relevant to the objective. The narrative provided a reasonable explanation of activities to meet the improvement objective. These include: implementation of a Community focussed Schools Strategy; the introduction of learning coaches, enhanced data packs provided to all Schools and the implementation of a bespoke leadership development programme. The narrative concluded that the improvement objective has been achieved.

Other evaluations of performance did not provide such a clear picture of performance. For example, the evaluation of performance for the improvement objective 'improve access to play, leisure, sporting and cultural activities' does not provide a robust assessment of performance. The only performance indicator relates to the percentage of children who are library members. There were no measures to assess achievement of any of the other elements of the performance objective. In addition, the narrative included under the heading 'our performance' only relates to library members and therefore does not help explain achievement of the improvement objective. The evaluation does provide a view on whether the improvement objective has been achieved.

The evidence base underpinning the Plan is strong: We found the Council's methods for collecting and reporting were reliable and robust. However, supporting detail does not always flow through into the Council's publication.

The Council's Plan includes an assessment of its performance over time and reports on all statutory performance indicators.

The Plan does not compare the Council's performance against other comparable bodies which would help to provide a more balanced picture of the Council's performance and contains no specific description of the Council's plans and arrangements to improve or explain how the Council has evaluated its performance.

The Council reports information about its collaboration activities during the year and the expected benefits of collaboration. It needs to extend this to explain the purpose of the collaboration and whether the intended outcomes were achieved.

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 promote its availability

The publication is presented in an easy-to-read manner, is available on the internet and hard copies are available in libraries. A large print version of the publication is available upon request.

The Council is placing reliance on the internet to make the Plan available for public scrutiny but the general public would have to search to find it. The Council's website home page does not highlight the recent published Report or provide links to the document, making it difficult to find. The Council has not marketed the publication as widely as it could have, for example it could have been promoted in the local press to raise awareness and placed copies of the publication in Council reception areas and libraries to make it more easily accessible to the public.

The Plan has a link within it asking for members of the public to make comments and suggest additional improvement objectives. A dedicated mailbox has been established to collate these emails.

A summary document has been produced and this contains very limited information, but as with the main publication, it does not go far enough to explain the rationale for improvement or whether the Authority has been successful in its achievement of performance.

Further proposals for improvement/recommendations

No proposals for improvement are being made 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



HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS
AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES

CC: Carl Sargeant, Minister for Local Government and Communities
Steve Barry, Manager
Janet Villars, Performance Audit Lead
John Golding, Grant Thornton