

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council

Annual audit summary 2020

This is our audit summary for Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council. It shows the work completed since the last Annual Improvement Report, which was issued in October 2019. Our audit summary forms part of the Auditor General for Wales' duties.

More information about these duties can be found on our [website](#).



About the Council

Some of the Services the Council provides



Key facts

The Council is made up of 33 councillors who represent the following political parties:

- Independent Group 16
- Labour 15
- Park and Dowlais Independent Group 2

The Council spent £117.4 million on providing services during 2019-20, the lowest spend of the 22 unitary councils in Wales.

As at 31 March 2020 the Council had £15.9 million of usable revenue financial reserves. This is equivalent to 14% of the Council's annual spend on services, the tenth lowest percentage of the 22 unitary councils in Wales.

Key facts

The County Borough has 8 (22%) of its 36 areas deemed the most deprived 10% of areas in Wales, this is the second highest of the 22 unitary councils in Wales.¹

The County Borough's population is projected to increase by 4.3% between 2020 and 2040 from 60,567 to 63,154, including a predicted 4.4% decrease in the number of children, no change in the number of working age population and a 27.1% increase in the number of people aged 65 and over.²

The Auditor General's duties

We complete work each year to meet the following duties

- **Audit of Accounts**

Each year the Auditor General audits the Council's financial statements to make sure that public money is being properly accounted for.

- **Value for money**

The Council has to put in place arrangements to get value for money for the resources it uses, and the Auditor General has to be satisfied that it has done this.

- **Continuous improvement**

The Council also has to put in place arrangements to make continuous improvements, including related plans and reports, and the Auditor General has to assess whether the Council is likely to (or has) met these requirements.

- **Sustainable development principle**

Public bodies need to comply with the sustainable development principle when setting and taking steps to meet their well-being objectives. The Auditor General must assess the extent to which they are doing this.

¹ An area in this context is defined as a 'Lower Super Output Area'. Source: Stats Wales

² Source: Stats Wales



Since the Spring of 2020, the ongoing pandemic has affected our audit work. We recognise the huge strain on public services and have reshaped our work programme, and found new ways of working to reduce its impact on public bodies' response to COVID-19, while still meeting our statutory duties.



To meet the Auditor General's duties we complete specific projects, but we also rely on other audit work, and the work of regulators such as Care Inspectorate Wales and Estyn (the education inspectorate). We take the findings of our audit work into account when assessing whether the council has put in place arrangements to secure value for money. Our findings and conclusions are summarised below.

What we found

Audit of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council's 2019-20 Accounts

Each year we audit the Council's financial statements.

For 2019-20:

- The Auditor General gave an unqualified true and fair opinion on the Council's financial statements on 26 November 2020. The opinion included two emphasis of matter paragraphs to draw the readers' attention to specific accounts disclosures regarding material valuation uncertainties over the Council's property assets and property investments funds relating to the pension fund.
- The Council's Annual Governance Statement and Narrative Report were prepared in line with the CIPFA Code and relevant guidance. They were also consistent with the financial statements prepared by the Council and with our knowledge of the Council.
- A good quality of draft statements was presented for audit on 28 July 2020.
- A number of changes were made to the Council's financial statements arising from our audit work, which were reported to the Audit Committee in our Audit of Financial Statements Report on 23 November 2020.
- In addition to the Auditor General's responsibilities for auditing the Council's financial statements, he also has responsibility for the certification of a number of grant claims and returns. Our work did not identify any significant issues.
- The Auditor General issued the certificate confirming that the audit of accounts for 2019-20 has been completed.
- Key facts and figures from the 2019-20 financial statements can be accessed [here](#).

Well-being of Future Generations Examination – The delivery of the Flying Start Programme (February 2020)

The examination that we undertook in 2019-20 considered the extent to which the Council has acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when taking steps to deliver the Flying Start Programme. We concluded that the Council has a number of positive examples of how it has acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when delivering the Flying Start Programme, but the Council recognises that its application of the five ways of working can be further strengthened. The report can be viewed [here](#).

Continuous Improvement

The Auditor General certified that the Council has met its legal duties for improvement planning and reporting, and believes that it is likely to meet the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 during 2020-21.

Financial Sustainability (March 2020)

During 2019-20 we examined the financial sustainability of each Council in Wales. In Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, we concluded that despite a higher than expected settlement, the Council's financial position is still challenging, and failure to deliver to budget or make planned savings risks depleting reserves to a low level. The report can be viewed [here](#).

Assessment of progress to address key concerns (March 2021)

This report sets out our assessment of the Council's progress in addressing the concerns identified in our letter issued to the Council in May 2019, and those identified in the September 2019 John Gilbert report, and the December 2019 Improvement and Assurance Board's Rapid Assessment report. We concluded that the Council has shown resilience in its response to recent challenges and had made progress in developing an improvement plan, but it urgently needs to address its lack of capacity to drive the transformation needed, and use its available resources to strengthen its resilience over the medium to long term.

National Fraud Initiative

In October 2020, the Auditor General published his report on the findings of the latest National Fraud Initiative (NFI) data-matching exercise in Wales. The exercise helped public bodies in Wales, including the 22 unitary authorities, identify fraud and overpayments amounting to £8 million. The report can be accessed on our website [here](#). NFI continues to be developed and in the forthcoming NFI exercise (NFI 2020-22) local authorities will have access to matches designed to help identify potential fraudulent applications for COVID-19 business support grants.

Other Inspectorates

We also took into account the reports of Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) and Estyn as well as any subsequent actions taken by the Council in response.

In January 2021, Estyn wrote to the Council's Chief Executive outlining the outcome of their review of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council's work in supporting their learning communities in schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) during the period from March to

October 2020. The report highlighted a number of cameos including: collaborative, multi-disciplinary working; provision of childcare for key workers over the Easter holiday period and adapting the support provided by the youth service to respond to emerging challenges. Also relevant is Estyn's National report, 'Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19 - Update report from June to November 2020', published in January 2021. The report can be viewed [here](#).

In January 2020 CIW published an inspection report of older adults services. The report can be viewed [here](#). CIW held a local authority performance review meeting in October 2020 and also undertook a 5 day performance evaluation inspection during October identifying strengths and areas for improvement.

Local Government Studies

As well as local work at each council, each year we also carry out studies across the local government sector to make recommendations for improving value for money. Since the last annual improvement report we have published the following reports:

Review of Public Services Boards (October 2019)

We inspected how Public Service Boards are operating; looking at their membership, terms of reference, frequency and focus of meetings, alignment with other partnerships, resources and scrutiny arrangements. We concluded that Public Services Boards are unlikely to realise their potential unless they are given freedom to work more flexibly and think and act differently. The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Progress in implementing the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Act (November 2019)

We examined how the new duties and responsibilities of the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act are being rolled out and delivered. We found that victims and survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence are often let down by an inconsistent, complex and fragmented system. The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Rough Sleeping in Wales – Everyone's Problem; No One's Responsibility (July 2020)

We looked at how well public services are responding to the issue of rough sleeping. Overall, we found that responding to COVID-19 is an opportunity for public bodies to start addressing long standing weaknesses in partnership working which has stopped them from tackling rough sleeping in the past. The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Better Law Making (September 2020)

This report draws on five reports published between 2019 and today looking at how local authorities are responding to the challenge of implementing new legislation. Implementation is a complex task which needs to be fully thought through by the Welsh Government and the Senedd whenever they bring forward and make any new legislation. The paper highlights the difficulties faced by local authorities and their public sector partners in implementing their new responsibilities. The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Commercialisation in Local Government (October 2020)

Councils have conducted commercial activity for a long time, and many councils are exploring additional commercial opportunities to mitigate against the financial pressures they face. Our report is specifically targeted at helping elected members and senior officers to examine and judge the potential impact on their organisations when considering whether to undertake commercialisation. It will also help councils to demonstrate how well they are discharging their value for money responsibilities. The full report can be viewed [here](#).

Work carried out in 2020-21

We also looked at the key challenges and opportunities facing the Council. These risks could have an effect on the Council's ability to meet its legal obligations in relation to the sustainable development principle, the use of its resources and continuous improvement.

The most significant risk and issue facing councils and the wider public sector during 2020-21 was the COVID-19 pandemic. We have shaped our work to provide assurance and challenge in a way which helps to support the Council through this period. Our work for 2020-21 included:

- **Assessment of progress to address key concerns;**
- **Recovery planning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic;**
- **Covid-learning project – helping to identify and share learning; from the way in which public bodies have responded to the pandemic;**
- **Assurance and risk assessment; and**
- **A review of the Council's financial sustainability.**

The Auditor General is independent of government, and is appointed by Her Majesty the Queen. The Auditor General undertakes his work using staff and other resources provided by the Wales Audit Office, which is a statutory board established for that purpose and to monitor and advise the Auditor General. The Wales Audit Office is held to account by the Senedd.

The Auditor General audits local government bodies in Wales, including unitary authorities, police, probation, fire and rescue authorities, national parks and community councils. He also conducts local government value for money studies and assesses compliance with the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009.

Beyond local government, the Auditor General is the external auditor of the Welsh Government and its sponsored and related public bodies, the Senedd Commission and National Health Service bodies in Wales.

Audit Wales is the non-statutory collective name for the Auditor General for Wales and the Wales Audit Office, which are separate legal entities with their own legal functions, as described above. Audit Wales is not a legal entity.

We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English. Corresponding in Welsh will not lead to delay. Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg. Ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

This document is also available in Welsh.