

Use of performance information: service user perspective and outcomes – Carmarthenshire County Council

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Report summary

- 1 We considered the service user perspective and outcome information provided to senior officers and senior members (senior leaders), and how this information is used.
- 2 Overall, we found **the performance information provided by the Council to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities is limited.**
- 3 We have made three recommendations to strengthen the information given to senior leaders.
- 4 Our findings are based on fieldwork we did between June and July 2023.

What we looked at – the scope of this audit

- 5 We focused on the performance information provided to senior officers and senior members (senior leaders) about service user perspective and outcomes, and how this information is used. We did not undertake a full review of the Council's performance management arrangements or an in-depth review of the quality of the data that the Council collects. Neither did the review focus on engagement with service users on specific service changes or the development of policies and strategies.
- 6 We have set out our audit questions and audit criteria in **Appendix 1**. The audit criteria essentially set out what good looks like and what we would expect to find.
- 7 Overall, we were looking for performance information to be shared with senior leaders to help them understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users and how well they are helping the Council to achieve the outcomes it is working towards. We were also looking to see that senior leaders use this information to monitor progress and take action where necessary to improve outcomes.
- 8 This is an important part of arrangements to ensure that councils are securing value for money in the use of their resources. It is also an important way in which the Council can assure itself that it is acting in accordance with the 'involvement' way of working in taking steps to meet its well-being objectives. Without this information, it is difficult to see how senior leaders can understand whether their policies and actions are having the intended impact and make changes where they are not.
- 9 Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with the Cabinet Member, Chief Executive, and senior officers with responsibility for the Council's performance management arrangements. The evidence we have used to inform our findings is limited to these sources.

- 10 We set out to answer the question '**Does the Council's performance data enable senior leaders to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities to effectively manage its performance?**' We did this by exploring the following questions:
- Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the perspective of service users?
 - Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the outcomes of the Council's activities?
 - Does the Council have robust arrangements to ensure that the data provided is accurate?
 - Does the Council use the information to help it achieve its outcomes?
 - Does the Council review the effectiveness of its arrangements?

Why we undertook this audit

- 11 This audit was undertaken to help fulfil the Auditor General's duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 (the 2004 Act) and section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.
- 12 We sought to:
- gain assurance that the performance information the Council provides to senior officers and elected members enables them to understand the service user perspective and the outcome of its activities;
 - gain assurance that this information forms part of the Council's arrangements to secure value for money in the use of its resources and its application of the sustainable development principle; and
 - identify opportunities for the Council to strengthen its arrangements.

The Council's performance reporting arrangements

- 13 The Corporate Management Team (CMT) holds quarterly performance monitoring meetings. CMT receives quarterly Observation Reports that include information on the progress towards well-being objectives; details of service performance; internal audit findings; financial monitoring; complaints and compliments information; risk; consultation feedback; workforce; assets; procurement; and regulatory reports. These reports are also discussed with Cabinet Members.
- 14 Quarterly performance reports, based on the performance monitoring information, are provided to all scrutiny committees.
- 15 The Council published its Annual Self-Assessment for 2021-22 as part of its Annual Report 2021-22 In October 2022. Prior to this, the Governance and Audit

Committee considered it in, in line with the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

- 16 Our review focused on these key performance reporting mechanisms.

What we found: the performance information provided by the Council to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities is limited

The performance information the Council provides to its senior leaders on the perspective of service users is limited

- 17 The Council's performance reports do not generally include information on the perspective of service users, apart from a few limited examples.
- 18 The Council amended its performance reporting arrangements in 2021 and introduced its quarterly Observation Report. This is a detailed report that presents performance by Well-being Objective and draws together information from a wide range of sources. This report contains some narrative and measures relating to the perspective of service users, but these examples are limited. It is, therefore, difficult to see how senior leaders would be able to understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users.

The performance information the Council provides to senior leaders largely focuses on activity and output, rather than evaluating their impact

- 19 Most of the performance information the Council provides to senior leaders talks about activities and outputs. We found limited examples of where the Council presents information on outcomes and an assessment of progress against the outcomes the Council is seeking to achieve. This limits the ability of senior leaders to understand the impact of the Council's activities and assess whether it is meeting its overall objectives.
- 20 The Council's Annual Report 2021-22 contains a section under each of the 13 Well-being Objectives entitled 'Is anyone Better Off?' These sections contain case study examples to show where the work of the Council has made a difference. These examples contain a range of information, including feedback and quotes from service users. The quarterly Observation Reports and associated dashboards also contain some examples of outcome information. Sharing this information can help senior leaders understand the impact of the Council's activities. However, the

small number of examples does not provide a comprehensive picture of performance and does not enable senior leaders to fully understand the impact of the Council's activities.

The Council has limited arrangements to ensure that service user perspective and outcomes information provided to senior leaders is accurate

- 21 The Council does not have comprehensive arrangements in place to routinely check the data quality of performance information relating to outcomes and the service user perspective. The Council's Corporate Performance Team 'sense check' the data they collate for quarterly reports by looking for outlying values or anomalies. The Corporate Performance Team relies on service managers to enter accurate information into the performance management system.
- 22 The Council has a set of record cards which explains the detail behind each performance measure it uses. The cards detail the reporting frequency, owner, source, calculation, and improvement direction by measure. This arrangement provides rigour and consistency for the measures the Council uses, but there are no arrangements in place to check the accuracy of the data used in the calculations.
- 23 The Council's Internal Audit team reviewed the Council's performance management arrangements in July 2022. Internal Audit found there was no mechanism in place to provide assurance that the performance data was a true reflection of the actual situation. Internal Audit's report stated that data entered by managers was accepted as being accurate and there were no subsequent checks in place to ensure the integrity of the data.
- 24 The Council's Performance Management Framework states that the Risk and Internal Audit Team is responsible for assessing the effectiveness of internal control mechanisms, including the quality assurance of performance information. However, aside from the broader review mentioned above, we found no evidence of the Council's Internal Audit team completing data quality reviews in the last five years.
- 25 As a result of the Council having limited arrangements in place to check the accuracy of its service user perspective and outcomes information, there is a risk that the actions and decisions it takes, and the resources it deploys, are based on inaccurate information.

As the information provided on outcomes and the perspective of service users is limited, the extent to which the Council can use this information to help it achieve its outcomes is also limited

- 26 As set out above, our main finding is that the Council provides limited performance information to senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities. Therefore, it follows

logically that the extent to which the Council uses the service user perspective and outcomes information to help it achieve its outcomes from this performance information is limited.

- 27 Where we did find examples of the Council providing information on the perspective of service users and outcomes, we found some evidence of the Council using this information to make changes. For example, the Council receives and records complaints information and monitors the outcomes of the action it takes in response to those complaints. The quarterly Observation Reports also contain further examples, such as homelessness prevention and responding to fly tipping.

The Council recognises it needs to strengthen the information it provides to its senior leaders to help them better understand the service user perspective and has been exploring how other councils do this

- 28 The Council has recently reviewed the performance information it provides to senior leaders. For the 2020-21 financial year, it created the quarterly Observation Reports to bring together a range of performance information in one place. However, this review did not focus on providing senior leaders with information to better understand the service user perspective and/or the outcomes of the Council's activities.
- 29 The Council acknowledges that the service user perspective and the achievement of outcomes are not well represented in its current performance reporting arrangements. In its Annual Report for 2021-22, it identified the need to further develop its performance monitoring and reporting arrangements.
- 30 Consequently, the Council is in the process of developing a Corporate Data Suite (CDS) which will include a set of population indicators as well as service level measures. It has produced a 'starter version' of the CDS for senior leaders to use and provide feedback on. The CDS will use a range of service user perspective measures currently contained in the annual consultation exercise the Council undertakes with its residents. It will be important for the Council to ensure that this information is drawn from the diversity of service users including groups who share protected characteristics.
- 31 Since 2022, the Council surveys residents, local businesses, staff, and trades unions to inform future planning and priority setting. The Council presents the findings from these surveys in its Annual Report. The Council has identified that it has a rich source of data in these surveys and has acknowledged it can use this information going forwards to better provide the service user perspective. The Council is currently planning how it can present this information to senior leaders as part of its performance reporting arrangements.
- 32 The latest Corporate Strategy 2022-27 clearly lists the outcomes the Council is aiming to achieve under its four Wellbeing Objectives. To deliver the outcomes, the

Council has identified thematic (e.g., tackling poverty) and service priorities (e.g., housing) that it will focus on. The Council plans to use its new performance reporting arrangements, based on the Corporate Development Suite, to report on service priorities, themes, and outcomes.

- 33 In recognising the need to include more information about the service user perspective, the Council has looked at other councils throughout the United Kingdom to see how they collect and present this information. The Council is also using a range of informal and formal networks to develop its future performance management arrangements. Learning how other organisations are providing information on the service user perspective and outcomes is an important element of the Council’s arrangements to secure value for money. It will, therefore, be important that the Council continues to benchmark its arrangements with those from other organisations.

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

Information on the perspective of the service user

- R1 The Council should ensure that the information provided to its senior leaders enables them to understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users. This should include strengthening its arrangements to assure itself that this information is drawn from the diversity of service users.

Information on progress towards outcomes

- R2 The Council should strengthen the information provided to senior leaders to help them evaluate whether the Council is delivering its objectives and intended outcomes.

Quality and accuracy of data

- R3 The Council should assure itself that it has robust arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of the information it provides to senior leaders relating to service user perspective and outcomes.

Appendix 1

Key questions and what we looked for

Exhibit 2: key questions and what we looked for

The table below sets out the question we sought to answer in carrying out this audit, along with the audit criteria we used to arrive at our findings.

Level 1	
Does the Council's performance data enable senior leaders to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities to effectively manage its performance?	
Level 2	Audit Criteria ¹ (what we are looking for)
2.1 Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the perspective of service users?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The information is:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– relevant to the objectives the Council has set itself;– sufficient to enable an understanding of the service user perspective;– sufficient to provide an understanding of progress towards the outcomes the Council is planning to achieve;– drawn from the diversity of service users including groups who share protected characteristics; and– used to inform comparisons with the performance of similar bodies where relevant.• The Council has involved service users in determining which information to collect.
2.2 Does the performance information provided to senior leaders include appropriate information on the outcomes of the Council's activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The information draws on a range of evidence sources to provide a holistic view of progress.• The information enables senior leaders to monitor progress over the short, medium and long term.• The information enables senior leaders to monitor the delivery of outcomes that cover multiple service areas and/or organisations.

¹ Our audit criteria have been informed by our cumulative knowledge of previous audit work, as well as the question hierarchy and positive indicators we have developed to support our sustainable development principle examinations.

Level 1

Does the Council's performance data enable senior leaders to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities to effectively manage its performance?

Level 2

Audit Criteria¹ (what we are looking for)

2.3 Does the Council have robust arrangements to ensure that the data provided is accurate?

- The Council has clear arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of the data it provides to senior leaders.
- Where weaknesses in data quality are identified, the Council addresses them.

2.4 Does the Council use the information to help it achieve its outcomes?

- Where poor performance is identified, the Council uses the information to make changes/interventions.
- There is evidence of the Council improving its progress towards its outcomes as a result of interventions.

2.5 Does the Council review the effectiveness of its arrangements?

- The Council reviews the information provided to senior leaders to ensure it is appropriate and relevant.
- The Council compares the information it collects with the information collected by similar organisations to identify opportunities to strengthen its arrangements.



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