

Use of performance information: service user perspective and outcomes – Newport City 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 that **the Council provides limited performance information to enable senior leaders to understand the perspective of service users and the outcomes of its activities.**
- 3 We have made three recommendations to strengthen the information given to senior leaders.
- 4 Our findings are based on fieldwork we did between May and September 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 sets 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 Leader of Newport City Council, Director of Transformation & Corporate, Transformation & Intelligence Service Manager, and Performance and Programmes Manager. 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 Council produces quarterly performance and annual self-assessment reports, which cover the Council’s financial and service performance and progress towards its well-being objectives. The Council also produces mid-year reports to provide updates on progress in relation to its four well-being objectives. The above reports are considered by Cabinet and the Council’s scrutiny committees and provide the main opportunity for members and senior leaders to understand how well the Council is performing.

14 The Council published its Annual Corporate Well-being Self-Assessment Report 2021-22 in October 2022 and, subsequent to our fieldwork, its 2022-23 Annual Self-Assessment report in October 2023. The Council’s Corporate Plan 2022-27, which notes its commitment to shape services through considering the views of its communities, service users and partners, was approved by Cabinet and adopted by full Council in November 2022.

15 Our review focused on these key performance reporting mechanisms.

What we found

The Council provides limited performance information to enable senior leaders to understand the perspective of service users and the outcomes of its activities

The performance information provided to senior leaders provides limited insight into the perspective of service users

- 16 Overall, the performance information reported to senior leaders provides limited information on the service user perspective.
- 17 We found some examples of the Council providing information to help senior leaders understand the service user perspective. For example, through its annual report on compliments, comments, and complaints. There was also information in the Council's community well-being profile 2021 that provided some insight into the service user perspective. This included information from the citizen satisfaction surveys.
- 18 The Director of Social Service's Annual Report 2022-23 also includes information about the perspective of service users, mainly through the use of case studies and quotes from service users. There are also some case studies included in the Council's Annual Corporate Self-Assessment Reports, 2021/22 and 2022/23, and some of the mid-year performance reports. Case studies can help senior leaders understand the perspectives of service users, although they do tend to relate to a small number of individuals, so do not necessarily provide a comprehensive picture of the perspective of service users.
- 19 In its Prevention and Inclusion mid-year review 2022-24, the Council stated that it had proactively sought out the perspective of service users in its work to become a City of Sanctuary for refugees and asylum seekers. The Council carried out a mass consultation with service users, as well as professionals including statutory and third sector organisations, but this activity was not integrated into the Council's performance reports.
- 20 Consequently, there is a gap between the information on the service user perspective that some Council services collect and the information that is routinely reported to its senior leaders. It is therefore difficult to see how senior leaders would be able to gain a comprehensive overview of the perspective of service users and fully understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users from the performance information they are given.

Performance information provided to senior leaders largely focuses on outputs and activities rather than evaluating their impact

- 21 Apart from some limited examples, the Council's performance reports generally provide a narrative of activities and outputs as opposed to an assessment of progress against the outcomes the Council is seeking to achieve.
- 22 There are examples of performance information within performance reports that would help senior leaders understand the outcomes of the Council's activities. For example, the Council's 2021/22 Annual Corporate Well-being Self-Assessment report includes some information about the outcomes from supporting individuals to live independently. There are also some measures in the Council's Annual Corporate Self-Assessment Report 2022/23 which would help senior leader have an understanding of outcomes, such as around emotional and mental well-being.
- 23 The Director of Social Services annual report 2022-23 also includes some examples of outcomes, through case studies.
- However, overall, much of the performance information we reviewed focused upon outputs and quantitative measures, with limited evaluation of the outcomes of its actions. This limits senior leaders' ability to understand the impact of the Council's activities and whether it is achieving its desired outcomes.

The Council has limited arrangements to ensure performance data reflecting the service user perspective and outcomes information is accurate

- 24 The Council does not have comprehensive arrangements to routinely check the quality of the service user perspective and outcomes performance information. As set out earlier in our report, such information is limited in the Council's performance reports anyway.
- 25 The Council trusts its staff to be familiar with the performance data they are reporting and how this is collected. The Council has developed a Data Quality Protocol. This Protocol outlines the requirements of maintaining high quality data and producing accurate and timely performance information. The Council states in the Protocol that all employees are responsible for the administration, interrogation and reporting from these systems, and that they should be aware of the requirements set out in the Protocol. Each service area is responsible and accountable for their data which is submitted into the Council's Management Information System.
- 26 The Council's Transformation and Intelligence Team undertake regular sense checks of performance information before it is presented to scrutiny committees and senior leadership. Where anomalies with performance information are identified, the Team engages with the relevant service to check the accuracy of that information.
- 27 The Council's Internal Audit service did a review of data quality during 2021-22 which covered a small sample of local and national performance measures. Internal Audit gave a 'reasonable' assurance rating from its review and highlighted several

strengths for the majority of the service areas reviewed. These included that performance indicators were clearly defined and there was sufficiently detailed guidance about calculating the indicators. However, Internal Audit found some common themes across the sample reviewed, including data that had been collected was not always subjected to secondary review or quality assurance checks. Management actions were agreed for the Policy and Partnership team and Newport Intelligence Hub to review the self-assessment process for performance measures, as well as the Council's approach to performance management.

- 28 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 performance information presented to senior leaders may be inaccurate, and actions being taken and resources being deployed 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

- 29 As identified above, the Council provides limited performance information to its senior leaders to enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of its activities. It is, therefore, logical 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 will also be limited.
- 30 Where we did find examples of the Council providing information on the perspective of service users and outcomes, we found some examples of the Council then using this information to make changes. For example, the Council's Compliments, Comments and Complaints Annual Report 2021/22 identifies seven actions for improvement as a result of its review of the complaints it has received.

The Council recognises that it needs to make better use of the information available to it

- 31 The Council recognises the importance of using data to understand the views of its service users and the impacts of its activities. For example, within its Annual Corporate Well-being Self-Assessment Report 2021/22, the Council highlighted the importance for its services to receive feedback information to help understand the experiences faced when service users access and use services, to help it improve its delivery of services. Also, for it to improve data captured in its contact centre, as well as to better analyse complaint demographics and improve recording of data.
- 32 The Council does not compare its arrangements for collecting and reporting performance information on outcomes and the service user perspective with the approaches of other organisations. We do not mean comparing performance per se, but to help it learn how other organisations are providing information about service user perspectives and outcomes to help strengthen its own arrangements.

- 33 The Council is making some changes to its management of performance information, with a view to improve its understanding of the service user perspective and outcomes. However, this work is ongoing so we have not been able to test the impact of these changes during this review.
- 34 While making better use of the information available to senior leaders, it will be important for the Council to also ensure that its arrangements help senior leaders benchmark and compare its arrangements with other organisations. This is an important element of securing value for money and doing this will also help the Council understand and learn from how other councils are providing information on service user perspective and outcomes.

Recommendations

Exhibit 1: recommendations

R1 Information on the perspective of the service user

- The Council should strengthen the information it provides to its senior leaders to enable them to understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users.

R2 Information on progress towards outcomes

- The Council should strengthen the information provided to senior leaders to help them understand the impact of its services and evaluate whether it is delivering its long-term objectives and intended outcomes.

R3 Information on the quality and accuracy of data

- The Council needs to assure itself that it has robust arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of the service user and outcomes data it provides to senior leaders.

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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