



WALES AUDIT OFFICE
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

Annual Improvement Report 2016-17 Powys County Council

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This Annual Improvement Report has been prepared on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales by Colin Davies and Justine Morgan under the direction of Jane Holownia.

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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 National Assembly.

Together with appointed auditors, 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 Assembly Commission and National Health Service bodies in Wales.

The Auditor General and staff of the Wales Audit Office aim to provide public-focused and proportionate reporting on the stewardship of public resources and in the process provide insight and promote improvement.

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.

Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This document is also available in Welsh.

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Summary report

2016-17 performance audit work

- 1 In determining the breadth of work undertaken during the year, we considered the extent of accumulated audit and inspection knowledge as well as other available sources of information including Powys County Council's (the Council's) own mechanisms for review and evaluation. For 2016-17, we undertook improvement assessment work at all councils under three themes: governance, use of resources, and improvement planning and reporting. At some councils, we supplemented this work with local risk-based audits, identified in the Audit Plan for 2016-17.
- 2 The work carried out since the last Annual Improvement Report (AIR), including that of the relevant regulators, is set out in [Exhibit 1](#).

The Council is meeting its statutory requirements in relation to continuous improvement

- 3 Based on, and limited to, the work carried out by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators, the Auditor General believes that the Council is likely to comply with the requirements of the Local Government Measure (2009) during 2017-18.

Recommendations and proposals for improvement

- 4 Given the wide range of services provided by the Council and the challenges it is facing, it would be unusual if we did not find things that can be improved. The Auditor General is able to:
- make proposals for improvement – if proposals are made to the Council, we would expect it to do something about them and we will follow up what happens;
 - make formal recommendations for improvement – if a formal recommendation is made, the Council must prepare a response to that recommendation within 30 working days;
 - conduct a special inspection, and publish a report and make recommendations; and
 - recommend to ministers of the Welsh Government that they intervene in some way.
- 5 During the course of the year, the Auditor General did not make any formal recommendations. However, a number of proposals for improvement have been made and these are repeated in this report. We will monitor progress against them and relevant recommendations made in our national reports ([Appendix 3](#)) as part of our improvement assessment work.

Audit, regulatory and inspection work reported during 2016-17

Exhibit 1: audit, regulatory and inspection work reported during 2016-17

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
Governance			
March 2017	<p>Good governance when determining service changes</p> <p>Review of the Council's governance arrangements for determining service changes.</p>	<p>Given the ambition and pace of its service change programme, there is significant scope for the Council to strengthen its governance arrangements.</p>	<p>The Council's governance arrangements could be strengthened by:</p> <p>P1 Reviewing the current remit and role of the Cabinet to enable it to focus on the Council's key priorities and significant service changes.</p> <p>P2 Clarifying and strengthening the role of scrutiny committees in considering service change.</p> <p>P3 Aligning Cabinet and Scrutiny work programmes to include details of forthcoming service change proposals and making them easily accessible on the Council's website.</p> <p>P4 Improving the quality of information and options appraisals provided to Members to enable them to consider the strategic implications of the proposed service changes.</p> <p>P5 Clarify delegated authorities, particularly for significant service changes so that decisions are transparent and accountability for them is clear.</p> <p>P6 Strengthening arrangements for monitoring the impact of service changes including explicitly setting out at the point of decision what will be monitored, where this will be monitored and who will be responsible for doing so.</p>

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
Use of resources			
November 2016	<p>Annual audit letter 2015-16 Letter summarising the key messages arising from the Auditor General's statutory responsibilities under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 and his reporting responsibilities under the Code of Audit Practice. The Annual Audit Letter is in Appendix 2 of this report.</p>	<p>The Auditor General issued an unqualified opinion on the Council's 2015-16 accounting statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council's and the Pension Fund's financial position and transactions.</p>	<p>Not applicable.</p>
March 2017	<p>Savings planning Review of the Council's financial savings arrangements, including how well it is delivering the required savings and whether it has robust approaches to plan, manage and deliver budget savings, at a pace that supports financial resilience.</p>	<p>Whilst the Council is strengthening its arrangements for developing savings plans, some are insufficiently developed and have unrealistic delivery timescales which may not fully support future financial resilience.</p>	<p>P1 Strengthen financial planning arrangements by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring that the service savings targets set for third party spend, income and cost improvement opportunities can be achieved in planned timescales; • ensuring that all savings plans are sufficiently well developed for inclusion in the annual budget; and • forecasting the use of reserves over the MTFP period.

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
June 2017	<p>Review of Education Finance</p> <p>Our review set out to answer the question, 'Is the availability and quality of advice adequate to support the Council and its schools in managing education budgets'?</p>	<p>We concluded that schools and councillors receive improved advice and support about the management of schools' budgets, but the Council faces challenges in achieving the pace to deliver an affordable, sustainable education service.</p> <p>We reached this conclusion because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the monitoring of schools' delegated budgets, and the support and challenge provided to schools when setting their budgets, are improving in most respects; but • the Council faces major challenges in achieving the pace that will deliver an affordable and sustainable education service and halt the projected substantial decline in schools' financial health. 	<p>P1 In order to provide the necessary challenge to secondary schools with regard to their financial planning, the Council should ensure that it has the capacity to analyse and evaluate schools' curricular planning.</p> <p>P2 The Council should work with schools to explore means of improving the efficiency and effectiveness with which schools procure goods and services.</p> <p>P3 In order to further embed resource management as a key component of school improvement, the Council should agree with schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a consistent template for recording key financial information within school development plans; and • a system whereby schools' financial health might be assessed and reported annually. <p>P4 In order to improve its clarity and transparency, the Council should review its Service Level Agreement with schools for Financial Services, ensuring that the optional element includes only those services that are not statutory functions of the Council.</p> <p>P5 In order to ensure a common understanding of financial data, the Council should ensure that data reported to members is consistent with that reported to the Welsh Government, and that any necessary variance between the two sets is fully explained.</p> <p>P6 In order to achieve an affordable and adequately resourced school system, the Council should increase the pace and scale of change in implementing its Schools Organisation Policy, Planning Education Provision. In particular, the Council should work with partners inside and outside Wales to ensure that learners aged 16 to 19 are able to access a suitable curriculum in the language of their choice.</p>

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
Local risk-based performance audit			
May 2017	In December 2016, in lieu of a full Corporate Assessment, we undertook a tailored risk-based assessment focusing on vision and strategic direction; collaboration and partnerships; governance and accountability; resource management, and improvement planning.	<p>Our assessment findings underpinned the conclusions set out above and we further concluded that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Council has a clear and ambitious vision for transformational change but capacity, capability and pace remain as challenges; • the Council is working in collaboration with Powys THB through its integration plan, supporting cultural change and staff engagement; and • the Council has a track record of financial resilience but management information and data remains a challenge if the Council is to deliver sustainable models for Education and Social Services. 	The Council is developing and implementing an action plan to respond to our findings and conclusions.

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
Improvement planning and reporting			
July 2016	Wales Audit Office annual improvement plan audit Review of the Council's published plans for delivering on improvement objectives.	The Council has complied with its statutory improvement reporting duties.	Not applicable.
November 2016	Wales Audit Office annual assessment of performance audit Review of the Council's published performance assessment.	The Council has complied with its statutory improvement reporting duties.	Not applicable.

Issue date	Brief description	Conclusions	Proposals for improvement
Reviews by inspection and regulation bodies			
March 2017	On 8 February 2017, Estyn conducted an improvement conference focused on the local authority's education services for children and young people. This improvement conference is part of a pilot to try out new ways of working with local authorities to secure improvements in education services in Wales.	<p>Estyn is assured that the local authority understands:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the reasons behind the relatively weak performance of pupils in around half of its secondary schools in recent years; and • the need to improve its monitoring and oversight of school budgets and that plans are being developed or are at the early stages of implementation to address the issues. 	<p>In order to further strengthen ongoing work, Estyn recommends that the local authority:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • refines its use of data to monitor schools; • ensures that officers, elected members and governors understand how well schools are performing compared to similar schools; • ensures that actions in improvement plans are supported by appropriate success targets, and that progress is monitored vigorously; • ensures that performance management for head teachers is a rigorous process that takes appropriate account of standards that pupils achieve and inspection outcomes; • agrees a plan for the future organisation of secondary schools; • develops further its work to recruit strong senior and middle leaders and provide leadership training for suitable teachers within the authority; • ensures that the full range of financial information is taken into account when budgets are agreed and monitored; • ensures that school governors are fully aware of their school's financial position; and • uses its powers of intervention effectively to address performance or budget issues in schools and follows up any prior warning letters appropriately.

Appendix 1

Status of this report

The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) requires the Auditor General to undertake a forward-looking annual improvement assessment, and to publish an annual improvement report, for each improvement authority in Wales. Improvement authorities (defined as local councils, national parks, and fire and rescue authorities) have a general duty to 'make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of [their] functions'.

The annual improvement assessment considers the likelihood that an authority will comply with its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement. The assessment is also the main piece of work that enables the Auditor General to fulfil his duties. Staff of the Wales Audit Office, on behalf of the Auditor General, produce the annual improvement report. The report discharges the Auditor General's duties under section 24 of the Measure, by summarising his audit and assessment work in a published annual improvement report for each authority. The report also discharges his duties under section 19 to issue a report certifying that he has carried out an improvement assessment under section 18 and stating whether (as a result of his improvement plan audit under section 17) he believes that the authority has discharged its improvement planning duties under section 15.

The Auditor General may also, in some circumstances, carry out special inspections (under section 21), which will be reported to the authority and Ministers, and which he may publish (under section 22). An important ancillary activity for the Auditor General is the co-ordination of assessment and regulatory work (required by section 23), which takes into consideration the overall programme of work of all relevant regulators at an improvement authority. The Auditor General may also take account of information shared by relevant regulators (under section 33) in his assessments.

Appendix 2

Annual Audit Letter

Mr Jeremy Patterson
Chief Executive
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Dear Jeremy

Annual Audit Letter Powys County Council 2015-16

This letter summarises the key messages arising from my statutory responsibilities under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 and my reporting responsibilities under the Code of Audit Practice.

The Council complied with its responsibilities relating to financial reporting and use of resources

It is the Council's responsibility to:

- put systems of internal control in place to ensure the regularity and lawfulness of transactions and to ensure that its assets are secure;
- maintain proper accounting records;
- prepare a Statement of Accounts in accordance with relevant requirements; and
- establish and keep under review appropriate arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

The Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 requires me to:

- provide an audit opinion on the accounting statements;
- review the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources; and
- issue a certificate confirming that I have completed the audit of the accounts.

Local authorities in Wales prepare their accounting statements in accordance with the requirements of the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom. This Code is based on International Financial Reporting Standards. On 30 September 2016, I issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Council's and the Powys Pension Fund's financial

position and transactions. My report is contained within the Statement of Accounts. The key matters arising from the accounts audit were reported to members of the Audit Committee in my Audit of Financial Statements report on the 30 September 2016, and a more detailed report containing specific recommendations and management's response to those recommendations will be issued in due course.

I am satisfied that the Council has appropriate arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources

My consideration of the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness has been based on the audit work undertaken on the accounts as well as placing reliance on the work completed under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. The Auditor General will highlight areas where the effectiveness of these arrangements has yet to be demonstrated or where improvements could be made. In his Annual Improvement Report issued in June 2016, with regard to its use of resources, the Auditor General concluded that the Council is improving its financial management arrangements with the benefit of increasingly rigorous internal scrutiny and challenge, but recognises that it needs to better align and monitor service and financial performance if it is to be confident of achieving its priorities with the resources at its disposal.

I issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts has been completed on 30 September 2016.

My work to date on certification of grant claims and returns has not identified significant issues that would impact on the 2016-17 accounts or key financial systems.

A more detailed report on my grant certification work will follow in 2017 once this year's programme of certification work is complete.

The financial audit fee for 2015-16 is currently expected to be broadly in line with the agreed fee set out in the Annual Audit Plan. However, during the course of the year, the audit team responded to a considerable volume of correspondence arising from members of the public. Once all our work is complete, we will discuss the final fee position with the Director of Finance.

Yours sincerely

Anthony Veale
Engagement Director
For and on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales

cc: County Councillor W. Barry Thomas – Leader
Mr David Powell – Director of Finance

Appendix 3

National report recommendations 2016-17

Exhibit 2: national report recommendations 2016-17

Summary of proposals for improvement relevant to local government, included in national reports published by the Wales Audit Office, since publication of the last AIR.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
August 2016	Financial Resilience of Local Authorities in Wales 2015-16	<p>In our report of 2014-15 (The Financial Resilience of Councils in Wales, April 2015) we made a number of recommendations for local authorities. Many of these recommendations remained relevant and required further work from authorities to address them during 2016-17. In addition, we also made the following recommendations based on our more recent review:</p> <p>R1 Local authorities should strengthen their financial-planning arrangements by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing more explicit links between the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and its corporate priorities and service plans; • aligning other key strategies such as workforce and asset management plans with the MTFP; • developing comprehensive multi-year fully costed savings plans which underpin and cover the period of the MTFP, not just the forthcoming annual budget; • categorising savings proposals so that the shift from traditional-type savings to transformational savings can be monitored over the period of the MTFP; and • ensuring timescales for the delivery of specific savings proposals are realistic and accountability for delivery is properly assigned. <p>R2 Local authorities should develop corporate income generation and charging policies.</p> <p>R3 Local authorities should ensure that they have a comprehensive reserves strategy, which outlines the specific purpose of accumulated useable reserves and the impact and use of these in the MTFP.</p> <p>R4 Local authorities should develop key performance indicators to monitor the MTFP.</p> <p>R5 Local authorities should ensure that savings plans are sufficiently detailed to ensure that members are clear as to what the plans are intended to deliver and that the delivery of those plans can be scrutinised appropriately throughout the year.</p> <p>R6 Local authorities should ensure that corporate capacity and capability are at a level that can effectively support the delivery of savings plans in the MTFP at the pace required.</p>

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
October 2016	Community Safety in Wales	<p>The seven recommendations within this report required individual and collective action from a range of stakeholders – the Welsh Government, Home Office Wales Team, police and crime commissioners, public service board members and local authorities:</p> <p>R1 Improve strategic planning to better coordinate activity for community safety by replacing the existing planning framework with a national strategy supported by regional and local plans that are focused on delivering the agreed national community-safety priorities.</p> <p>R2 Improve strategic partnership working by formally creating effective community-safety boards that replace existing community-safety structures that formalise and draw together the work of the Welsh Government, police forces, local authorities, health boards, fire and rescue authorities, WACSO and other key stakeholders.</p> <p>R3 Improve planning through the creation of comprehensive action plans that cover the work of all partners and clearly identify the regional and local contribution in meeting the national priorities for community safety.</p> <p>R4 Review current grant-funding arrangements and move to pooled budgets with longer-term funding commitments to support delivery bodies to improve project and workforce planning that focuses on delivering the priorities of the national community-safety strategy.</p> <p>R5 Ensure effective management of performance of community safety by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting appropriate measures at each level to enable members, officers and the public to judge progress in delivering actions for community-safety services; • ensuring performance information covers the work of all relevant agencies; and • establishing measures to judge inputs, outputs and impact to be able to understand the effect of investment decisions and support oversight and scrutiny. <p>R6 Revise the systems for managing community-safety risks and introduce monitoring and review arrangements that focus on assuring the public that money spent on community safety is resulting in better outcomes for people in Wales.</p> <p>R7 Improve engagement and communication with citizens through public service boards in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing plans and priorities for community safety; • agreeing priorities for action; and • reporting performance and evaluating impact.

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
November 2016	<u>Charging for Services and Generating Income by Local Authorities</u>	<p>This report made eight recommendations, of which six required action from local authorities. Recommendations R4 and R6 required action from the Welsh Government and Welsh Local Government Association:</p> <p>R1 Develop strategic frameworks for introducing and reviewing charges, linking them firmly with the Medium Term Financial Plan and the Corporate Plan.</p> <p>R2 Review the unit and total costs of providing discretionary services to clearly identify any deficits and, where needed, set targets to improve the current operating position.</p> <p>R3 Use the impact assessment checklist whenever changes to charges are considered.</p> <p>R5 Identify opportunities to procure private sector companies to collect charges to improve efficiency and economy in collecting income.</p> <p>R7 Improve management of performance, governance and accountability by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regularly reporting any changes to charges to scrutiny committee(s); • improving monitoring to better understand the impact of changes to fees and charges on demand, and the achievement of objectives; • benchmarking and comparing performance with others more rigorously; and • providing elected members with more comprehensive information to facilitate robust decision making. <p>R8 Improve the forecasting of income from charges through the use of scenario planning and sensitivity analysis.</p>

Date of report	Title of review	Recommendation
January 2017	Local Authority Funding of Third Sector Services	<p>This report made three recommendations, of which two required action from local authorities. Recommendation R3 required action from the Welsh Government:</p> <p>R1 To get the best from funding decisions, local authorities and third sector bodies need to ensure they have the right arrangements and systems in place to support their work with the third sector. To assist local authorities and third sector bodies in developing their working practices, we recommend that local authority and third sector officers use the Checklist for local authorities effectively engaging and working with the third sector to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-evaluate current third sector engagement, management, performance and practice; • identify where improvements in joint working is required; and • jointly draft and implement an action plan to address the gaps and weaknesses identified through the self-evaluation. <p>R2 Poor performance management arrangements are weakening accountability and limiting effective scrutiny of third sector activity and performance. To strengthen oversight of the third sector, we recommend that elected members scrutinise the review checklist completed by officers, and regularly challenge performance by officers and the local authority in addressing gaps and weaknesses.</p>

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