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Dear Darren

Improvement Assessment

This letter summarises the key conclusions arising from the Auditor General's work in respect of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure).

I am required, under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) to report my audit and assessment work in relation to whether Bridgend County Borough Council (the Council) has discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure.

Further to my Improvement Assessment letter of 17 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 reliability of the Council's self-evaluation; and
- my further proposals for improvement and/or recommendations.

I have arrived at my views by:

- reviewing the Annual Report produced and published by the Council by 31 October, in which it reported its performance for 2011-12;
- undertaking interviews with managers and reviewing supporting documents in a sample of the service areas included in the report; and
- testing the reliability of a sample of performance indicators.

Further to this I will undertake more detailed work on the arrangements that support the Council's performance management and reporting over the following months.

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 and has acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance

By publishing the Annual Report by the deadline of 31 October, the Council has complied with the statutory requirements outlined within the Welsh Government's guidance for the Local Government Measure 2009, under Section 15 (7). The Report was approved by the Cabinet on 17 October 2012 and is available on the Council's website, both in English and Welsh.

The Report contains nine Improvement Objectives and supporting actions, covering the period 2011-12. The Council clearly summarises results and includes sufficient evidence to demonstrate whether or not the Council has achieved improvement or maintains arrangements to secure continuous improvement.

All Statutory Performance Indicators were included in the Report and appropriately assessed by the Council, in addition to local performance indicators.

The Council has taken positive steps to publicise the availability of its Annual Report, which identifies whether or not improvements have been achieved; but the Report does not always include details of the impact or outcomes of its actions

The Council is strengthening its approach to reviewing its performance and has produced a more balanced view of its performance in 2011-12

The Council is demonstrating a better level of self-awareness compared to last year by providing a more balanced account of its performance, accounting for its failures to perform, as well as promoting its successes.

The Annual Report describes performance against each of its nine Improvement Objectives. Each Improvement Objective has a discrete section which contains a description of on-going challenges and what the Council intends to do to address these challenges. Nevertheless, in some examples, the Council could more explicitly state whether each Improvement Objective has or has not been fully achieved; for example, by providing a conclusive statement that collates all the results within each objective.

Performance review is a routine and regular function throughout the organisation, involving managers and members in the assessment and management of performance. The Council's new Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) arrangements, built on its former Quarterly Business Reviews, were introduced in July 2012. They provide senior management and members with an opportunity every three months to monitor how well services are performing against improvement objectives. Performance results are analysed, with the information being used to identify actions to address areas of weaknesses and future challenges. The preparation of the Annual Report also provides a

focus for the Council to challenge itself, to learn and reflect on its performance and to report on its progress to the public.

The Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales, reviewed the heads of service reports for both adult's and children's services which were submitted in July 2012. The Inspectorate found that the Council had supplied comprehensive and up-to-date information, to demonstrate progress and assist in its evaluation of performance.

The Council has used a wide range of relevant information to arrive at its conclusions and is working to improve its ability to show the impact of its activity

The Council provided sufficient evidence to make a valid assessment of performance by explaining intentions and, in most cases, providing an adequate description of progress made together in many cases, with supplementary performance indicators. For example, to increase the range of housing options with an emphasis on preventing homelessness, the description covers a wide range of activities including bed and breakfast usage, work with social landlords, and the increase in numbers of affordable homes. The Council has also begun to widen its evidence base with the inclusion of feedback from its Citizen Panel.

The Council has reliable systems for making sure the performance indicators it uses in its reports are accurate. The Council provides data on how well it has performed against current years' targets, against the previous two years and, whenever possible, against other local authorities, both nationally and regionally. For example, it compares its performance to measure the average number of calendar days taken to deliver a Disabled Facilities Grant, of 251 days against the all-Wales average of 326 days and the South East Wales average of 291; concluding that its results are more favourable in comparison.

Although the Council's self-assessment process appears relevant to the needs of users, many of the descriptions it uses in its 2011-12 Annual Report to evaluate its success are not sufficiently outcome-focused. For example, the description to 'work with partners in the health and third sector, to implement a targeted programme of health and well-being promotions': this statement explains the action being taken but it does not clearly state whether service users are any better off. Similarly, significant funding has been made available through the Local Investment Fund (£1.2million) and Community Enterprise Grants (£2million); however, the Council does not provide details on how these cash investments have brought real benefits to people and their communities.

This area for improvement has been recognised by the Council, which is in the process of developing more outcome-focused measures to assess performance against 2012-13 priorities. The Council has also taken steps to improve the business plans of individual services following a report made by Community Safety and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 10 September 2012, which contained a series of recommendations to improve the quality of information contained in the plans.

The Council would also benefit from consistently including more detailed analysis and reviews of its achievements and of any downward trends, for example, give reasons why the results are as achieved, and whether the actions had the desired effect. The Annual Report, Section (Annex B – Appendix A) includes specific performance indicator data, with comments on the quality of performance, such as when targets were met, and how performance compared with Welsh and Regional results. However, in a few cases, trends were denoted as positive even where targets were not met. For example, the target for the percentage of first placements of looked after children with a care plan in place was set at 93 per cent with the actual performance being reported as 88.7 per cent. The positive trend in improvement is accurately stated but there is no reason given for failing to meet the target – in the context of a target of 95 per cent being set for 2012-13. More explanations regarding the quality of performance would be useful to provide a fuller picture. The Annual Report does not yet clearly articulate how performance information is being used to influence and develop Improvement Objectives for the forthcoming year.

The Annual Report also contains a section on the collaborations undertaken by the Council during the year. The descriptions would benefit from more detailed information on how and why the collaborative work was undertaken, the intended outcomes and what has been achieved so far.

The Council took positive steps to publicise the availability of its assessment

The Council has made the Annual Report available for public scrutiny by promoting its availability through the press; publishing a summary within a special edition of its community newspaper distributed in November 2012; and ensuring it can be accessed both electronically and through copies within libraries and other Council offices. The Council is also using social media, such as Twitter and Digital Signage to promote the Annual Report and enable feedback from the public.

For the first time, citizen feedback on the effectiveness of the Annual Report as a means to communicate information on Council activities is being actively encouraged through the use of a simple follow-up survey.

Further proposals for improvement/recommendations

No new proposals for improvement are being suggested 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

Helen Keatley – Performance Audit Lead