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Caerphilly County Borough Council
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Reference:

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Dear Christina,

Recovery planning – Assurance and Risk Assessment feedback

I hope this letter finds you safe and well in these particularly challenging times.

I thought it might be useful to write to you at this point to summarise the progress that we have made to date with our **Recovery planning – Assurance and Risk Assessment** project, and to give you some feedback to date to inform your ongoing recovery work.

Since July 2020, we have focussed part of our work programme on our recovery planning project focussing on the question: **Are recovery processes planned and delivered with proper regard for economy, efficiency and effectiveness and are they being done in accordance with the sustainable development principle?**

We continue to have ongoing dialogue with senior officers responsible for key areas of the Council's response and recovery processes and we provide observations, where relevant, to those officers following our discussions.

We are providing this summary feedback in this letter with a view to supporting your recovery processes in real time, focussing on economy, efficiency, and effectiveness and taking account of the sustainable development principle. In this spirit, we have summarised our key thoughts and findings to date, as well as some key areas you may wish to consider as you take your recovery processes forward.

Strategic recovery priorities

We recognise that the Strategic Recovery Framework (SRF) has now been in place since late September 2020, however, the Council has yet to set out how the aims and principles of the SRF align with existing priorities including the Corporate Plan, the Team Caerphilly transformation programme and the Place Shaping and Wellbeing framework. We recognise that those strategic programmes represent an ambitious and far reaching vision.

We identified in our recent Delivering Good Governance report that as a result of the above strategies the Council's priorities are too numerous and are not set out concisely and clearly enough to generate the necessary public support and commitment within the Council.

Our report therefore identified the following matter for your consideration;

“In order to create and maintain a collective shared focus, the Council should consolidate its priorities into a single, manageable, sequenced and agreed plan. The plan should span both the short and medium term and should specify, for each objective, the desired outcomes.”

We note that as yet no reports have been presented to elected members outlining the progress in firstly identifying and the working towards the success measures for the SRF.

Areas for consideration going forward:

- Set out how the Council will respond to the matters for consideration identified within our Delivering Good Governance report.
- To demonstrate and monitor progress against the 2 strategic aims in the SRF the Council should consider setting out clear success measures for the two Strategic Aims.
- Ensure that the Council's recovery processes take account of the Climate emergency and that the outcomes of its Decarbonisation strategy are integrated within the development of changes to the delivery of Council services.

Use of data to inform decisions

We note that in early 2021 the corporate review team focussed on Insight, Intelligence and Data engaged with a range of external organisations to understand their approaches to the use and reporting of data.

Area for consideration going forward:

- the Council will wish to ensure that in taking its corporate reviews forward, and the associated changes to service design and delivery, that a wide range of data and intelligence is regularly updated and analysed to inform decisions.

Reshaping services

We note that the Sustainable Development Principle is embedded within the methodology for the ten Corporate Reviews currently being undertaken. We also note the engagement with local communities around the Council's existing service provision through the Caerphilly Conversation in late 2020 to help inform the further stages of service changes.

Area for consideration going forward:

- the Council will need to regularly refresh its understanding of local communities' needs that have and will be impacted in varying ways by the pandemic.

We continue to meet with the transformation programme coordination group to receive periodic updates on progress on the Corporate Reviews. We note that in recent months the transformation programme has recruited staff across the Council to contribute to the development of the ten reviews.

We note that the Transformation Programme Board meets regularly and has already considered a number of important changes to date: including

- Agile working;
- Corporate volunteering; and
- Tourism review.

Our review of the transformation programme board papers has identified that the Council is now implementing a consistent approach to programme management and reporting of activity within the corporate reviews. Those reports are clear and concise and provide a clear narrative around progress over time.

We have identified a number of areas that the Council may wish to strengthen:

- Board papers should set out clearly the decision required from the Board and the subsequent decision should be recorded clearly within the minutes;
- Articulating the intended outcomes for each of the ten corporate reviews;
- Ensuring that risks and dependencies are considered at a programme level by the Board, and where necessary, relevant actions to mitigate those risks

are taken. A number of the reviews currently cite staff engagement and capacity of the IT service to drive forward reviews as a risk;

- Setting out a programme timeline to allow a sequenced approach to governance and decisions to be set out. The programme board papers do not as yet clearly set out the timescales for the conclusion of each review;
- Ensuring that the governance of the transformation, place-shaping and regeneration programmes are aligned and that the intended outcome measures are clearly articulated, and
- To ensure the necessary oversight and governance arrangements the Council may wish to consider how elected members are consistently engaged and enabled to challenge and support the wide range of transformational activity including the corporate reviews, commercialisation and investment strategy and the Placeshaping and Wellbeing framework. Our Delivering Good Governance review identified the following matter for consideration:

“In order to help ensure that both executive and non-executive members maintain a focus on its agreed priorities, the Council should:

- schedule key decisions well in advance in the Cabinet forward work programme; and
- consider how best to engage its scrutiny function in challenging constructively the Council’s progress in delivering its objectives and in setting its direction of travel.

Financial sustainability

We will shortly be publishing our Financial Sustainability review for 2020-21 and have sought to ensure that the transformation programme is reflected within that report.

Managing staff well-being

We note the considerable consultation and engagement activity undertaken in the development and agreement of the Agile working policy. We are also aware of the work being undertaken under the Workforce Development corporate review to deliver effective support to staff focussed on their well-being. The Council has sought to establish and maintain a positive dialogue with relevant trade unions during the development of the Agile working policy. The Council has recently surveyed its staff.

The Council has also identified a number of relevant courses within its Management training directory to help managers support staff working remotely. However those courses are not yet in place and operational.

We continue to engage with the head of people services and workforce development manager to understand the Council's emerging plans for supporting staff through its flexible working policy and working with the management network.

Area for consideration going forward:

- the Council will need to use the learning from its recent staff survey to help refine its support to staff as it moves into its recovery phase and embeds its Agile working policy.

Return to democratic arrangements

We note that following feedback we provided in our letter in November 2020, the Council's arrangements for taking votes in online meetings are now much more consistent and transparent.

As we identified in our Delivering Good Governance report 'In order to create and maintain a collective shared focus, the Council should consolidate its priorities into a single, manageable, sequenced and agreed plan. The plan should span both the short and medium term and should specify, for each objective, the desired outcomes.'

An effectively aligned work programme across Scrutiny and Cabinet should offer the opportunity for elected members to be effectively engaged in the recovery process and the key decisions that the Council will take in its recovery process. It will be critical that the Council's governance arrangements challenge and support the transformation programme effectively and efficiently.

Areas for consideration going forward:

- the Council will need to assure itself of the effective alignment of the the forward work programmes of Cabinet and Scrutiny committees, taking account of the ambitious changes being considered across a wide range of strategic developments including the Strategic Recovery Framework, transformation programme and Place shaping and Well-being Framework .

I hope that this summary of our work to date is useful to you and we would be happy to discuss with you at our scheduled meeting on 22nd June and receive any feedback from you to inform our summary findings to be published later this year which I understand was the subject of discussion at Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 6th April. Thank you again for engaging so constructively with us on this, and we look forward to continuing our working alongside you in real time.

Yours sincerely,

Gareth Jones
Audit Lead

cc Colin Davies, Audit Manager