

24 Cathedral Road / 24 Heol y Gadeirlan  
Cardiff / Caerdydd  
CF11 9LJ  
Tel / Ffôn: 029 2032 0500  
Fax / Ffacs: 029 2032 0600  
Textphone / Ffôn testun: 029 2032 0660  
[info@audit.wales](mailto:info@audit.wales) / [post@archwilio.cymru](mailto:post@archwilio.cymru)  
[www.audit.wales](http://www.audit.wales) / [www.archwilio.cymru](http://www.archwilio.cymru)

Caerphilly County Borough Council  
Penallta House  
Tredomen Park  
Ystrad Mynach  
Hengoed  
CF82 7PG

**Reference:** 2143A2020-21

**Date issued:** November 2020

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.

During the early summer we engaged with officers to see how we could best work with Councils to focus our work on your learning from the first wave of the pandemic. Thank you for your openness and invitations to speak with officers and members as well as to sit in to observe relevant recovery related meetings.

In our meetings with officers, we have become aware of the high level of understanding of the impact of the pandemic on local communities.

We are committed to sharing learning and feedback in real time, and as such have already shared relevant learning points. We're also sharing the learning we hear about through our [COVID-19 learning project](#) which you may have already picked up on through our tweets, blogs and COVID Learning digest emails.

We've highlighted a number of practice examples from the Council's approach including:

- the work to provide alternative approaches to delivering library services; and
- the delivery of free school meals to families that has boosted take up and also supported the local foundational economy.

Since early July, we have started 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 have already provided observations, where relevant to those officers following our discussions. We were pleased to be able to observe the Policy Development Meeting on 16 September when the Strategic Recovery Framework was discussed. The meeting was effectively chaired and the Chief Executive provided Cabinet members with very clear information about the local infection rate and the changes to the testing system, as well as the impact of the Welsh Government's local lockdown on service delivery. It was clear from those discussions that the Council is responding proactively and positively to the rapid and daily changes to its operating environment.

We recognise that recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will be a long and more complex process than some other emergencies, such as flooding, which are more timebound and linear in their nature. The COVID recovery phase will to a large extent have to run alongside a continuing response phase with priorities being reassessed continuously as a result. The key challenge of recovery for all public bodies in Wales is to build back better in a sustainable way.

We are providing the 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 going forward.

### **Strategic recovery priorities**

The Council has developed its Strategic Recovery Framework (SRF). We recognise this framework is an addition to the Corporate Plan, containing 2 strategic aim and 5 principles. We understand that the framework is to be seen as a 'lens' that will help guide the Council through its unprecedented recovery process.

The Auditor General and the Future Generations Commissioner will be holding a joint webinar on Building Back Better in late 2020 and that webinar may provide some useful learning for the Council.

Areas for consideration going forward:

- the Council will need to ensure that it has the necessary oversight and governance arrangements to demonstrate and monitor progress against the 2 strategic aims and the 5 principles in the SRF. In doing so the Council

should consider setting out clear success measures for the two Strategic Aims.

- the Council will need to align the SRF principles with its Corporate Plan objectives to ensure the efficient and effective achievement of both sets of priorities.

### **Learning from initial wave**

We have heard of the work undertaken locally to understand the impacts of the national lockdown on the Council's services, and also on staff who are a critical asset. It is clear that the Council changed the delivery of many services very rapidly and designed new services very rapidly, including the free school meal delivery service which both supported the foundational economy and increased take up of free school meals. The Council's IT service has provided support to enable far greater remote working which is now well established. The Council maintained its critical services including household waste collections and social care and has flexed its workforce to support the regional Test, Trace and Protect service. A clear learning experience for the Council has been the need to communicate clearly and rapidly with local communities, and the Council is aware of the increasing number of calls to its contact centre.

Area for consideration going forward:

- the One Council reviews to be undertaken under the SRF should provide an opportunity to consider how greater digital engagement can provide the most efficient and effective response for residents.

### **Use of data to inform decisions**

The Council has developed its own dashboard for COVID related data for schools, drawing in a standardised dataset from all schools on a daily basis to inform its risk assessment of them. The Council has also developed feedback processes for users of those leisure centres that it has re-opened to date.

### **Reshaping services**

The Council's 10 Corporate Reviews, agreed at Cabinet on 22 July, have set a clear initial intention to further strengthen and embed its Team Caerphilly approach across a number of service areas. The Council's learning from the first wave of the pandemic and its Corporate review process under the SRF, provide a clear opportunity to both reform and improve services to ensure efficient, effective and economic service delivery.

Areas for consideration going forward:

- the Council should use the Sustainable Development Principle to help inform its thinking when undertaking such reviews, particularly with a view to

understanding the needs of local communities who will have been impacted in varying ways by the ongoing pandemic;

- the Council will need to ensure that such understanding is built on effective data and intelligence that is regularly updated; and
- the Council will need to assure itself that its arrangements for the programme management of those reviews ensures the necessary oversight and challenge to maximise the benefits.

### **Financial sustainability**

In reports to both Cabinet in July and full Council in September the interim Section 151 officer set out the impact of the pandemic on the current budget.

Those reports have highlighted the additional costs that the Council as well as impact on income streams.

Areas for consideration going forward:

- as part of its Sustainable Financial Planning Corporate review the Council should take the opportunity to further consider its medium-term financial plan and ensure that it is aligned to its service redesign to secure a long-term approach.

### **Managing staff well-being**

Senior leaders across the Council have consistently recognised and publicly acknowledged the considerable efforts of its staff in responding to the pandemic.

The Council has undertaken a survey of staff to understand the impact of remote working, and that survey has informed the Agile working policy that has been scrutinised by the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee in the Autumn of 2020. What is clear from the survey is that remote working offers both advantages for the Council and its staff, as well as creating some risks to be managed. It is clear that a lack of interaction with colleagues in the office is being seen as a loss by some staff. Having reviewed the messages from the Chief Executive and the Leader, the impact on the emotional well-being of staff has been very well recognised and there has been effective signposting of support materials and organisations to staff. 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.

### **Communication with staff and local communities**

The Council has ensured clear, effective and regular communication from the Chief Executive since the outbreak of the pandemic. Those communications have been supported by regular messages from the Council's Leader and

supplemented by messages from the Corporate Management Team. We are aware that some CMT meetings have also been recorded to provide insight into decision making processes.

### **Corporate support for recovery**

The Council's HR and Workforce development team have been involved at all stages of the Council's response to the pandemic since March 2020. Given the critical importance of the Council's workforce, the Council will need to ensure that the workforce implications of the corporate reviews are effectively managed as the reviews are undertaken. Having agreed the revised Performance Management Framework in late February 2020, the embedding of those new processes was paused during the summer of 2020 but we are aware that the Corporate Performance Assessment will shortly be completed.

Areas for consideration going forward:

- the Council will need to ensure that its HR and Workforce development team are fully engaged in the Corporate reviews to minimise the risk that workforce implications of changes to service design and delivery are not fully considered.
- the Council will need to assure itself that during the autumn / winter the use of Departmental and Corporate Performance Assessments provide a secure understanding of performance, finances and risk management and that such insights are used to drive further improvement and efficiency.

### **Return to democratic arrangements**

We note that following feedback we provided in July 2020, the Council now provides clearer signposting to the recordings of remote meetings and that they are now generally uploaded within 2 days of the meetings. We are currently finalising the draft output from our Corporate Governance review which will help to inform your own decision-making review.

From observations of a number of Scrutiny and Cabinet meetings, it is clear that elected members are becoming familiar with the use of the technology. Currently the process of taking votes varies across committees and could be more efficiently undertaken for the benefit of committee members and viewers of the recordings.

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 the response and recovery phases.

Areas for consideration going forward:

- the Council may wish to consider how it effectively takes, records and then displays votes taken during meetings; and
- the Council will need to assure itself of the effective alignment of the Strategic Recovery Framework's aims and principles to the forward work programmes of Cabinet and Scrutiny committees, due to the potential scale of the changes being considered.

I hope that this summary of our work to date is useful to you and would be happy to discuss and receive any feedback from you to inform any future summaries. Thank you again for engaging so constructively with us on this, and we look forward to continuing our working alongside you in real time.

Stay safe.

Yours sincerely

Gareth Jones  
Audit Lead

cc Non Jenkins, Audit Manager