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Dear Richard

## Improvement Assessment Letter

This letter summarises the key conclusions arising from my work in respect of improvement reporting under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure). I am required to report my audit and assessment work in relation to whether the Isle of Anglesey County Council (the Council) has discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure.

Further to my Improvement Assessment letter of 24 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;
- my further proposals for improvement and/or recommendations.

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 February 2013.

**The Council has discharged its improvement reporting duties under the Measure but it should ensure that it acts more in accordance with Welsh Government guidance**

I have reached this conclusion because:

- the Council has complied in full with its improvement reporting duties under the Measure; but
- the content and structure of the Council's Performance Report could include more qualitative information to provide a more rounded evidence base.

**The Council has complied in full with its improvement reporting duties under the Measure**

The Council published its 2011-12 Performance Report (the Report) on 30 October 2012, and therefore met the statutory deadline for doing so.

The Report includes all the required elements. In particular, the Report:

- explains how its contents contribute to the Council's statutory duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement and be accountable;
- summarises, in a balanced way, the main successes and failures in the delivery of key projects supporting the Council's improvement objectives and other strategic priorities;
- sets out the Council's performance against all statutory performance indicators in 2011-12 and includes current and prior year performance figures;
- includes information that enables readers to compare the Council's performance against its targets, with all Welsh councils, and with the other councils in North Wales;
- highlights various examples of collaborative activity with other North Wales councils, public and private sector bodies, although it does not consistently articulate the aims of the collaboration or whether they achieved their intended outcomes; and
- provides important information about: the Council's recent history of Welsh Government intervention; its progress in addressing the Commissioners' 10 corporate governance improvement themes; and the outcomes of regulatory activity by Estyn, the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (the CSSIW) and the Wales Audit Office.

**The content and structure of the Council's Performance Report could include more qualitative information to provide a more rounded evidence base**

The Council has used a balanced blend of progress against key actions and quantitative measures of performance as evidence to determine its success or otherwise in achieving its strategic priorities and improvement objectives. The Report summarises progress and performance using a Red, Amber, Green colour-coding system which provides a useful summary evaluation. Some sections explain well what caused the rating to be green, amber or red. However, some other priorities are not well-enough supported with information to enable readers to understand the reasons for the Council's assessment of its progress, or the level of benefit to the public. There is scope to include more qualitative information to provide a more rounded evidence base to enable it to assess its performance.

The Report is available bilingually and is clearly signposted on the Council's website, and performance information is available in the local community newspaper with links to the website and the Report. The newspaper has been delivered to all households in Anglesey. The Report is available in hard copy at the Council's main public buildings and, on request, in Braille, large print, on tape or CD.

The Report is 73 pages long, which is shorter than a number of other Councils' Performance Reports. A summary version of the Report has been produced and is available on the Council website. However, there is some variation within the Report in terms of the style and clarity of its content. For example, the financial performance section is thorough and realistic but it is difficult to follow in places and may not fully be understood by readers. In contrast, the section on Homelessness, empty housing and re-letting empty business units is well explained and shows clearly the benefits to the public of the Council's work.

The Report could be improved by a thorough editorial screening to ensure that technical jargon and more complex paragraphs are simplified. This would increase the Report's readability and ensure that basic typographical errors are eliminated.

**External assessments provide a picture of inconsistent reliability in the Council's self-evaluation of its performance during 2011-12**

In our Annual Improvement Report in January 2012, we emphasised that the Measure requires councils to be more self-critical and evaluative about how they deliver their services and that they should focus much more clearly on the impact of services upon citizens and the outcomes for citizens.

In October 2012, the Council entered Phase 2 of the Welsh Government intervention with the return of decision-making powers from the Commissioners to the Executive. During this period, it will be particularly important that the Council demonstrates clearly its ability:

to plan and deliver change; to assess its strengths and weaknesses accurately and consistently across services; and to learn from projects that have gone well and from those that have been less successful. The Council's track record in self-evaluation during the past year has been an inconsistent one.

### **Estyn and the Wales Audit Office were critical of the Council's evaluation of its education services for children and young people**

In May 2012, Estyn and the Wales Audit Office concluded that the Council's education services were unsatisfactory and that they had unsatisfactory prospects for improvement. In reaching these conclusions, they judged that:

- business planning and risk-assessment processes have not been robust enough to identify and address the slow pace of progress in education services and schools; and
- self-evaluation processes have been patchy and progress against recommendations made in previous inspections has been limited.

As a result of the inspection, Estyn recommended that the Council required special measures and the Welsh Government has established a Recovery Board to oversee its progress in addressing the seven recommendations in the inspection report. It is likely that Estyn will revisit during 2013 in order to monitor progress.

### **The CSSIW has judged that the Council's annual evaluation of its social services was balanced and supported by evidence**

In its Annual Review and Evaluation of Performance in 2011-12, the CSSIW reports that 2011-12 was a year of significant change for the Council's social services department. The Council appointed a new interim Director at the end of January 2012 and a permanent appointment took up post in September. The new post, created following the restructuring of senior management, combines the statutory duties of Director of Social Services within the broader role of Corporate Director of Community Services and Leisure.

The CSSIW judged that the interim Director's self-evaluation report provides a concise overview of performance within social services. The findings were balanced and supported by reports from both adults' and children's services. The evidence supporting the self-evaluation was wide-ranging and helpful in assessing the Council's performance. The CSSIW nevertheless stresses that continued corporate determination is needed to improve social services, particularly in the light of the financial challenges facing the Council. We shall report in more detail on the CSSIW's report in our Annual Improvement Report early in 2013.

**The Council's Performance Report for 2011-12 provides a balanced assessment of its performance but it lacks sufficient information to support the Council's evaluation against some of its Improvement Objectives**

As I have noted earlier in this letter, the Report is generally balanced and highlights what has been achieved, what has not been achieved and where improvements can be made. There is no impression the Council is overstating its strengths or underestimating its weaknesses. Our audit of a small sample of the Council's performance indicators this year suggests that the quality of the data contained in the Report is generally robust.

However, the quality of the evaluation within the Report is inconsistent. Some sections lack sufficient information to justify the assessment as to whether or not the Council has achieved a particular Improvement Objective. Sections such as that on 'promoting healthy and active lifestyles across all age groups' include specific performance indicators and targets that support the wider evaluation. In contrast, the Council's evaluation of its 'collaboration to promote community safety' refers only to the tasks undertaken, without reference to the benefits or otherwise of collaboration or analysis of its impact on community safety.

**Further proposals for improvement**

Some 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.

**Proposals for improvement**

P1 The Council should promote greater consistency across services in the quality of self-evaluation.

P2 The Council should apply stronger editorial control to its performance report in order to improve its readability and eliminate typographical errors.

Yours sincerely

HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS

AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES

CC: Carl Sargeant, Minister for Local Government and Communities