

Isle of Anglesey County Council

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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)

Dear Annwen,

### Isle of Anglesey County Council – COVID-19 response and recovery – Interim Assurance

I wanted to write to you to sum up our early conclusions based on our ongoing monitoring of your COVID-19 recovery.

From the work that Audit Wales has undertaken to date, I am assured that Isle of Anglesey County Council's (the Council) recovery from the impact of the pandemic has benefited from proactive engagement at both regional and local levels and that the Council's planning and decision-making processes have shown strong and consistent collective leadership.

The Council's commitment to reintroducing democratic decision making, valuing communication, forward looking financial planning and a commitment to working with partners have all been notable elements of the recovery journey.

I have set out in the appendix to this letter some of the key areas we have looked at. This work is undertaken to help discharge the Auditor General's duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004, section 18 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 and section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015. Further information about our work and our privacy notice is available on our website.

Yours sincerely



Jeremy Evans, Audit Manager

## **Appendix**

In Spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on our communities and public services. Councils have a key role to help keep staff and residents safe, adapt their decision-making arrangements, prioritise services and collaborate with partners to try and limit the spread and impact of the virus. Since the beginning of May we have been looking at the Council's approach to recovery and during this time we have observed meetings, reviewed documents and held on-line meetings with key officers and councillors.

Some examples of the work we have done are set out below:

### **Meeting observations:**

The Executive

Corporate Scrutiny Committee

Isle of Anglesey County Council

Partnership and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee

Audit and Governance Committee

Corporate Programme Board Meeting – Transforming Services

In addition, we have observed regional meetings of the Recovery Coordination Group and the Regional Economic Recovery Group hosted by the Economic Ambition Board.

### **Documents reviewed**

All agenda papers linked to the meetings noted and internal documents supplied by the Council.

Based on this work, I have set out some of the detail of my findings below:

### **Keeping staff safe**

The Council invoked its emergency planning arrangements and scaled back services in March 2020. Where possible staff have worked from home to limit the spread of the virus. Offices were initially limited to providing a supporting role for front line services. Going forward the Council is using a mix of working at home, in the office and working on site. As further Council services have been reintroduced, additional actions have been taken to provide a safe environment for the public and staff alike.

Measures such as an appointments system are often used to manage the number of individuals physically accessing a service at any one point in time. Looking forward, the Council has always recognised that Information Technology plays an

important role in delivering services, and the 2020-21 budget identifies further investment in IT to support the delivery of services.

## Adapting decision-making arrangements

The Council suspended formal governance meetings in April 2020 and resumed formal democratic meetings in May 2020 by making use of the internet and Microsoft Teams. All executive decisions made during the response to the pandemic were presented to the September 2020 full Council meeting, and a strategy for the reintroduction of meetings was introduced.

Whilst there was the odd example of growing pains, the Council has adapted well to their new meeting environment and has shown a commitment to making the new arrangements work. The Council has made efforts to improve on-line meetings and has revisited areas such as in-meeting voting and hosting a bilingual meeting to ensure that arrangements are effective and support open and transparent decision making.

## Prioritising services

The pandemic had an inevitable impact on services with many services closing and others reducing usual levels of service to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Staff members' willingness to be redeployed and undertake different work or roles has supported the communities on the island and contributed to the resilience of Council services.

Continuing to deliver key programmes and priority projects within the transformation programme will contribute to the resilience of services. Programmes such as 'Increasing the number of Local Authority Foster Carers', introduction of 'Cartrefi Clyd' and 'training flat' will positively contribute to **Support Vulnerable Adults and Families to Keep Them Safe, Healthy and As Independent As Possible** and the wider Council Plan as well as the overall resilience of the Council.

## Valuing Communication

The Council has made significant efforts to communicate to a wide range of audiences and the intent is demonstrated by the inclusion of a representative of the Communications Unit in key meetings. Examples of this comprehensive approach include:

- messages from the Chief Executive to staff supplemented by the staff newsletter;
- regular member briefing sessions;
- significant presence on social media;
- sharing of messaging with key partners; and
- sharing information and creating news content through a significant amount of press releases.

## **Financial Planning supporting services**

The Executive has received detailed reports that estimate the early financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as identifying future pressures on council services. The latter has identified areas of budget pressures predominantly relating to workforce, changes in demography and general inflation.

## **Working with partners**

The Council continues to work with the full range of partners to support the Island's communities and wider region. The Council has productive relationships with several key partners who have helped respond to the challenges of the pandemic. The Council has also developed relationships with community-based volunteer teams to support those in need. For example, to provide support for the vulnerable in their communities, a partnership was set up between the Council, Menter Môn and Medrwn Môn.

## **Responding to the challenges of today and planning for recovery**

As we enter a second phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, and implementation of a firebreak lockdown, the Council will once again be aligning its resources to support communities on the Island. In responding to a second wave of COVID-19, the Council should be able to draw from its experiences and learning from responding to the first wave. The Council may also be able to identify opportunities to continue to deliver prioritised elements of the transformation programme and formalise recovery plans, which will contribute to the resilience of the Council's services.

Ends.