

II What is the Council trying to achieve?

Introduction

The Council is a large, complex multi-million pound service sector organisation that has a unique status amongst local service providers in being governed by seventy-five democratically elected Members. This elected status gives Members the authority and legitimacy to shape and decide local priorities for future development, and to provide leadership to the Council and our local communities. The Council in its Community Leadership role has to bring local people together to develop a shared vision for Rhondda Cynon Taf, produce a long-term community strategy, and deliver improvements in the quality of life of all local people. Central to this are the requirements for the Council to be transparent and honest in its decision making, accountable for the cost and the impact of local services, and to seek to actively involve local people in its political decision-making processes.

The Council has sought to achieve all this through establishing a clear planning framework that considers national and local priorities and enables elected Members to set consistent priorities and targets for the Council, taking into account what matters most to local people and where performance needs to be improved. The eight key components that assist elected Members in delivering the wishes and aspirations of local people are:

- **Community Leadership** – The Local Government Act 2000 gave local authorities a clear role in leading their communities, as ‘the organisations best placed to take a comprehensive overview of the needs and priorities of their local communities and lead the work to meet those needs and priorities in the round’. The Council is committed to carrying out this key role effectively, through its partnership framework and having a shared long term strategy;
- **Community Plan** – In 2004, the Council and its partners created a local Strategic Partnership as the focal point for community leadership, long term planning, and collaborative working. The Strategic Partnership, titled the Better Life Consortium, published ‘A Better Life’, a 10 year Community Plan setting out its shared vision of how life would improve in Rhondda Cynon Taf. The membership of the Strategic Partnership was widened and is now a ‘Congress’. All the organisations from the public, private and community and voluntary sectors represented on the Congress, including the Council, have publicly committed to shaping their operational activity to confirm their contribution to the shared aims, objectives and outcomes of the plan. The Community Plan is currently being reviewed and it is proposed that it is updated to reflect changes in Rhondda Cynon Taf over the past few years with a revised Community Plan being available from 2010;

- **Welsh Assembly Government Improvement Agreement** – Whilst the Community Plan sets out local priorities, there are also national priorities for development that have to be met and these have been reflected in an Improvement Agreement. The Improvement Agreement focuses on addressing local priorities for service improvement and linking them to the same four strategic aims linked to “**One Wales**” ie A Healthy Fair and Just Society – Adults; A Healthy Fair and Just Society – Children; Sustainable Communities and A Prosperous, Cultural and Diverse Society. Each of the strategic aims is aligned to a number of broad outcomes and in turn each of the outcomes has a suggested number of sources of evidence that describe progress towards that outcome. The Council identified its priorities and thus its broad outcomes for the Improvement Agreements on the basis of a critical self-evaluation supported by WAG and taking account of a review by the WAO. The payment of the Improvement Grant in 2008/09 was subject to concluding the process and £2,564,522 was paid in January 2009. In 2009 and 2010 grants will be paid based on a retrospective analysis of performance, but with provision for the partial payment of grant in cases of underperformance, rather than the all-or-nothing approach adopted with the previous Policy Agreements. The sources of evidence required to demonstrate progress in the broad outcomes selected include both qualitative and quantitative information with local measures, surveys and inspection reports contributing to a complete picture of performance. Work to collect the information and validate the Council’s performance for 2008/09 is nearing completion and we are confident that discussions with the WAO and the WAG will be concluded in early Autumn.
- **Specific Welsh Assembly Government Policies** – In addition to the Improvement Agreement, WAG approves national policies that it expects local Authorities to consider and implement. For example, ‘Making the Connections: Delivering Better Services for Wales’. The policy seeks to improve the quality of services for people in Wales. WAG is expecting public sector bodies across Wales to maximise efficiency gains to reinvest in better services, through the scale of economies via more effective co-operation and co-ordination between agencies across the whole of the public sector, not excluding the independent, voluntary and private sectors. In doing so WAG has set efficiencies targets for the Council and procedures are in place to monitor the Council’s success in achieving these targets. As a result, the Council is initially working with other South East Wales local authorities to deliver better services through effective co-operation;
- **Wales Programme for Improvement** – In conjunction with local Authorities in Wales, WAG introduced the Wales Programme for Improvement, the objective of which is to achieve the delivery of high quality services to the public which meet identified local needs. The Wales Programme for Improvement focuses the Council’s attention on delivering improvements to those services that have the greatest impact on the public. The Wales Programme for Improvement enables the Council to focus its energies and resources on tackling the biggest issues and provides a sense of clear priorities for action for the Council’s elected Members and staff. The WPI is being fundamentally changed and WAG will be consulting Local Authorities on these changes in the Autumn with a view to implementation in 2010/2011;

- **Performance Management Framework** – The Council has put in place a comprehensive performance management framework to ensure that all its services and functions focus on what has to be done to deliver the improvements identified by the Wales Programme for Improvement. The framework also ensures that Members and managers in the Council have access to regular information on how well services are performing, so they know where to put resources to meet community priorities, as set out in the Community Plan;
- **Financial Management Framework** – Allocating resources to priority areas is essential to meeting community needs. The Council has sought to better integrate its service and financial planning, which will allow elected Members and managers to deploy available resources, both financial and otherwise, to directly support delivery of the desired improvements in performance;
- **Risk Management** – Risk is the threat that an event or action will adversely affect the Council's ability to achieve its objectives and to successfully deliver the Community Plan. Risk management is the process by which risks are identified, evaluated and controlled. It is a key element of the performance management framework.

Setting the Priorities

The underlying objective of the Wales Programme for Improvement is to achieve the delivery of high quality services to the public which meet identified local needs. The Wales Programme for Improvement relies on the following principles:

- Local government commitment to **achieving continuous improvement**;
- **Effective management of performance** by the local authority;
- An approach which looks at the **whole authority**, i.e. its corporate **performance and capacity**, as well as individual functions;
- **Targeted action** based on an assessment of what will do most to **improve outcomes for the public**; and
- A **regulatory regime** that complements authorities' own improvement plans.

It is also underpinned by the statutory requirements of the Local Government Act 1999 that places a duty on Councils to:

- secure continuous improvement in the way in which they exercise their functions, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness;
- consult widely on how to do so;
- conduct reviews of their functions;
- prepare an improvement plan for each financial year.

The Wales Programme for Improvement comprises 5 key elements:

- 1. Annual Assessments of services and functions** - the Council is required to undertake an annual assessment of services and functions, and of their equalities and sustainability impact, to establish conformity with the Council's longer-term strategic aims and capacity to improve. This annual assessment is undertaken in the Autumn each year and forms a key role in the annual business planning and budget planning processes.
- 2. A Joint Risk Assessment** – The Risk Assessment identifies the services that are *improving well; improving adequately; not improving adequately or not improving* and where action to improve them would have a high impact in terms of improved outcomes for local people. These services are natural corporate priorities for a comprehensive Action Plan within the framework of the Council's Improvement Plan. **The Risk Assessment is an annual process, designed to ensure that any important changes in circumstances are taken into account in prioritising services for improvement.**

3. **An Improvement Plan** – The Improvement Plan is the key strategic document that sets out the Council’s objectives and reports the Council’s performance each year in achieving those objectives. The Plan is a publicly available document aimed at the informed reader (for example elected Members, Council officers, and partner organisations) and is used as a mechanism to monitor and report the performance of the Council. The statutory publication date for the Improvement Plan is 31 October.
4. **The Regulatory Plan** – The Wales Audit Office is responsible for co-ordinating an **annual** Regulatory Plan that takes account of the annual Risk Assessment. The Plan lists the proposed programme of audit and inspections, including planned inspections by other statutory inspectorates, for the forthcoming year. For next year, it will also need to take account of the requirements of the Local Government Measure.
5. **A Public Summary** – The Council is also responsible for publishing a summary of its Improvement Plan each year. The summary is a concise document and provides an overview of the Council’s performance, focusing on its priorities for improvement. The summary is targeted at the general public and reports high level data and key priorities. In recent years the Public Summary has been incorporated within the Council’s own newspaper, “Outlook”, to ensure all residents have access to this information.

The progress to date

The Council in partnership with local communities and WAG has high ambitions for the County Borough of Rhondda Cynon Taf, but in reality, the Council does not have the resources to effectively improve its wide range of services and meet residents and elected Members aspirations, all at the same time. As a Council, we have to ensure that the capacity of the Council, and its partners, matches our ambition. In doing so we have to prioritise what we do and be sure that we can deliver on those priorities. As a result, in June 2005, the Council’s Improvement Plan introduced a 3-year improvement framework that focused on delivering a limited number of key service and whole authority priorities over a 3-year period. These were reviewed, refreshed and refocused in 2008 and were supplemented with Education as a separate priority, reflecting the need to drive up standards in Schools and early years settings and improve the outcomes for all Children. The refocused priorities are as follows:

- Education
- Street Care Services and the Natural Environment
- Children & Family Centred Services;
- Maintaining People’s Independence;
- Regeneration of our Communities;
- Managing Our Assets;
- Better Customer Contact;
- Enforcement & Regulation;
- Maximising Partnership Opportunities
- Communication;
- Medium Term Financial Planning.

Since 2008, Lead Officers have been identified for each priority area and have begun to take account of these within service planning arrangements for 2009/10 and beyond. These Lead Officers will need to identify interdependencies to achieve the required improvements in services and ensure that colleagues support the delivery of the changes needed, in both Service Groups and Corporate areas.

This year’s risk assessment validated the decisions made in 2008, particularly the need to continue to focus on the 11 improvement priorities and at the same time ensure that the citizen is at the centre of everything the Council does. The changes are as follows:

- The **Street Care Services and the Natural Environment** Action Plan is re-focussed to place primary emphasis on the areas of waste management and recycling;
- The **Children & Family Centred Services** Action Plan is revised to place increased emphasis on the safeguarding of children and the key priorities of the Children’s Services Team;
- The **Regeneration of our Communities** Action Plan sets out the key activities the Council will be working toward to further assist local communities through the current economic down-turn;
- The **Managing our Assets** Action Plan is amended to exclusively focus on land and property, with the People dimension transferred to the **Medium Term Financial Planning** improvement priority area.

These changes have been reflected in the priority areas below

	Council Improvement Priority	What we are seeking to achieve
1.	Education - a top quality education for all	. The focus on education is to continue to drive up standards in both early years’ settings and schools, improving the outcomes for all children, in particular closing the gaps between those with the poorest outcomes, mostly those children living in our deprived communities. If we are to break the cycle of deprivation, a top quality education that meets the needs of all children is essential. A key priority is the development of Community Schooling – providing extended services to children and their families through programmes such as E3+, in partnership with schools, other agencies and the voluntary sector.

2.	Street Care Services and the Natural Environment - a cleaner greener County Borough	We have made good progress in recent years in improving the local environment. We aim to further improve the local environment by increasing our waste recycling rates to meet the challenging national targets, continue to deliver cleaner streets and well maintained highways all year round and improve parks so everyone can enjoy the open green spaces the County Borough has to offer. There will be a continued focus on the strict enforcement of littering, graffiti, fly tipping and fly posting.
3.	Children & Family Centred Services - keeping all children and young people safe and improving the life chances of vulnerable children	Our focus will be on safeguarding and supporting children and young people in need, including those that are carers; significantly improving the range and effectiveness of services designed to support children and families in their own homes; providing high quality care and permanent family homes for children who are unable to live with their birth families; delivering and commissioning high quality services for children in their early years; and preventing young people from becoming involved in criminal activity.
4.	Maintaining People's Independence - supporting adults and older people to live independently.	The Council will continue to improve the services it provides to support older people to live at home, promoting independence and improving the quality of life, preventing unnecessary hospital admissions and facilitating timely discharges. In particular, developing services for older people with mental health problems, providing more support for people with long term needs, protecting vulnerable adults and helping those with caring responsibilities.

5.	<p>Regeneration of our Communities <u>Physical Regeneration</u> - town centre enhancement, bringing derelict land back to life and widening housing choice and affordability for all.</p> <p><u>Social Regeneration</u> – income maximisation initiatives, help with employability, skills training, tackling labour market disadvantage.</p>	<p>Focusing on our town centres, enhance the retail on offer and improve the physical environment, in order that they are more attractive to shoppers and businesses than other towns outside Rhondda Cynon Taf. In spite of over 30 years of land reclamation the County Borough still bears the scars of extractive industry. Many of the former industrial sites have the potential to be major regeneration opportunities for South East Wales, but we need to work hard to convince outside policy makers and funders, in an ever-increasing competitive environment, that Rhondda Cynon Taf is a good investment. A key priority is to attract significant investment into the County Borough to develop these former industrial sites and promote Rhondda Cynon Taf as a very attractive location for business and tourism investment. We want to ensure that a range of good quality housing is available across the County Borough, which is secure, affordable, well maintained and meets varied and changing needs. We recognise that good quality housing is an essential component for improved health, education and employment prospects and therefore attracting people to the County Borough. We will also take proactive steps to tackle Child Poverty and support social regeneration (to help local people to maximise their income, to improve their skills and enhance their employability, throughout the economic downturn and on a sustained basis into the future). We will use the opportunities afforded by Communities First to help us achieve this.</p>
6.	<p>Managing our Assets – equipping ourselves for the future.</p>	<p>Internal changes continue to be necessary in order for the Council to be well prepared for the future – to deliver sustainable services by working in a better, more efficient way. These changes will require the Council to rationalise the number of buildings we occupy, improving the quality of the buildings that remain and ensuring occupancy is optimised.</p>
7.	<p>Enforcement & Regulation - proactively managing the late night economy and tackling anti-social behaviour.</p>	<p>Many of our residents' lives are blighted by anti-social behaviour. Much of this anti-social behaviour is alcohol related which can escalate into incidents of criminal damage and violent crime. It is clear from discussions with the community that they wish the Council to use its licensing and public protection powers to effectively manage the late night economy, prevent the sale of alcohol to minors, encourage sensible drinking and reduce anti-social behaviour.</p>

8.	Better Customer Contact - focusing on the customer	The customer remains at the centre of all that we are doing and many of our recent achievements have had the objective of enhancing the customer experience. We are committed to providing customers with a range of access channels; many services can be accessed through the new Customer Service Centre at Ty Elai, and the One4All Centres. We are extending this provision and increasing the number of services that can be accessed electronically, to improve access to them and to increase their efficiency and effectiveness.
9.	Maximising Partnership Opportunities – doing more for local communities by working together.	We have a good track record of partnership working in Rhondda Cynon Taf but there are opportunities to deliver more visible and measurable benefits of partnership working. In particular the Council needs to play a lead role in the Local Services Board, strengthening local public sector leadership to tackle the service delivery challenges from a customer/user perspective that can only be addressed by working in partnership. This may result in new models of service delivery, pooling resources and realigning services between sectors.
10.	Medium Term Financial Planning - living within our means.	The Council's key priority, already well known to Members and officers, is managing the Council's finances very prudently and innovatively in order to achieve our priorities. WAG has told us that there will be minimal increase in the level of funding for the next few years and "Living within our Means" needs to be a watchword for us all. We need to focus upon maximising the revenue we generate, become more efficient in how we deliver services, increase the level of external funding to support quality service delivery and continue to develop the workforce and improve recruitment and retention of staff.
11.	Communication – raising awareness and keeping people informed.	The Council has various approaches to communicating internally and externally and has improved these through simplifying key messages and using technology. However, often we communicate through various means to the same audience and often the information and messages we wish to share never reaches those who need them the most. We need to assess the effectiveness of our communication approaches and introduce ways in which we can ensure key messages and information reaches the audiences where it can have the greatest impact.

What is the Joint Risk Assessment and how has it been undertaken?

The purpose of the Joint Risk Assessment as defined by the Assembly is to “identify priorities for improvement in the coming year and to confirm progress against those highlighted in the preceding year”. Whilst, the Assembly specifies that all local authorities must undertake an annual joint risk assessment, there is no guidance that sets out the approach to be adopted. Each local authority, therefore applies its own methodology, which meets its own individual requirement.

The outcome of the Risk Assessment in Rhondda Cynon Taf has been to identify

- A revised set of Council priorities for the next 3 years – as set out above,
- Key corporate themes that the Council should focus on if it is to accelerate the improvement of all Council services;
- Those services that are not improving adequately, and which should receive additional support and scrutiny in order to accelerate the rate of improvement

This year, the Council continued the way it previously undertook the 2008 Risk Assessment, ensuring it focused on:

- **Corporate** – Assessing how effectively the Council is working corporately, and with its partners, to improve services and deliver improved outcomes for local people; and
- **Service** – Assessing individual service improvement and performance over the year.

The assessment process sought to answer the following three questions:

- What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve? (Corporate assessment);
- What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve? (Corporate assessment);
- What has it achieved? (Service assessment).

The assessment criteria used was based on the Audit Commission’s Comprehensive Performance Assessment, which is used to measure the performance of local authorities in England and it assesses:

- Past performance and proven delivery of outcomes;

- Present performance levels and comparative achievement of improvement. Effectively, assessing how its current performance compares with others and how its improvement levels compare with others and how much it has moved against its own baselines;
- Prospects for improvement, challenging the robustness and delivery of business plans.

During April and May 2009, an in-depth risk assessment was undertaken by a team of Council and Wales Audit Office Officers, led jointly by the Head of Performance & Resources and the WAO Audit Manager in accordance with the methodology explained above.

What are the outcomes from the most recent Risk Assessment?

The Risk Assessment was approved by Cabinet on 21 September **2009** and the conclusions were set out on a:

- whole authority basis – the corporate assessment
- service by service basis for each of the Council's 54 services;

The Corporate Assessment

The 2009 Corporate Assessment was again undertaken in accordance with the criteria set out in the Audit Commission's corporate assessment audit programme and the judgement criteria in which it used to assess the performance of English local authorities and considered:

- **What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?**
 - Are there clear and challenging ambitions for the County Borough and its communities?
 - Are ambitions based on a shared understanding amongst the Council and partner organisations, of local needs?
 - Does the Council, with its partners, provide leadership across the community and ensure effective partnership working?
 - Are there clear and robust priorities within the ambitions for the County Borough?
 - Is there a robust strategy to deliver the priorities?
- **What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?**
 - Is there clear accountability and decision making to support service delivery and continuous improvement?
 - Is capacity used effectively and developed to deliver ambitions and priorities?
 - Does the Council, with its partners, have the capacity it needs to achieve and deliver its priorities?
 - Is there consistent, rigorous and open approach to performance management?
 - Do the Council and partner organisations know how well they and each other are performing against planned outcomes?

- Is knowledge about performance used to drive continuous improvement in outcomes?

The work undertaken this year aimed to measure the progress made by the Council since September 2008. At this time, it was concluded that the Council should concentrate on the four corporate themes of '**Ambition**', '**Accountability**', '**Use of Resources**' and '**Effective Partnerships**' to support the successful delivery of the Council's 11 improvement priorities.

This year's corporate assessment has given full consideration to the radically different financial environment that the Council is now operating within. Over the last 5 years, the Council has received decreasing levels of funding in real terms, culminating in the wholly inadequate 2009/10 settlement. Therefore, rather than having real opportunities to invest in priority areas, the Council must now manage service delivery and improvement during a recession, which poses new risks and challenges. The strength and visibility of the 'corporate engine' will be critical in navigating the Council through these challenging times. The corporate assessment reflects the importance of this judgement.

A summary of the updated corporate assessment and the individual judgements given against each question is set out in **Appendix 1C**.

To assist the successful delivery of its priorities in the year ahead, the Council should continue to concentrate on the 4 Corporate themes identified last year, and in doing so, enhance its focus on what matters most to the citizens of Rhondda Cynon Taf. Continued attention should be afforded to the following;

- **Ambition** – consult upon and launch the new Community Strategy and agree a set of deliverable joint priorities with partners to improve public services and outcomes for local people. Ambitions will need to reflect the changed financial environment and consideration will need to be given to the levels of service provided, to ensure affordability and sustainability. The Council should strive to better link ambitions, outcome targets, delivery plans and performance arrangements and to achieve collective ownership and understanding of its Improvement Programme at all levels;
- **Accountability** – the accountability framework needs to be further strengthened to ensure that corporate expectations and planned service responses are clear at all levels and are underpinned by a strong performance management culture. Accountability arrangements need to become more robust to ensure that all managers are held accountable for the performance of the services they deliver and are appropriately supported at a corporate level to tackle barriers and take opportunities as they arise. A key element of improving accountability will be setting service standards, or entitlements to service, which make clear what a member of the public can expect to receive from the Council;

- **Use of Resources** – the foundations laid via the Medium Term Financial Planning Group (to review and challenge the use of resources), will need to mature and grow to seek further opportunities to secure operational efficiency in the delivery of Council Services. We must continue to pursue solutions to better manage our physical assets, our workforce, commissioning and procurement processes and partnership arrangements together with using performance management as a tool to ensure the best use of limited resources;
- **Effective Partnerships** – we must maximise the benefits to be achieved by working in partnership to deliver better public services at all levels. The effectiveness of the Strategic Partnership arrangements needs to be reassessed, to put in place firm plans to accelerate progress, improve accountability and improve working relationships across boundaries. We need to ensure that the Local Service Board is adequately supported to meet the commitments made in its first Local Delivery Agreement.

Service by Service assessment

The 54 services were assessed on the basis of the service improvement and performance over the previous year and prospects for improvement into the future. The criteria used to assess the service improvement are set out in **Appendix 1B**

Of the 54 services;

- 14 (26%) were considered to be improving well,
- 35 (65%) were improving adequately,
- 5 (9%) were not improving adequately,
- 0 (0%) were not improving.

Not improving adequately means that whilst a service is improving the speed of improvement is not as fast as we expect. A summary of all the Council's services against the three criteria, is set out in **Appendix 1A**.

The outcomes from this method of judging performance, independently, correlates to the performance information provided quarterly to Members, which sets out the Council's performance against a range of performance indicators. Over the past year, regularly over 75% of the Council's performance indicators have improved.

The 5 service areas that have been identified as not improving adequately will be expected to improve and will be supported by the relevant Group Director to deliver on agreed targets and improvements. The Group Director will provide key updates on progress/exceptions to the Corporate Management Team on a quarterly basis. These service areas are;

- Customer Services (Environmental Services);
- Emergency Planning*;
- Highways Infrastructure;
- Highways Development Control;
- Integrated Transport Unit.

** It is further recommended that the Council works together corporately with the Environmental Services Group to consider options to improve the delivery of the Council's Emergency Planning responsibilities.*

Similarly, there will be an expectation for the other 49 service areas that were considered to be improving adequately and improving well to deliver continuous improvement throughout 2009/10.

For each of the four corporate themes for improvement and of the five services identified as not improving adequately a detailed work programme will be prepared that sets out how these services will be taken forward and who will be responsible for delivery. You can view the full detail of the Joint Risk Assessment in the Report to Cabinet dated 21 September 2009 at <http://www.rhondda-cynon-taff.gov.uk/stellent/groups/Public/documents/Reports/026933.pdf>