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Sian Davies  
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Date 24 September 2012  
Our reference 455A2012  
Your reference  
Tel No  
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Dear Sian

### **Improvement Assessment**

I am required, under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) to report my audit and assessment work in relation to whether the Vale of Glamorgan Council (the Council) has discharged its duties and met the requirements of the Measure.

This letter summarises:

- my views on whether the Council has discharged its statutory duties in respect of improvement planning;
- my views on the Council's compliance with requirements to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement, based on work carried out to date by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators, including:
  - the Council's progress on areas for improvement and recommendations identified in my previous assessments;
  - any relevant issues that may have emerged since my last report, including comments on how the Council is addressing financial challenges; and
  - a brief summary of any reports of relevant regulators issued since my last report.
- my further proposals for improvement and/or recommendations; and
- updates to the Wales Audit Office work plan and timetable for delivering my Improvement Assessment work.

I shall update my views during the year and will provide a further letter by the end of November 2012.

## **The Council has discharged its improvement planning duties under the Measure and has acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance**

I have reached this conclusion because:

The Council took the decision that the Corporate Plan objectives would not be amended for 2012-13, but would undertake a full review of the Corporate Plan 2010-2014 during 2012 following Local Government elections in May. In April 2012, as an interim measure to identify the Council's key improvement objectives for 2012-13 eight improvement objectives for 2012-13 were agreed by the Cabinet and published on the Council's website.

A new Council administration was formed following the local government elections on 3 May 2012 and on the 30 July 2012 the new Cabinet re-affirmed the Council's eight Improvement Objectives for 2012-13 which have been submitted to the Council's Scrutiny Committees for consideration prior to the matter being referred back to Cabinet and then on to Council for final approval. The Cabinet also approved a timetable and approach for the comprehensive review of the Corporate Plan, and the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan which outlines how the Corporate Plan is to be funded.

## **Based on, and limited to, work carried out to date by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators I believe that the Council is likely to comply with the requirement to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement during this financial year**

I have reached this conclusion because:

### **A number of the proposals for improvement identified in my previous assessments are being, or are planned to be progressed.**

The Council is making clear progress in establishing a transparent programme for the development of outcome focussed measures moving from reporting arrangements that focus primarily on performance indicators and on the completion, or otherwise, of an action. The Council has worked with the Local Government Data Unit to revise its service planning arrangements and rationalise the number of service plans. A series of pilots have been undertaken by the Customer Relations, Visible and Public Protection services to inform the self-assessment as part of the service planning process for 2012-13.

**Results from the local work undertaken show the Council is able to demonstrate it is continuing to improve in most areas although it needs to strengthen arrangements for monitoring delivery of my proposals for improvement.**

The study of Information Management has been concluded since my previous letter. In April 2012, I reported that: "The Council's approach to information management is supporting improvement and the Council's proactive approach is delivering benefits". The Council's information management arrangements are robust and well established and the Council performs well, delivering and using information effectively to achieve service improvements and efficiencies. Detailed assessments of the effectiveness of the Council's arrangements in these areas, and proposals for improvement, have been provided in feedback issued during the year and will be summarised in my Annual Improvement Assessment in the first quarter of 2013.

In our 2011 technology themed review which looked at how effectively the Council was using technology to deliver efficiencies and service transformation I reported that the Council's current arrangements for developing, using and supporting technology were likely to support continuous improvement. The Council needed to make better use of limited ICT skills and resources and there was scope to better use performance information relating to the take-up and use of the Council's different customer access channels to inform and drive further improvement. The Council has made some progress in implementing our proposals for improvement, but none have been fully implemented and plans to progress delivery were unclear.

We will continue to work with the Council during the year to review progress and the Council's arrangements to implement and monitor Wales Audit Office proposals for improvement.

**The Council is well placed to address its financial challenges and has clear transformation plans which are supporting the delivery of efficiency savings, but its impact has only been evaluated in terms of cost savings.**

I concluded in my previous Corporate Assessment Letter and Annual Improvement Report that the Council has strong and effective financial leadership and is well placed to manage the challenges ahead. I remain of this view.

The Council identified more than the required savings in its 2011-12 budget process and during this period the Council made savings of £8.775 million. The Council needs to meet a shortfall of £12.69 million for the period 2012-13 to 2014-15 and its budget preparations continue to plan for this shortfall.

The Council has clear plans, which are supporting the delivery of efficiency savings. The Council's plans are based upon sound financial information and it is developing information relating to activity costs and impact. The Council regularly monitors and evaluates progress against its plans, scrutinising the financial information on a monthly basis but the impact of changes is not as robustly monitored and evaluated.

I will continue to monitor and report on the progress made by the Council in implementing these proposals and those set out in my previous reports and letters.

### **Updates to the work plan and timetable**

My Improvement Assessment Team will keep the Council informed of the detailed arrangements for the delivery of my assessment work.

The regularly updated work plan and timetable provides more detail on the work being delivered during this year's assessment and in particular how we will add value by focusing on jointly identified areas or services.

The work plan and timetable takes account of my consultation with improvement authorities over my proposals for 2012-13 performance audit work. In particular, I shall be asking my Improvement Assessment Team to consider during the year the reliance that we can place upon the self-assessment processes (including your review of governance in producing the Annual Governance Statement and your Annual Performance Report). I shall comment on this approach in my Annual Improvement Report.

I am grateful to the Council for the way in which it has helped to facilitate our work and hope to see even more effective and efficient arrangements developing over time. I remain committed to providing appropriate levels of public assurance while supporting you in mitigating the inevitable risks to services and accountability that stem from reducing resources and consequential change.

Yours sincerely



**HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS**

#### **AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES**

CC: Carl Sargeant, Minister for Local Government and Communities  
Jane Holownia – Group Director  
Steve Barry – Manager  
Janet Villars – Performance Audit Lead