

Joint Review of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council Social Services

Summary

Published information in respect of the joint review programme in Wales is available on the website: **www.joint-reviews.gov.uk** or from:

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Foreword

We are pleased to present this summary report of a joint review¹ carried out by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) and the Wales Audit Office (WAO).

The review sets out to answer two key questions:

- how good are the social services that people in the area receive?
- how well placed is the Council to sustain and improve services?

This report sets out the main findings of the Review Team, based on thorough analysis of the evidence gathered in the course of the review. It is our intention that the report will:

- tell the public how well people are being served;
- help these services to improve;
- safeguard the interests of service users and carers; and
- get better value for money in the provision of social services.

Joint reviews are carried out in accordance with the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003, which gives the National Assembly for Wales the power to conduct reviews of the way in which local authorities discharge their social services functions. The task of carrying out reviews is delegated to the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales and the Government of Wales Act 1998 (as amended) enables the Auditor General for Wales to participate.

The Joint Review of social services in Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council was carried out by a team comprising Philip Evans, Sue Roberts, Steve Martin and Carol Caporn, with Linda Owens and Roger Chater as lay assessors². On-site work in Merthyr Tydfil took place between November 2006 and March 2007. A presentation of the findings from this Review was given to the Council in April 2007.

In the Review, we relied heavily on the support of the Council and other stakeholders. Many individuals and groups collaborated in planning and supporting the review process. The Joint Review Team would like to thank everyone who contributed by sharing their experiences and views.

There is also a full report which sets out in more detail the Review Team's assessment of the Council. It outlines the most important evidence gathered during the Review, setting out strengths and good practice as well as areas for development.

¹ Where the term joint review is used without capital letters, this signifies the overall programme in Wales. Joint Review with capital letters means the review carried out in Merthyr Tydfil.

² Inspectors from the Care Standards Inspectorate Wales (CSIW) worked in conjunction with the Joint Review Team as they were conducting the main fostering service inspection at the time.

The Council has been asked to produce an action plan in response to the full report. Both CSSIW and the Wales Audit Office will undertake further work to evaluate the progress made in delivering these actions and the outcomes for service users and carers.

Both the full report and this summary are available on the joint review website.



Rob Pickford
Chief Inspector



Jeremy Colman
Auditor General for Wales

Overall Conclusions

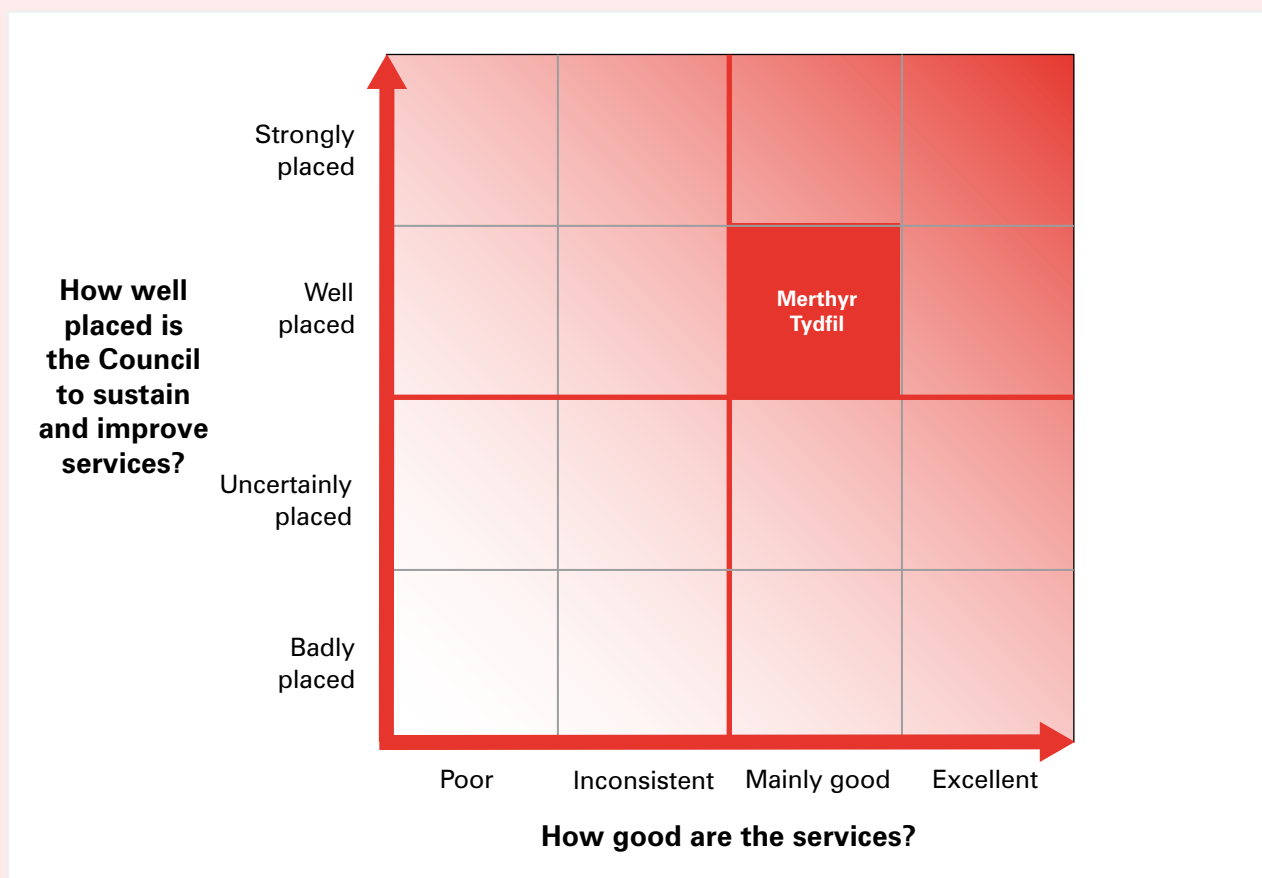
This chapter summarises the Joint Review Team’s overall judgement of the Council. It highlights the Council’s key strengths and draws out the priorities for development.

1.1 Overall judgement

The social services currently available in Merthyr Tydfil generally provide good care and help to keep people safe. As the result of some good service developments, there are people who receive very responsive support which enables them to lead independent and fulfilling lives. Such help is not yet consistently available to some groups of people who have considerable needs. The Council is moving in the right direction to tackle the shortfalls. On balance, Reviewers judged services as mainly good.

There are good prospects for achieving further progress. The Council has shown that it can deliver transformational change in areas such as regeneration and corporate leadership. Its commitment to social care has been strong and social services staff have responded well to new ways of working. There is a clear need to get a better return from the resources invested in social services but overall the Council is well placed to sustain and improve services (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1: Merthyr Tydfil’s position in the joint review performance matrix



In making the improvements to social services that are still required, the Council faces a number of challenges. It will need to:

- **ensure that people most in need benefit as much as possible from the exciting regeneration work being done to improve the opportunities available to all citizens (in areas such as employment, leisure, learning, health and wellbeing);**
- **expand more quickly the range of services available to people in need;**
- **support more children safely at home and in their own communities;**
- **shorten the gap between major service reviews and the making of difficult political decisions;**
- **deliver high standards of assessment and care planning more consistently; and**
- **get more from the resources invested through:**
 - **developing a framework for longer-term financial planning that ensures problems in redirecting money and realigning core services are tackled**
 - **providing commissioning strategies and investment plans for specific services, in response to the direction set out in strategic documents**
 - **making further improvements to business planning and performance management at service and team levels.**

1.2 Key findings

The local authority is three years into a journey to transform Merthyr Tydfil into a modern council and to regenerate its communities, with a strong emphasis on developing the economy. A report in January 2003 marked a significant turning point in the Council's history. The new Leader had invited the Audit Commission in Wales to provide an independent perspective on its corporate capacity to improve. The report highlighted significant concerns and there followed a period of considerable change, including recruitment of a new Chief Executive, a major corporate restructuring and the production of the Transformational Strategic Plan - a major document intended to provide a blueprint for delivering the Council's vision and strategic aims.

Reviewers were impressed by:

- the record of achievements to date;
- the strong sense of commitment and willingness to try new ways of working (for example, in performance management); and
- the emphasis on working together and moving forward together (for example, encouraging ownership of change at all levels through the Team Merthyr concept).

In respect of social services, the drive for improvement is having a positive impact, in part because the Council takes seriously its responsibilities for providing social care and support. Services are being developed that contribute positively towards extending the range and volume of help available. Reviewers found some very good services in place to support independence, to help families in crisis and to improve people's life chances and opportunities.

In adult services, for example, the development of the initial response team means that a growing number of service users can be supported in the community with complex packages of care. In children's services, the merged Gellideg centre and rapid response team is providing considerable help to families in crisis. When underpinned by moves to ensure sound assessment and care planning, the outcomes for service users were good. Reviewers were impressed by the commitment of staff providing social services in Merthyr Tydfil. Often they are willing 'to go the extra mile' in making sure that service users and carers receive help.

However, in achieving its transformation agenda in social care, Merthyr Tydfil is still at the crossroads. Reviewers judged that there remains a gap between the Council's ambitions and the assessed needs of service users and carers on the one hand and the overall shape of current service provision on the other.

Despite an improving picture, there is scope for achieving better quality in the overall standard of the work done to make sure the right people get the right service at the right time (through good assessments and care plans). In a number of key areas, the overall pace of change in developing new service options has been slow. Consequently, at the time of the Review, it was sometimes difficult to find clear enough links between the needs of service users and carers identified in care plans and the types of services made available to them.

Challenges to existing patterns of service delivery (on grounds such as excessive cost or poor outcomes) have been cautious. Although some good work has been done to achieve better value in the provision of services, this approach has not yet been applied across the whole range of services. As a result, some resource decisions in key areas of expenditure appear very much to reflect short-term pressures rather than strategic priorities. For example, the Council has not succeeded in re-directing resources from its own adult residential care homes and its children's placement budget towards more preventive services, despite agreements in principle that this is the right direction.

As a consequence, some people are still being offered limited choice or experience services that Reviewers considered to be:

- rather dated in their approach;
- inconsistent in the extent to which they focus on meeting the assessed needs of service users; and
- not yet fit for purpose in delivering the sort of help the Council wants to provide for service users and carers.

There has been a sustained drive to achieve service and organisational improvement. However, the Council acknowledges that much work is still to be done, with the focus on action to create a wider range of social services (in collaboration with key partners) and to provide a good professional environment for staff.

1.3 Priorities for action

1. Achieving greater consistency in the quality of assessments, care planning and case management practice.

The Council should:

- employ sufficient staff with the qualification and skill levels needed for undertaking complex work.

Senior managers should:

- implement a framework for quality assurance that uses evidence from a wide variety of sources (audits, management reviews, service user satisfaction surveys, etc.);
- make sure that cases are appropriately allocated;
- introduce more systematic approaches to the management of risk in individual cases; and
- increase the extent of integrated working with other professionals.

Staff should:

- meet standards and expectations in delivering:
 - core assessments in children's services (including children with a disability);
 - ongoing assessment of the needs of children who are looked after;
 - reviews in adult services; and
 - carers' assessments.
- further empower service users and carers, helping them to feel more in control as well as more involved.

2. Expanding more quickly the range of service options available to people in need, in order to address key service gaps identified by the Council.

The Council should:

- make the links between overall corporate aims and the aims for social services more explicit, in part so that users of social services benefit from regeneration activity;
- use the opportunities for shaping services provided by the development of new strategic plans;
- increase its capacity for basing service plans more firmly on analysis of current need and future demands;
- involve service users in quality assurance and service design more consistently;
- monitor what happens to those not able to access social services, to ensure that lower level needs are being met;
- build on current work to improve services to carers;
- provide a more responsive range of services to children with disabilities, people with mental health problems and those with sensory impairment.

Senior managers should:

- produce detailed commissioning strategies, to underpin service reviews and provide clear purchasing and investment plans for specific services;
- make key planning groups more effective;
- implement an effective placement strategy and services to meet the needs of looked after children; and
- tackle obstacles to the use of direct payments.

3. Using all the levers of change to get more from the resources invested in social services.

The Council should:

- shorten the gap between major service reviews and making difficult political decisions;
- implement a framework for longer-term financial planning that ensures problems in redirecting money and realigning core services are tackled;
- tackle the obstacles to achieving the strategic aims set for children and family services, initially concentrating on areas of greatest risk (including the budget for placements); and
- identify the capital investment requirements of social services.

Senior managers should:

- make further improvements to business planning and performance management at service and team levels;
- implement service level agreements for internally provided services; and
- use more routinely a structured programme and project management approach to achieving change and involving staff in the process.

The performance of social services

This chapter summarises the main evidence used by the Joint Review Team when making judgements about the performance of the Council in delivering its responsibilities for social services. It describes strengths and areas for development in respect of the two key questions asked in the review.

The Review sought to answer two key questions:

- how good are the services? (Section 2.1)
- how well placed is the Council to sustain and improve services? (Section 2.2)

2.1 How good are the services?

Themes

1. Getting help (access to services; assessment; care management and review).
2. The services provided (range; quality).
3. The effect on people's lives (arrangements to protect vulnerable people; success in promoting independence and social inclusion).

Strengths	Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The overall numbers of people getting help• Mainly sound arrangements for people to contact social services and relatively few significant delays in services being provided• Processes for screening, for prioritising assessments and for deciding eligibility generally working well• Positive outcomes from the investment of additional resources in some areas (with good service developments, improved availability and more timely access)• Focus on social inclusion, supporting people in the community or in a family setting and increasing the opportunities available to service users in areas such as education, training and employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increasing the pace of change in developing new service options, to deal with a mismatch between the overall shape of service provision and the assessed needs of service users and carers• Achieving more consistency in the overall standard of the work done to make sure the right people get the right service at the right time (assessment and case management practice, processes and systems)• Making sure that all people requiring adult services get the same opportunities for assessment and finding out more about what happens to those who are not provided with access to social services

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good quality of care across most services • Effective response to allegations of abuse or neglect in terms of procedural action • Impressive commitment from fieldwork staff, willing 'to go the extra mile' in making sure that service users and carers receive help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In children's services, supporting more children safely at home and ensuring that complex cases are held by staff with the experience and skills required • Empowering service users and carers, helping them to feel more in control as well as involved • Implementing a framework for quality assurance that uses evidence from a wide variety of sources (audits, management reviews, service user satisfaction surveys, etc.)
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Theme 1: Getting help

	Poor	Inconsistent	Mainly good	Excellent
Access			•	
Assessment			•	
Care Management		•		

The Review Team found that comprehensive and accessible information about social services was available to the public and to other organisations. The arrangements for people to contact social services, during the working day and out of office hours, were mainly sound. In most service areas, the work done in receiving and managing enquiries and referrals was effective. Where waiting lists did occur, these were generally well managed.

The Council has improved its ability to provide individual service users and carers with a good quality assessment and a care plan that is then reviewed appropriately. Case management practice, processes and systems were all getting better. However, in some key areas, this was from a relatively poor starting point and concerns remain about inconsistent standards in the quality of the work done to make sure the right people get the right service at the right time. Some assessment and case management work was very good but, in a significant proportion of cases, practice was mediocre or inadequate.

The reasons for these shortfalls varied between different service areas but often staff and the systems were operating under considerable workload pressure. In some teams, there were also shortfalls in experience and skills. In other areas, staff were struggling to match the needs of service users with a restricted range of services. Reviewers were impressed by the commitment of fieldwork staff. Often they were willing 'to go the extra mile' in making sure that service users and carers received help. There has been a positive response on their part to work in progress designed to get the best possible use from new resources, systems and information technology.

Between the point of referral and the beginning of an assessment, the processes for screening and prioritising assessments were generally sound. Systems for deciding eligibility worked well. Staff were working hard to ensure that assessments comply with guidance and standards in respect of timeliness, quality and content. In adult services, arrangements for the provision of specialist assessments were improving. Reviewers saw some very good collaborative working across agencies and disciplines in children's services.

However, more work is needed to ensure consistently good performance in delivering:

- core assessments in children's services (including children with a disability);
- carers' assessments;
- a proper focus on assessing risk; and
- good analysis of complex circumstances.

In adult services, the introduction of frameworks for assessment such as the Unified Assessment Process (UAP) has been beneficial. However, the quality of assessments varied considerably between different groups of service users and sometimes within each group. For example, older people were most likely to get a good assessment whereas, in many of the cases seen by Reviewers in respect of people with a learning disability, there were no recent assessments. In children's services, systems have been improved and this was leading to more timely assessments but there have been difficulties in allocating complex work to staff with sufficient experience and skills. Little use was made of systems and tools for risk assessment that have been implemented in other local authorities. Reviewers were especially concerned about the continuing assessment of children who were being looked after by the Council.

The Council has done some good work in improving the extent to which care plans specifically and reliably describe:

- the services to be provided;
- the intended outcomes; and
- how risks would be managed.

There have been positive developments in both casework practice and managerial oversight but these changes still needed considerable consolidation - with the emphasis on helping staff to link all three aspects of care planning in a sound way and to set out more routinely the cost of major service elements in care plans.

Growing numbers of case reviews were being held regularly and on time but, in adult services, this was from a relatively low baseline. More work was needed across all social services to build upon efforts to improve the quality of reviews and their contribution to good care planning and case management. This would help the Council to deliver its agenda for achieving better person-centred planning in adult services and more effective permanency planning for children who are looked after. In both these areas, practice was inconsistent.

Reviewers judged that the systems in place for appropriately allocating, transferring and closing cases were generally operating effectively. Especially in children's services, managers were sometimes faced with considerable challenges in ensuring that cases were held by staff with the experience and skills required. Additionally,

there were issues about the quality of case management practice, with plans that lacked risk analysis and specific objectives. The Council acknowledges these concerns and, in adult services, a 'quality framework for assessment/care management' is being developed.

Theme 2: The services provided

	Poor	Inconsistent	Mainly good	Excellent
Range of services		•		
Quality of services			•	

The Council takes seriously its responsibilities for providing the people of Merthyr Tydfil with the range and volume of services required for meeting the assessed needs of individual users and carers. Services were being developed that contribute positively towards achieving this goal. There was some evidence that closer integration between social services and education/life long learning services has produced benefits in providing a more holistic approach to service provision.

In a number of key areas, however, the overall pace of change in developing new service options has been relatively slow. Consequently, at the time of the Review, it was difficult to find clear enough links between the needs of service users and carers identified in care plans and the types of services made available to them.

Because of social and economic factors, the demand for social services in Merthyr Tydfil has always been relatively high and there was evidence that increasing numbers of people were seeking help. The Council has responded by:

- extending the range of services available; and
- acting to deal with problems in some areas where social services were under pressure in coping with demand.

Reviewers found positive outcomes from this investment of resources - some innovative service developments, improved availability and more timely access.

However, improvements were taking place in a context where there has been heavy reliance on services such as traditional day centres. These services ensure that help is provided to large numbers of people but sometimes do so in ways that fail to differentiate sufficiently between the sorts of help they need³. More recent service developments have been geared towards providing different sorts of help to people. These services focus with greater urgency on outcomes such as enabling service users to remain in their own homes and to feel part of their communities.

³ It can ensure that help is provided to large numbers of people (dealing with issues of volume) but sometimes in ways that increase levels of long-term dependency and risk undermining the Council's capacity to focus on meeting especially complex needs without removing people from their homes.

Reviewers judged that some good progress was being made but that there remains a clear mismatch between the Council's ambitions and the overall shape of current service provision. For example, people with mental health problems did not have available to them services such as crisis resolution home treatment. Hence people were still being offered limited choice and too often they experienced services that were insufficiently responsive to their individual needs.

Because of a strong emphasis on operational work in social services, the Council was able to demonstrate in most areas a good understanding of the gaps in provision. There were difficulties sometimes in gathering current, detailed evidence about the scale of the problems - through analysis of delays, unmet need and excessive costs. This lack of quantified information caused Reviewers to question if the Council's plans for dealing with all the shortfalls in a timely way were realistic.

Partnership arrangements for delivering services were working well, although the Council needs to consider whether more help should be made available through services that are fully integrated with Health and other providers of personal services. Reviewers found some good practice in consulting users about the range of services provided and about the development of new services. The Council is beginning to put in place some of the building blocks needed for a systematic approach to this work.

The evidence available to the Review Team indicates that the Council is generally providing a good quality of care in its current services; people are getting a reliable response. The Council has introduced quality standards for most service areas and there was some monitoring of services against these standards. The system for dealing with complaints, representations and compliments was being used to improve the quality of services. In most service areas, there has been a serious response made to issues raised by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) as a result of its work in regulating and inspecting services. In contrast, it has been difficult to get an agreed way forward in response to some of the issues raised during inspections of the fostering service. There was considerable disparity between different service areas in the extent to which they could demonstrate that the views of service users and carers were reflected in work to measure quality.

Evidence from all these sources needs to be set within a quality assurance framework that ensures systematic monitoring across all services to provide the Council with:

- reliable information;
- better safeguards; and
- consistent analysis and reporting.

Theme 3: The effect on people's lives

	Poor	Inconsistent	Mainly good	Excellent
Protecting vulnerable people			•	
Promoting independence & social inclusion		•		

Across children's and adult services, there was an effective response to allegations of abuse or neglect in terms of procedural action. Multi-agency procedures and safeguarding bodies were operating to a good standard. Some good services were in place to safeguard vulnerable people in terms of dealing with the immediate risks or the immediate consequences of abuse. The Council needs to explore ways of meeting effectively the longer-term therapeutic needs of those who have suffered harm.

Reviewers were concerned that, in dealing with risks to children, social services may rely disproportionately on taking action under child protection procedures and removing children from home on a permanent basis. The exceptionally high numbers of children looked after by the Council could be seen as a consequence of decision-making that places too much weight on 'rescue' and risk avoidance. The development of more intensive support for children at home, greater use of formal risk assessment and approaches that encourage partnership with families can reduce the need for such action.

The creation of integrated departments for children's services and adult services is helping to deliver the Council's strong social inclusion agenda. Senior managers in social services have been very much involved in sponsoring appropriate initiatives. There was a growing emphasis on supporting people in the community or in a family setting rather than in institutional care, wherever possible. Work was being done to expand the numbers of people who get services designed to:

- help them exercise control over their lives; or
- increase the opportunities available to them in areas such as education, training and employment.

However, there are still considerable challenges for the Council in making sure that all service users and carers consistently receive this sort of help. Some core services, such as residential care for older people, have been slow to benefit from the change of approach. In areas such as direct payments, new ideas about empowerment are developing slowly. Support for carers is becoming more effective but some of the developments are relatively new and the Council acknowledges the scope for further improvements.

Reviewers concluded that a crucial challenge for the Council is to strengthen the links between:

- the exciting preventive and social inclusion work it has been doing across service areas (the community regeneration agenda); and

- the drive to improve social services so they can provide responsive support, focused on independence/enablement, for those who are most vulnerable and most in need (the service and professional agenda).

This would involve more consideration of evidence about the impact of thresholds for getting help from social services. For example, it appeared that that some groups of service users were less likely to receive a formal assessment of their needs in Merthyr Tydfil than elsewhere in Wales. The Council needs to have more information about what happens to people who are turned aside because of the eligibility criteria adopted and the need to prioritise. More work was needed, especially in reaching out to those groups who experience most difficulties in making their voice heard and who need good advocates. Reviewers judged that service users and carers felt more involved but not necessarily more in control.

2.2 How well placed is the Council to sustain and improve services?

Themes

1. Shaping services (resources, planning and partnerships; commissioning and contracting).
2. Delivering social services (workforce; performance management).
3. Providing direction (leadership and culture in social services; corporate and political support and scrutiny).

Strengths	Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An ambitious Council, undertaking innovative work in pursuit of its transformation agenda and regeneration • Extensive organisational change providing some good building blocks for improvement • Effective arrangements for social services issues to be represented and managed at a political and corporate level as a key priority for the Council • A coherent direction for social services emerging from service reviews and planning activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making explicit the links between overall corporate aims and the aims for social services • Helping Councillors and managers to focus more on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - shortening the gap between major service reviews and the making of difficult political decisions - risk management - using financial disciplines to underpin policy objectives - evaluating robustly the impact of decisions being made

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work done by the corporate centre and by other directorates making an important contribution to the Council's agenda for social services and for social inclusion • New organisational arrangements for social services providing better outcomes for service users • Generally sound Council finances, with significant investment in social services • Good position regarding recruitment and retention in many social services areas • Some very good systems for scrutinising the performance of social services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing the challenge to existing patterns of service delivery, especially in respect of the Council's own adult residential care homes • Bringing the budget for placements of children under control • Encouraging partnerships to use robust commissioning strategies that provide clear purchasing and investment intentions for specific services • Dealing with the gap between Merthyr Tydfil and other local authorities in staff qualification/skill levels • Applying more widely the disciplines associated with a structured approach to programme/project management and service/team business planning
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Theme 1: Shaping services

	Badly placed	Uncertainly placed	Well placed	Strongly placed
Resources		•		
Planning and Partnerships		•		
Commissioning and contracting		•		

The Council has made the task of improving social services one of its key priorities and there has been a high level of expenditure on social services. However, the Council is not always achieving the best return on its investment. Significant increases in expenditure have been used to meet overspending and short term priorities. There were examples of action taken to improve efficiency and reduce unit costs but the approach is not applied consistently. Budget monitoring and information is satisfactory but budget delegation arrangements are not being used as effectively as they could be. Medium-term financial planning is developing and the introduction of three year budget settlements by central government from 2008/2009 should make forecasting more robust. However, further work is needed to ensure that the financial impact of service developments is clear.

Partnerships were not delivering sufficient change because there appeared to be some areas where agencies were reluctant or unable to move beyond statements of intent. One of the consequences is that only limited use has been made of commissioning

strategies that provide clear purchasing and investment intentions for specific services, in response to the direction set out in strategic documents.

At the time of the Joint Review, a new commissioning framework was being developed in the Integrated Adult Services Directorate. In children’s services, the Council had volunteered to work with the Social Services Improvement Agency in pioneering a new approach to commissioning services for children in need. Appropriately employed, robust commissioning would improve the capacity of the Council to re-shape patterns of service provision in circumstances where it is experiencing many of the problems often associated with attempts to switch monies or disinvest.

Theme 2: Delivering social services

	Badly placed	Uncertainly placed	Well placed	Strongly placed
Workforce			•	
Performance management			•	

The position regarding recruitment and retention in social services is generally good. There were specific challenges in some key areas, especially in children’s services where the Council has struggled to find enough staff with the skills and experience needed for carrying out complex work.

Staff were mainly positive about the way in which the Council has identified and met their needs for training, development and support. Merthyr Tydfil has invested substantially in workforce development programmes. Reviewers concluded that training opportunities should be linked much more closely to team business plans, individual performance plans, qualification targets and service standards. The Council was making progress with longer-term workforce planning across the social care sector and with workforce development partnerships. Although workforce issues are being managed more decisively, the gap between Merthyr Tydfil and other local authorities (in areas such as qualification/skill levels and recruitment competitiveness in respect of some key positions) means that the Council still faces considerable challenges.

Good work has been done to put in place clear baseline standards for some key aspects of professional practice and service delivery. Performance against standards was being monitored via a considerable range of mechanisms including Key Strategic Plans, a Business Planning Scorecard, Audit Action Plans, Quarterly Business Reviews and Service Manager Reviews. Other quality assurance mechanisms (such as case file audits, feedback from service users and contract monitoring) were being used less well. Some groups of service users were involved in formal processes for monitoring and managing performance but there was limited evidence of a consistent approach.

Management information systems were improving and providing increased opportunities for performance monitoring and target setting. Full implementation of the new case management database was taking a considerable time and this has made it difficult to consolidate progress. The Council has in place arrangements for

staff supervision and appraisal, although the appraisal system is still being rolled out. At a corporate and directorate level, there have been strong links between planning, accountability and performance management. The need for better service and team operational/business planning made these systems less effective elsewhere.

In interviews, there was considerable praise for the overall system of performance management. Some groups considered that changes were needed so that the Council can secure maximum benefit from the considerable effort involved in maintaining all the processes involved. In particular, staff and partner organisations wanted to see:

- greater analysis attached to the evidence about performance, including performance benchmarking against comparable authorities;
- more narrative, to make explicit the ‘big picture’;
- greater consistency in the use of targets;
- more cross-referencing to objectives and actions agreed with partners; and
- improved business planning at service and team levels.

In response to these issues, the Council is acting to make changes, especially in the use of service and team business plans and targets.

Theme 3: Providing direction for social services

	Badly placed	Uncertainly placed	Well placed	Strongly placed
Leadership and culture in social services			•	
Political and corporate support and scrutiny			•	

The Reviewers found Merthyr Tydfil to be an ambitious Council. They observed energy, commitment and change at all levels of the organisation. There is an exciting vision in place, with strong political and corporate endorsement. The Council is undertaking innovative work in pursuit of its transformation agenda. Through developments such as the framework for performance management and monitoring of plans, it is becoming more business-like and providing some good building blocks for future change.

The Council has set a coherent direction for social services, although the links between overall corporate aims and the aims for social services need to be more explicit. The drive for improvement has made a positive impact upon social services. Managers and staff have worked hard to implement and make effective major structural changes. The new organisational arrangements for social services are providing clarity in respect of roles, responsibilities and delegations, with good working relationships between the two directorates. The move to integrated directorates is a good example of transformational change in pursuit of better outcomes for service users. There were other examples of changes being positively led and implemented within the directorates at all levels.

As the messages from service reviews and other major exercises were being translated into aims and objectives, a clear direction was emerging in some key areas of social services. Managers were working hard to secure an explicit political and corporate mandate for the changes required to pursue these strategies. Consequently, they were able to describe in these areas how the Council was going to meet new challenges and get the most from the resources invested. Arrangements for social services issues to be represented and managed at a corporate and political level were effective. Relevant Councillors were much involved.

In their meetings with Reviewers, staff demonstrated sound values and high levels of loyalty and commitment. Both directorates were seeking to maximise the benefits from this very strong operational culture that has helped to unify managers and staff. The corporate framework for achieving this goal, including Continuous Improvement Programme teams, needs to be applied more coherently so that staff can become more involved in the process of change.

The Council has good systems for scrutinising the performance of social services. Councillors were working to improve their ability to:

- evaluate more robustly, through informed challenge and impartial advice, the impact of the decisions being made; and
- ensure that there was a clear focus on value for money issues and risk management.

Although the overall position is strong, there are some major areas where decisive action has been deferred. Much good work has been done using a mainly consensual approach but Reviewers saw some reluctance to apply all the means of leverage for changes that are available. This was especially the case in respect of:

- applying financial disciplines to underpin policy objectives (budget control, commissioning, value for money studies); and
- increasing the capacity to switch monies in support of strategic intent.

There is a clear need to shorten the gap between major service reviews and making difficult political decisions so that the Council can align budgets with the evidence provided by the reviews about effective use of resources. Reviewers endorsed the need for increasing the capacity within scrutiny systems for more robust self appraisal and better access to objective, expert advice.

The Council has sought to increase leadership and management capacity in social services, through additional posts and development opportunities. However, the range of responsibilities undertaken by managers meant that they were often stretched in seeking to achieve a proper balance between their professional and business management roles. Reviewers were encouraged by evidence that, in both the relevant directorates, senior managers are seeking to provide a more coherent and explicit explanation of the major changes required.

Reviewers were more convinced by the strategic thinking done in respect of adult services, in terms of identifying effective ways of tackling the most important issues (such as shaping services in response to changing need and expectations). They considered that the Director of Social Services needs to exercise vigorously his responsibility for providing professional advice to the Council and to the Director of

Integrated Children's Services in respect of statutory responsibilities towards children in need and their families. This would ensure a greater element of challenge to current strategic thinking.

To achieve further change on the scale required and at the pace sought, managers also need to demonstrate a greater willingness to:

- highlight risks, especially the financial consequences of current policies and practices;
- outline options in the form of costed policies for underpinning service developments (including strategies for family support and promoting independence) and professional developments (such as permanency and person-centred planning);
- use more robustly the arrangements in place for reviewing services and performance on the basis of self-assessment and external evaluation; and
- apply the disciplines associated with a structured approach to programme and project management more routinely.

Further copies

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