

‘SOCIAL SERVICES MUCH IMPROVED’

Second joint review reveals that services in Torfaen are now mainly good

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Torfaen County Borough Council has transformed its social services over the last five years. According to the first in a new round of joint review inspections, it now offers mainly good services and it is judged as being well placed to sustain and further improve services.

This result represents significant improvement since the first joint review report was published in 1999. Then, reviewers found that people were poorly served and that social services were suffering from weak leadership. Since then, the Council has worked hard to drive forward a programme of change. The second review report, published today, provides a very different picture.

The review team comprised staff from the Social Services Inspectorate for Wales and the Wales Audit Office, with help from independent lay people acting as assessors. They report a strong move away from care in institutions to services that protect people well and support them to live independently, wherever possible. They found strong leadership and councillors who understand the priority and investment needed when providing help for vulnerable people and their carers. Major strengths in Torfaen included good access to services and a sound, safe response to requests for help.

The reviewers say that the Council still needs to do still more work to help people receive support in their own communities and also to provide consistent standards between different groups of people who use services. For example, there are gaps in the services to support older people with mental health problems. Carers require more consistent help, with more opportunities for respite breaks.

The report recommends priorities for action by the Council, including areas such as working more in partnership with other organisations and with the people who use social services.

The Chief Inspector of Social Services, Graham Williams said today: "Torfaen deserves to be congratulated on becoming the first Council in Wales to be given a 'mainly good services' judgement in a joint review. This is an impressive change, given the poor position five years ago. Torfaen can now look to build on this success. We will agree today with the Council an action plan in response to this report. Both the Social Services Inspectorate and the Wales Audit Office will do further work to evaluate the progress made in delivering these actions and to ensure good outcomes for the people who use social services."

Auditor General for Wales, Jeremy Colman said today: "The Council has acted vigorously in taking on board the findings and recommendations contained in the first joint review. I wish to praise all those who contributed to the substantial progress made in recent years. I look forward to a similar effort being made to tackle the areas that still need to be addressed, particularly the way the Council commissions social services to achieve best value."

Notes to Editors:

- This report is the first in a second series of joint reviews, a rolling five-year programme to assess the performance of individual social service authorities in Wales.
- Joint reviews are conducted jointly by the Social Services Inspectorate for Wales and the Wales Audit Office.
- The review of Torfaen was carried out between April and July 2005. The report will be published on 15 February 2006, to coincide with a presentation to the Council.
- 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.
- Joint reviews set out to answer two key questions: *How good are the social services that people in the area receive?* and *How well placed is the Council to sustain and improve services?*
- Torfaen covers an area of approximately 126 square kilometres. It has the second highest population density in Wales with most of its 90,000 population living in Cwmbran, Pontypool and Blaenavon.
- Further information can be found on the joint review web-site: www.joint-reviews.gov.uk

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