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Environmental Health follow-up review – **Monmouthshire County Council**

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The team who delivered the work comprised Ginette Beal and Lidia Vorontsova of Grant Thornton LLP under the direction of Non Jenkins and Sara-Jane Byrne.

Contents

Overall, we found that the Council has acted upon the recommendations raised in 2014. The environmental health service currently has financial stability and should use this period of stability to build resilience through achieving the right balance of statutory, discretionary and income-generating services.

Summary report 4

Detailed report 4

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Summary report

Summary

What we reviewed and why

- 1 As part of his 'delivering with less' series of Local Government Improvement Studies, the Auditor General published his report, Delivering with less – the impact on environmental health services and citizens, in October 2014.
- 2 In this report, the Auditor General drew attention to recent and forthcoming legislation, and the concerns of Councils that they would be unable to deliver the commitments contained within it. Many of the legislative proposals referred to in the Auditor General's 2014 report have subsequently been implemented, including the Housing Act (Wales) 2014 and the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016. The Public Health (Wales) Act was also passed in 2017.
- 3 The Auditor General also published local reports for each Council as part of the 2014 study.
- 4 In a letter to local authority Chief Executives on 11 January 2018, the Auditor General set out his intention to undertake some thematic work more closely aligned to his programme of Local Government Studies. The purpose of aligning thematic work more closely to Local Government Studies programme is to make the most effective use of audit resources in discharging the Auditor General's duties whilst ensuring that issues, themes and learning identified in Local Government Study reports are 'followed-up' and explored with councils locally in subsequent years.
- 5 This review assessed whether there have been any budget and staff changes within the Council's environmental health services and the extent to which it has addressed the recommendations included in our 2014 national report. For the purposes of this review, we focussed on the Council's progress in addressing recommendations 2, 3, 4, and 5 of the national report.
- 6 The report contained six recommendations that are set out in **Exhibit 1** below:

Exhibit 1: recommendations made in 2014 national report, Delivering with less – the impact on environmental health services and citizens

Recommendation	Responsible Partners
<p>R1 Revise the best practice standards to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• align the work of environmental health with national strategic priorities;• identify the wider contribution of environmental health in delivering strategic priorities of the Welsh Government; and	<p>Councils, Chartered Institute of Environmental Health Cymru</p>

Recommendation	Responsible Partners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> identify the benefit and impact of environmental health services on protecting citizens. 	
<p>R2 Provide scrutiny chairs and members with the necessary skills and support to effectively scrutinise and challenge service performance, savings plans and the impact of budget reductions.</p>	<p>Councils, Welsh Local Government Association</p>
<p>R3 Improve engagement with local residents over planned budget cuts and changes in services by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> consulting with residents on planned changes in services and using the findings to shape decisions; outlining which services are to be cut and how these cuts will impact on residents; and setting out plans for increasing charges or changing standards of service. 	<p>Councils, Welsh Local Government Association</p>
<p>R4 Improve efficiency and value for money by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying the statutory and non-statutory duties of council environmental health services; agreeing environmental health priorities for the future and the role of councils in delivering these; determining an 'acceptable standard of performance' for environmental health services (upper and lower) and publicise these to citizens; improving efficiency and maintaining performance to the agreed level through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> collaborating and/or integrating with others to reduce cost and/or improve quality; 	<p>Councils, Welsh Local Government Association, Welsh Government</p>

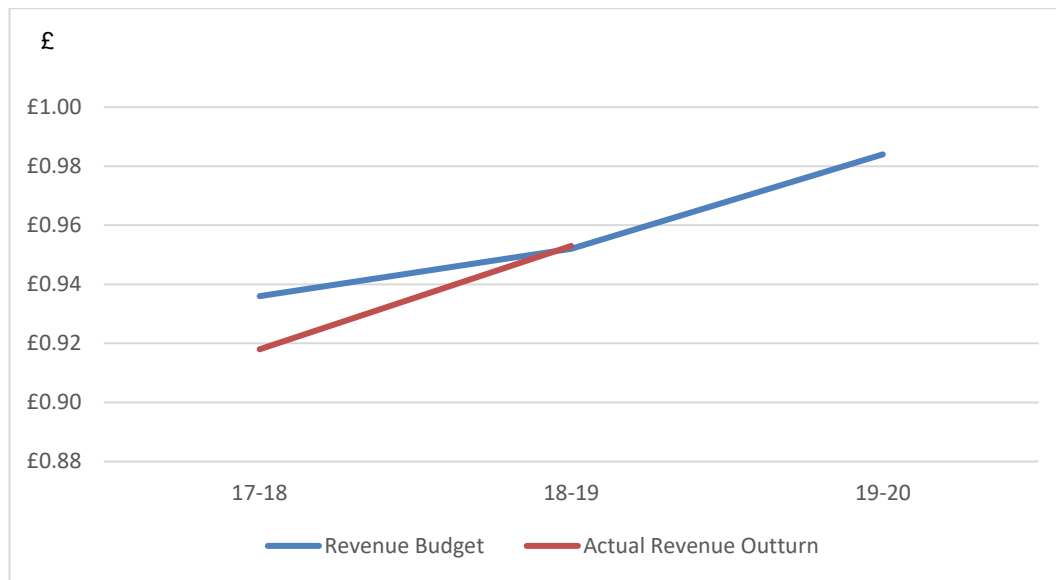
Recommendation	Responsible Partners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – outsourcing where services can be delivered more cost effectively to agreed standards; – introducing and/or increasing charges and focusing on income-generation activity; – using grants strategically to maximise impact and return; and – reducing activities to focus on core statutory and strategic priorities. 	
<p>R5 Improve strategic planning by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying, collecting and analysing financial, performance and demand/need data on environmental health services; • analysing collected data to inform and understand the relationship between 'cost: benefit: impact' and use this intelligence to underpin decisions on the future of council environmental health services; and • agree how digital information can be used to plan and develop environmental health services in the future. 	Councils
<p>R6 Clearly set out the expectations of council environmental health services under new housing and health legislation and agree how these new duties will be delivered.</p>	Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association

7 We undertook this review during the period September to October 2019.

What we found

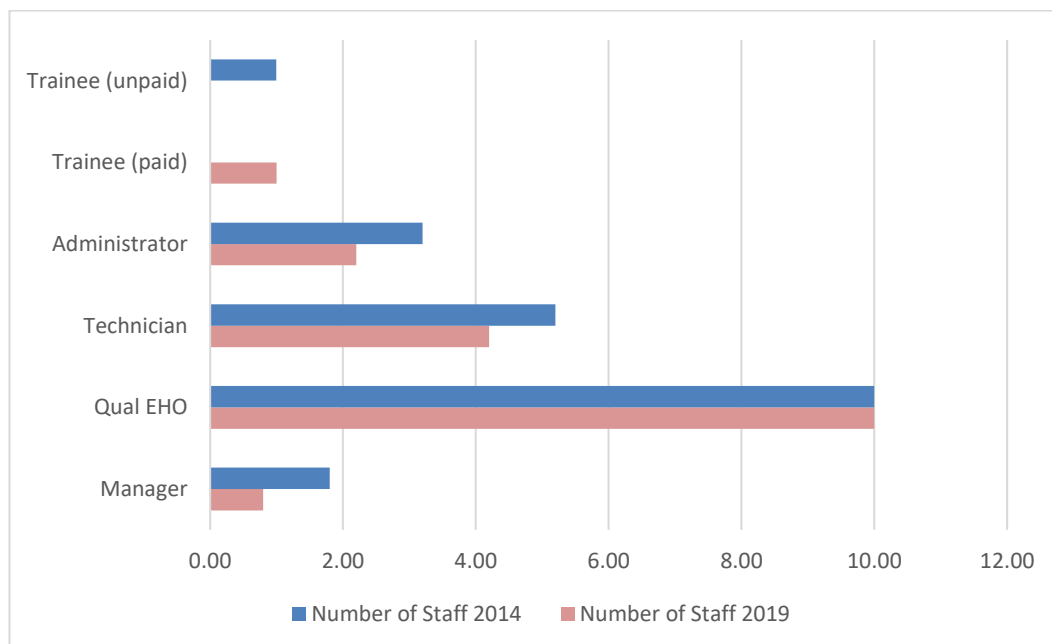
- 8 Our review sought to answer the question: **Has the Council acted upon the recommendations in the Auditor General's Environmental health – Delivering with Less report published in October 2014?**
- 9 Overall we found that: **The Council has acted upon the recommendations raised in 2014. The environmental health service currently has financial stability and should use this period of stability to build resilience through achieving the right balance of statutory, discretionary and income-generating services.**
- 10 We reached this conclusion because:
- Scrutiny members are provided with detailed reports and generic scrutiny training which enable them to understand the services provided and the opportunity to effectively challenge and scrutinise the environmental health services.
 - Environmental health budget changes have had a minimal impact on service users, limiting the need for consultation.
 - The Council has set environmental health priorities within its business plans. The Council recognises the value of investing in both statutory and non-statutory services and would benefit from a fresh review of statutory and non-statutory services to support any future funding decisions.
 - The Council collaborates with a wide range of partners, but has a limited range of formal partnerships. Where possible, the Council obtains grant income and charges full costs for services.
 - At a service level, there are good strategic planning arrangements in place. Changes to the service have been limited, so the Council has not completed detailed analysis of costs, benefit and impact. The Council is exploring the use of technology.
 - Revenue budgets for environmental health have increased from £0.94m in 2017-18 to £0.98m in 2019-20 (please refer to [Exhibit 2](#)), a budget increase of 5%, due to increasing staffing costs and the introduction of a new staffing structure.
 - Staff numbers have reduced from 21.2 FTEs in 2014 to 18.2 FTEs in 2019 (please refer to [Exhibit 3](#)), a total reduction of 3.0 FTEs. Posts removed included technicians and a service manager. Managerial duties are now undertaken by two senior environmental health officers who also have operational duties.
 - Any reductions in resources are not anticipated in the short to medium-term, as the service is considered by officers to be operating at a minimum level. The Chief Officer would like to explore how the service can progress from a 'surviving service to a thriving service'.

Exhibit 2: the net cost of environmental health services: revenue budget compared to outturn from 2017-18 to 2019-20



The Council were unable to confirm and provide financial information comparable with 2014-15 when the original review was undertaken.

Exhibit 3: staff numbers (full time equivalents) 2014 compared to 2019



Proposals for improvement

Exhibit 1: proposals for improvement

The table below sets out the proposals for improvement that we have identified following this review.

Proposals for improvement	
P1	The Council should undertake a fresh analysis of statutory and non-statutory service obligations to support and inform any future service changes.
P2	<p>In order to develop a prosperous and future-proof environmental health service the Council should consider the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Balancing statutory duties with non-statutory services and discretionary income generation.• Aligning its income generation activities with the Council's overall Commercial Strategy and considering how the service might benefit.• Working in more formal partnerships with other authorities to deliver services.• Exploring how transformation and technology could improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Detailed report

Overall, we found that the Council has acted upon the recommendations raised in 2014. The environmental health service currently has financial stability and should use this period of stability to build resilience through achieving the right balance of statutory, discretionary and income-generating services.

Scrutiny members are provided with detailed reports and generic scrutiny training which enable them to understand the services provided and the opportunity to effectively challenge and scrutinise the environmental health services

11 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- Environmental health matters are regularly considered by the Strong Communities Scrutiny Committee. This committee receives a detailed report on environmental health services every six months. These reports include both financial and performance data. The officers attending meetings vary depending on the subject matter.
- The Strong Communities Scrutiny Committee also considered the local toilet strategy.
- The Wales Audit Office completed a review of scrutiny arrangements in 2017. As a result the following has been introduced:
 - Member development programme.
 - Self-evaluation action plan completed in 2017, and was further refined in 2018. This plan is regularly reviewed by the Scrutiny Chairs Group.
- In 2017 training was provided on an Introduction to Scrutiny and the Role and Conduct of Councillors.
- In 2018 all member training was provided on equality impact assessments in decision making.
- The Council does not have a structured member training programme for environmental health matters.

Environmental health budget changes have had a minimal impact on service users, limiting the need for consultation

12 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- Changes in the environmental health service to date have been limited to:
 - Ceasing to provide a domestic pest control service in 2014-15.
 - Reduction in staff numbers in public protection to save £141k in 2014-15. (This includes the whole of the public protection service and not just environmental health.)
 - Increase in private water supplies fees and charges in 2018-19.
- Public consultation was not undertaken for any of the changes above, although the reduction in staff numbers in 2014-15 did include consultation with staff and the trade unions.
- The Council undertook public consultation to inform its local toilet strategy.

The Council has set environmental health priorities within its business plans. The Council recognises the value of investing in both statutory and non-statutory services and would benefit from a fresh review of statutory and non-statutory services to support any future funding decisions

13 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- The proposal to reduce staff numbers in Public Protection in March 2014 included an assessment of the impact on statutory and non-statutory duties. The Council should consider updating this analysis to support future decision making.
- The environmental health service recognises the value of undertaking proactive non-statutory work such as providing training on food hygiene standards and the targeting of inspections of residential accommodation above high risk establishments such as takeaways.
- The environmental health service has two business plans: Commercial and Public Health. These business plans are comprehensive and set out service-level priorities and objectives, associated outcomes and how these are aligned to the corporate well-being objectives. Acceptable standards of performance have been agreed internally and documented within these business plans.
- Officers periodically review their performance against the Practice Standards, but have not self-assessed on an annual basis in recent years whilst the Practice Standards were under review.

The Council collaborates with a wide range of partners, but has a limited range of formal partnerships. Where possible, the Council obtains grant income and charges full costs for services

14 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- The environmental health service is maintaining its performance in the majority of areas, but is not achieving its planned target to test private water supplies across the County.
- The Council collaborates with a range of partners on an informal basis, such as the Food Standards Agency, all Wales expert panels and Public Health Wales NHS Trust. Collaboration provides an opportunity to develop a more prosperous and thriving environmental health service.
- In recent years, the Council has undertaken work for a neighbouring authority to respond to environmental health-related planning applications, but the Council does not currently share any environmental health services with other Local Authorities or outsource to other providers.
- External contractors have been used to complete low risk food establishment inspections, so that experienced staff could focus on high risk premises.
- The Council does charge for all environmental health services for which it is permitted and has reviewed its charges to ensure full cost recovery. The Council receives income by acting as a Primary Authority for various private sector organisations.
- The Council is considering how it should balance delivering its statutory duties whilst delivering discretionary income, with a view to developing its services to be fit for the future.
- The Council has obtained grant funding wherever possible and is currently receiving funding from the FSA.

At a service level, there are good strategic planning arrangements in place. Changes to the service have been limited, so the Council has not completed detailed analysis of costs, benefit and impact. The Council is exploring the use of technology

15 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- There is a comprehensive performance management framework in place to ensure operational managers are challenged and held accountable for performance and delivery of objectives.
- The Council has used activity and demand data to plan services and to enhance its reporting to scrutiny.

- The Council has begun to make new technology available and has begun to trial a Noise App to report noise nuisance. The Council is also exploring digital solutions for evidence capture whilst on site.
- Committee papers provided to support member decisions indicate that consideration is given to the cost, benefit and impact of the decision.

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