

Oversight of Partnerships – Flintshire County Council

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

We looked at whether the Council has proper arrangements to provide effective oversight of the partnerships it is involved in. To do this, we selected two partnerships in which the Council plays a significant role, the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) and the Public Services Board (PSB). This audit did not cover all the Council's partnership arrangements. We used the audit questions and criteria set out in **Appendix 1** to inform our assessment of the Council's arrangements.

Why this is important

Partnership working is essential for the Council to meet legal duties and support local initiatives. It can be a powerful tool to tackle difficult policy and operational problems and make better use of resources. Effective oversight is needed to ensure it meets legal requirements and that partnerships deliver their intended outcomes and provide value for money.

What we concluded

The Council has strengthened its strategic intent for partnership working, as seen in its Council Plan and leadership support. However, implementation is still in early stages. The Governance arrangements for the two partnerships reviewed are in place, but the Council lacks a corporate approach of all its partnerships. It does not have a consistent way to define, manage or oversee them. Establishing a proportionate and consistent partnerships framework, with a clearer understanding of resources and outcomes, will help the Council ensure it achieves value for money and contribute effectively to strategic objectives.

What we recommend

We have made two recommendations around clearly defining what constitutes a partnership and corporate approach to guidance and training; and developing a proportionate evaluation framework to assess partnership value for money and impact.

Our findings

Partnership working is important to the Council but implementing this strategic priority is at an early stage

1. The Council has made a strategic commitment to partnership working. This is shown by its inclusion as a new priority in the Council Plan 2023-28, with a focus on collaborating with partners from all sectors to achieve shared goals and priorities. Senior leaders that we interviewed consistently expressed the importance of partnerships within the Council.
2. Under the priority 'A Well Managed Council', the Council Plan 2023-28 commits to working with public services to enhance well-being across Flintshire. However, the Council's strategic approach to partnership working appears to centre on the work of the PSB. While there is recognition of the value of collaboration, there is limited evidence of a broader ambition to explore ways to use partnership working as a transformational tool in delivering its strategic priority.
3. A strategic focus on partnership working, beyond meeting statutory requirements, can help drive synergy in service delivery, and allow for efficiencies in the use of resources. It can also bring meaningful change to delivering better outcomes.

Governance arrangements for its statutory partnerships are in place

4. Governance arrangements for the two statutory partnerships we reviewed, the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) and the Public Services Board (PSB) are clearly established. The Council's strategic intent and commitment for these partnerships are evident. The Council ensures that these statutory partnerships are guided by a well-defined purpose, clear intended outcomes, and a structured engagement process that demonstrates how the Council collaborates with its partners.

5. The Council has also ensured each partnership lists its membership with a definition of roles and responsibilities. This is reflected in documents, such as the terms of reference, which are reviewed and updated annually by Flintshire and Wrexham Public Services Board (for the PSB) and Safer North Wales Partnership Board (for the CSP), as well as information-sharing protocols, and scrutiny committee records.

The Council lacks a corporate approach to all its partnerships

6. The Council does not have a structured approach to support its staff in the identification, development, and management of all its partnerships across the organisation. The Council does not have a clear approach to identifying who it wants to work with. Decisions about partner engagement rely on the knowledge of councillors and officers, without defined methods to support partner involvement. As a result, the Council has limited assurance that it is identifying, prioritising, or engaging with partners in a strategic and fully considered way.
7. The Council does not have an up-to-date record of all partnerships. The absence of a centralised record may hinder the Council's ability to maintain a strategic oversight of its partnerships. This can lead to missed opportunities for collaboration, duplication of effort, and inefficiencies. It could also weaken the Council's ability to align partnership work with its corporate priorities.
8. The Council has not made it clear what constitutes a partnership. The lack of a shared definition can create uncertainty about which working relationships should be recorded at a corporate level. Without this clarity, some joint work may be overlooked.
9. We heard examples of informal learning, such as shadowing colleagues or attending partnership meetings. We also saw examples of training provided to PSB members on 'Systems Thinking', in response to specific needs identified by partnerships. However, the Council does not provide corporate guidance and training to ensure that all staff involved in, or seeking to engage in, partnership work understand and apply a consistent approach.

10. Without a supporting framework and consistency in training, officers and members may be unsure how to initiate or assess new partnership opportunities. This can lead to inconsistent practices and missed opportunities. A structured approach based on shared principles, which includes guidance, training, and tools for evaluating potential partners may help embed partnership working more deeply and consistently across the Council.

The Council does not have a clear process for assessing the value for money of its partnerships

11. The Council's existing governance structures provide a framework for monitoring and reporting progress against the Council Plan, as well as the work of the PSB and CSP, to senior officers and elected members. While this provides a foundation for monitoring progress, current reporting arrangements may not offer sufficient oversight to fully understand the value for money achieved through partnership working.
12. We saw that some arrangements are in place to monitor progress towards partnership outcomes. For example, the CSP Overview Report (October 2024) includes performance measures related to the reduction of knife crime rates and the implementation of safety initiatives. However, similar clarity on progress towards achieving outcomes was not evident for the PSB.
13. The Council's limited understanding of the full range of its partnerships also makes it difficult for the Council to assess the full resource requirements of its partnership work. While the PSB benefits from dedicated resourcing, such as officer time, and external funding to deliver projects, other partnership activity is absorbed within existing service budgets. The Council did not provide examples of systematically assessing whether its partnerships are delivering value for money. For instance, we did not see evidence of benchmarking, or the use of comparative data to evaluate outcomes against resources used.

14. Without a clear method for identifying the resource¹ implications of its partnership commitments, and without relevant measures across all partnerships, the Council may struggle to determine whether these arrangements are delivering their intended benefits. This limits its ability to monitor progress, take corrective action when needed, and make informed decisions about resource allocation, prioritisation, and whether to continue, scale, or exit specific arrangements.

¹ Financial and non-financial

Our recommendations

- R1 The Council should clearly define what constitutes a partnership and work to formalise and encourage partnership working across the organisation. This should include the development of guidance and the provision of training to ensure that staff understand and consistently apply a shared approach to partnership working.
- R2 The Council should also develop a proportionate evaluation framework to assess whether its partnerships are delivering value for money and contributing positively to organisational objectives. This will help ensure that partnership activity is both effective and sustainable.

Appendix 1 – Audit questions and criteria

Does the Council have proper arrangements to provide effective oversight of the partnerships it is involved in?

Does the Council have a clear strategy for partnership working?	Does the Council have a clear vision for partnership working?	<p>The Council has a clear vision of what it wants to achieve through partnership working.</p> <p>The Council has a policy framework for partnership working that clearly outlines its approach and methodology and is easily accessible.</p> <p>The Council champions the importance of good partnership working and there is a buy-in at all levels to the approach.</p> <p>The Council has identified the benefits of partnership working.</p>
	Has the Council provided guidance and training on partnership working?	<p>The Council provides guidance and training on partnership working to ensure that the approach is understood and implemented by all staff with a direct responsibility for representing the Council on a partnership or supporting a partnership.</p>
Does the Council have a clear and comprehensive understanding of its existing partnerships?	Does the Council know the full extent of the partnerships it is involved in?	<p>The Council has mapped all existing partnerships and has an up-to-date database of all partnerships it is involved in.</p> <p>The Council has identified its statutory obligations (where the Council is required to set up the partnership by law or in order to receive additional funding/meet a requirement of the assessment regime/statutory guidance).</p>

	The Council has a clear mechanism for identifying who it wants to work with.
Has the Council clearly defined each partnership?	The Council ensures there is a definition of each partnership with a clear statement of its purpose (a clear and shared understanding of the partnership's purpose and vision).
Has the Council clearly laid out the governance arrangements for each partnership?	<p>The Council has set standards for documenting partnership governance to clarify expectations, minimum requirements and ensure consistency.</p> <p>The Council has documented the governance arrangements for each partnership eg TOR.</p> <p>The Council ensures each partnership has a clear definition of roles and responsibilities of involved parties, eg MOU in place.</p>
Has the Council identified clear outcomes for its partnerships?	The Council ensures each partnership has clearly identified its intended outcomes (defined and agreed aims and objectives).
Does the Council assess the value of partnerships before entering into them?	The Council has a clear process for assessing the value of and entering into new partnerships.
Has the Council considered the costs and resources associated with each partnership?	<p>The financial costs and benefits of each partnership are clearly understood and explained.</p> <p>The Council understands the long-term resource requirements of each partnership.</p>
Has the Council thought about the wider impacts its partnerships could have (eg on Council WBOs, on the WBOs of partner organisations, and on the NWBGs)?	The Council ensures that each partnership has identified how its work helps the Council achieve its WBOs. There is a clear indication of how the partnership fits with the Council's priorities and objectives.

Does the Council have an effective process for monitoring, reporting and reviewing its partnerships?	Does the Council have clear monitoring and reporting arrangements for its partnership?	<p>There are clear monitoring arrangements of partnerships.</p> <p>There are clear reporting arrangements of partnerships to officers and elected members.</p> <p>The monitoring arrangements include provision for scrutiny.</p> <p>The Council has a mechanism for regularly identifying and monitoring the risk associated with each partnership and has a clear escalation process in place.</p> <p>Partnership risks are included in the Council's regular risk management framework.</p>
	Does the Council review the effectiveness of its partnerships?	<p>The Council regularly reviews the effectiveness of partnerships, including cost-effectiveness, in helping the Council to achieve its objectives.</p> <p>The Council reviews the outcomes its partnerships are achieving.</p>
	Does the Council regularly review if its partnerships are providing value for money and adding value to the organisation?	The Council has examples of it regularly assessing if its partnerships are providing value for money and adding value to the organisation.
	Has the Council identified appropriate performance measures for its partnerships?	The Council has identified clear and comprehensive performance measures for its partnerships. Objectives should be specific and measurable. They should focus on outcomes and results rather than activities and demonstrate what the benefit will be for the local community or in terms of efficiencies.
	Does the Council take action when partnerships are not performing as intended?	<p>The Council takes remedial action to get partnership arrangements back on track.</p> <p>The Council ensures partnerships have clear and transparent exit strategies.</p>

Does the Council learn lessons from its partnership reviews?

The Council routinely shares lessons learned from partnership reviews to inform future partnership arrangements.

The Council has examples of positive outcomes and good practice achieved by the partnerships it enters into.

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