

# Vale of Glamorgan Council – the Application of the Sustainable Development Principle in Service Areas

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# Contents

The Council's arrangements for ensuring service areas are applying the sustainable development principle are largely effective, although there is scope to further develop some elements.

## Summary report

Summary 4

## Detailed report

The Council's arrangements for ensuring service areas are applying the sustainable development principle are largely effective, although there is scope to further develop some elements

The Council's senior officers, supported by a corporate framework, are helping to drive a positive culture that supports services to apply the sustainable development principle, but this is not fully incorporated in its project management toolkit 6

There is effective corporate support to help service areas to apply the sustainable development principle, but there is an opportunity for the Council to strengthen its learning and development offer 8

The Council has mechanisms in place that help it to assess whether service areas are effectively applying the sustainable development principle and is applying learning to strengthen its arrangements 9

# Summary report

## Summary

### What we reviewed and why

- 1 During 2021-22, we liaised with the Council about our concerns regarding the leisure contract renewal. The Council had not addressed the proposal for improvement in our November 2020 [Review of Outsourced Leisure Services](#) report in relation to strengthening the application of the sustainable development principle. We took considerable assurance from the Council's subsequent actions responding to our concerns. However, we stated that going forward we will be keen to see that the understanding of the sustainable development principle demonstrated by the Council in response to our concerns about the leisure contract renewal is mirrored across the Council.
- 2 We undertook this review to gain assurance that the Council has effective arrangements for ensuring that service areas are applying the sustainable development principle.
- 3 When we refer to leadership in this report, we are referring to officers as opposed to members. This is because the focus of our work was on how officers ensure that service areas are applying the sustainable development principle.
- 4 We undertook the review during the period September to December 2022.

### What we found

- 5 Our review sought to answer the question: Does the Council have effective arrangements for ensuring that service areas are applying the sustainable development principle?
- 6 Overall, we found that: The Council's arrangements for ensuring service areas apply the sustainable development principle are largely effective, although there is scope to further develop some elements. We reached this conclusion because:
  - the Council's senior officers, supported by a corporate framework, are helping to drive a positive culture that supports services to apply the sustainable development principle, but this is not fully incorporated in its project management toolkit;
  - there is effective corporate support to help service areas to apply the sustainable development principle, but there is an opportunity for the Council to strengthen its learning and development offer; and
  - the Council has mechanisms in place that help it to assess whether service areas are effectively applying the sustainable development principle and is applying learning to strengthen its arrangements.

## Recommendation

### Exhibit 1: recommendations

The table below sets out the recommendations that we have identified following this review.

Recommendations	
R1	The Council should develop its project management toolkit to ensure that those documents help officers to apply the sustainable development principle from the outset.
R2	The Council should develop its learning and development offer to help to ensure that staff across the organisation understand the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015 and are able to apply the sustainable development principle as needed in their roles.

# Detailed report

The Council's arrangements for ensuring service areas are applying the sustainable development principle are largely effective, although there is scope to further develop some elements

**The Council's senior officers, supported by a corporate framework, are helping to drive a positive culture that supports services to apply the sustainable development principle, but this is not fully incorporated in its project management toolkit**

7 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- we found that senior officers at the Council provide clear direction and leadership to ensure that expectations regarding the sustainable development principle are clear and understood across the organisation. For example, the terms of reference of the Strategic Insight Board specifically state that its purpose is to provide a strategic focus and support the delivery of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015 (the Act). The Chief Executive is committed to ensuring the sustainable development principle is being applied, as demonstrated by his constructive and proactive response to the concerns we raised about the leisure contract<sup>1</sup>.
- the Council has a corporate framework that positively promotes consideration of the sustainable development principle. This framework includes:
  - Corporate Plan
  - Annual Delivery Plan
  - Service plans
  - Team plans
  - Directorate self-assessments
  - Committee/Cabinet report templates
  - Performance reporting and cross cutting scrutiny committees
- examples of the corporate framework promoting consideration of the sustainable development principle include:
  - the team plan template clearly sets out expectations that teams are to apply the sustainable development principle.

<sup>1</sup> For further information see Appendix 1 of our [Assurance and Risk Assessment review](#).

- the Directorate self-assessment process prompts Directorates to give detailed consideration of how they have acted in accordance with the five ways of working.
- senior officers told us that they were confident that they understood the expectations on them around applying the sustainable development principle. This understanding came through in our fieldwork where we observed senior officers actively promoting the implementation of the framework.
- the Council also has other mechanisms that help drive the application of the sustainable development principle. These include a number of cross-cutting, multi-Directorate forums to tackle challenging issues, such as:
  - the Project Zero Board;
  - ‘Huddles’<sup>2</sup> that have been set up to help the Council consider its plans to address Cost of Living and Children’s Mental Health;
  - the Strategic Insight Board; and
  - the Chief Officers Group and related management development sessions.
- during our fieldwork, we observed meetings of the Social Services Reshaping Board, the Strategic Insight Board and the Project Zero Board. We found several examples of how these forums are helping to drive the Council’s application of the sustainable development principle. For example, we observed challenge on the application of the sustainable development principle, such as how the public are going to be involved in relation to active travel.
- importantly, we could see evidence of the Council’s corporate framework being implemented as intended. For example, the completed Directorate self-assessments show meaningful consideration of the prompts in relation to the five ways of working. Officers were confident in giving examples of where service areas were applying the sustainable development principle.
- overall, we are assured that the Council is developing a positive culture, which is effectively driving the application of the sustainable development principle.
- however, the Council’s project management documentation, such as its business case templates, do not provide prompts for officers to ensure that they are giving early consideration to the sustainable development principle. Therefore, there is a risk that officers do not take account of the five ways of working from the outset in projects and service changes. Arrangements such as project groups should help challenge application of the sustainable development principle as projects develop. However, there is an opportunity

<sup>2</sup> The Council is using the term ‘Huddle’ to describe the coming together of officers from across the Council on the issues of Cost of Living and Children’s Mental Health.

for the Council to strengthen its project management toolkit to help promote and embed consideration from the early stages of a project.

## **There is effective corporate support to help service areas apply the sustainable development principle, but there is an opportunity for the Council to strengthen its learning and development offer**

8 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council provides a range of corporate support to service areas to help them apply the sustainable development principle. This support includes:
  - corporate performance partners are allocated to service areas to provide support and challenge to services, for example on service planning and self-assessments. From our interviews, it is clear that the corporate performance partners' support is well regarded by staff and that managers feel their challenge is helping service areas to apply the sustainable development principle.
  - there is central support for services that relates to the sustainable development principle. An example is economic trend analysis provided to services. This is a good example of wider horizon scanning and facilitating the use of data. Heads of Service told us that the Council's use of data was helpful to them when planning services.
  - we saw examples of officers from HR, finance and performance attending and supporting directorate meetings, and other strategic meetings such as the Social Services Reshaping Programme Board and the Project Zero Board. This type of support is well regarded by service areas. This cross-council approach to providing support is a good indication of how the Council is working in an integrated way and making the connections between teams and functions.
- the Council provided training for staff on the Act, when the Act was first introduced, but has not provided any training since. In our view, it would be timely for the Council to review its learning and development offer for staff. There would be multiple benefits from this including:
  - it could help refresh and develop knowledge amongst staff, leading to an enhanced understanding of the Act;
  - it reduces the risk of knowledge being lost due to staff turnover;
  - it could ensure new starters understand the Council's expectations about meeting the requirements of the Act;
  - it could help more senior staff members to strengthen the level of challenge they provide about the application of the sustainable development principle; and



- it would help the Council to maintain the momentum that it is currently showing to embed the application of the sustainable development principle throughout the organisation.

## **The Council has mechanisms that help it to assess whether service areas are effectively applying the sustainable development principle and is applying learning to strengthen its arrangements**

9 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council has a range of arrangements that enable it to assure itself that services are effectively applying the sustainable development principle. These include:
  - the aforementioned challenge provided by corporate performance partners on service planning and Directorate self-assessments.
  - directorate self-assessments are also challenged via a peer review process involving another Director, the Chief Executive, Cabinet members and scrutiny chairs. The Council is using the first iteration of the Directorate self-assessment process to inform service planning going forward. This includes identifying improvement areas that relate to the application of the sustainable development principle.
  - project board meetings – at the Project Zero Board meeting we observed we could see challenge and discussion about the application of the sustainable development principle.
  - six weekly wider Senior Leadership Team meetings that include Heads of Service. These meetings are intended to develop a culture of sharing reports and issues to help facilitate cross-Directorate discussion and challenge.
  - it was evident from our work that the Council’s leadership was clearly underlining the need to learn from our concerns about the leisure contract. The Council has shared learning from the leisure contract renewal across the organisation to both officers and members.
  - the Chief Executive was clear that the application of the sustainable development principle is the way that staff are expected to work. The accountability mechanisms to facilitate this include one-to-one meetings and Departmental Management Team meetings.
  - during our fieldwork, we observed positive discussions on the Council’s draft procurement strategy and the application of the sustainable development principle. For example, the Council was considering the wider impact of the procurement process on its carbon footprint and the circular economy.

- the Council is planning to renew its approach to its transformation agenda. This provides it with an opportunity both to ensure that the sustainable development principle is driving its approach, and to assure itself that it is being applied as intended.





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