Flintshire County Council

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Dear Colin,

Flintshire County Council – COVID-19 recovery – Interim Assurance

As you reach the end of the first phase of your recovery process and are bringing decision making back into more normal arrangements during this month, I wanted to write to you to sum up our early conclusions based on our ongoing monitoring of your COVID-19 recovery.

From the work that Audit Wales has undertaken to date, I am assured that Flintshire County Council's (the Council) recovery from the impact of the pandemic has benefited from strong and consistent leadership, particularly in planning and decision making. There has been a drive to engage and lead regional groups which is positive. Internal and external communication has been very strong and is to the Council's credit.

I consider that the Council's approach to recovery is well structured and well thought through. The Council has taken the time to reflect on its response actions and learn from them. As a result, should it be necessary to revert to response mode to manage any resurgence of the virus, the Council will be better placed to deal with the crisis than it was before.

I have set out in the appendix to this letter some of the key areas we have looked at. This work is undertaken to help discharge the Auditor General's duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004, section 18 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 and section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015. Further information about our work and our privacy notice is available on our website.

Yours sincerely

Jeremy Evans, Audit Manager

Appendix

In Spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on our communities and public services. Councils have a key role to help keep staff and residents safe, adapt their decision-making arrangements, prioritise services and collaborate with partners to try and limit the spread and impact of the virus. Since the beginning of May we have been looking at the Council's approach to recovery, and during this time we have observed meetings, reviewed documents and held on-line meetings with key officers and councillors. Some examples of the work we have done is set out below:

Meeting Observations:

A total of 7 meetings observed.

Documents Reviewed:

A total of 68 documents reviewed

Surveys completed:

Audit Wales review and staff survey. 'Response phase –operating model and communications.' Presentation of findings to CEO and officers 31 July. Includes result of senior staff survey. Response rate of 80%.

Adapting decision-making arrangements

The Council suspended formal governance meetings in March 2020 and began to resume formal democratic meetings, using Cisco WebEx technology, in June 2020. The Council's Audit Committee, Cabinet, and some Scrutiny Committees met in July. Meetings are well chaired and have good participation by members and demonstrate open and transparent decision making.

Even at the peak of the pandemic there were frequent briefings of Council members and distribution of FAQs to ensure all members knew the latest developments and were able to give a clear and consistent message to the public.

The Chief Executive demonstrated good strategic leadership during the pandemic, chairing and guiding the Emergency Management Response Team (EMRT/Gold) which directed strategy, made principal decisions, and escalated topics to regional and national decision-makers as required. Tactical Groups (Silver) directed strategy and decision-making in areas of specialism/delegation and Operational Groups (Bronze) made operational decisions within delegations. The Council's Operating Model was an effective tool for achieving quick and transparent decision making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These arrangements worked well and from the end of July the Council stood down EMRT and returned to its normal senior officer arrangements as it began the transition to restoring and adapting services.

Keeping staff safe

The Council invoked its emergency planning arrangements and scaled back services in March 2020. Where possible staff have worked from home to limit the spread of the virus. Since July, as services have resumed, greater numbers of staff have returned to offices but many are still working from home. Going forward the Council plans a mix of working at home, in the office and working on site. Where staff are working in offices or on site, the Council will follow Welsh Government guidance, looking at what adjustments need to be made and how staff are best able to work safely and to re-pattern how staff work.

Communications

Flintshire's communications with the public and residents during the pandemic has been consistent, clear, and innovative. Audit Wales key findings are:

- the Council's communications with the residents of Flintshire has been innovative and quick to respond to a fast-moving crisis.
- the Council's methods of communications with its staff has improved during the pandemic, and new methods have been introduced to overcome the barriers created by the crisis.
- the Communications Team have worked exceptionally hard during the crisis. The Council needs to consider if this is sustainable.
- as part of reviewing its Communications Strategy, the Council could consider gathering the views of residents, its front-line staff, and all councilors to gauge their perspectives on the communication model.

Prioritising services

The pandemic had an inevitable impact on services with many services closing and others reducing usual levels of service to prevent spread of COVID-19. Some staff were redeployed to priority services and to support the most vulnerable people.

The Council has now carefully 'unlocked' many of its key services in line with Welsh Government guidance and identified what will be different as staff return to work to keep them safe. The reopening of services has progressed well, once again helped by a clear communications strategy.

We encourage the Council to look for opportunities for doing things differently as a result of what has been learned through the COVID-19 crisis, and not to automatically return services to how they were before.

There are opportunities to maintain the momentum and learn from 'digital democracy'

Looking towards the future, there might be opportunities to learn from the experiences of holding meetings online and to consider this learning to shape future practices. The Council has shown that virtual meetings can work well, and

there might be financial, time and environmental benefits to providing online meeting facilities in the future. All of which might have the potential to improve value for money.

Most councillors have shown their ability to embrace the use of technology for online meetings. There may be further opportunities to gain insights from council members on any development and training that may help them to participate more effectively in online meetings.

There are some challenges in holding formal meetings exclusively online and at this stage there may be opportunities to gain insights about the effectiveness of these arrangements. Further engagement with the public to gather views about their experiences of observing meetings during this period could also help to provide timely feedback on the effectiveness of these arrangements from their perspective.

Collaborating with partners to build back better

Council officers and members continue to play an active role in regional recovery. The Chief Executive is the lead CEO for the North Wales Economic Ambition Board and chairs the Regional Coordinating Group. The Council volunteered to deliver and employ the staff for the North Wales regional approach for Test, Trace and Protect (TTP). As members of the Regional Partnership Board and the Public Service Board the Council plays an active role in working with partners to coordinate and deliver a regional recovery from the pandemic.

Ends.