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WALES AUDIT OFFICE

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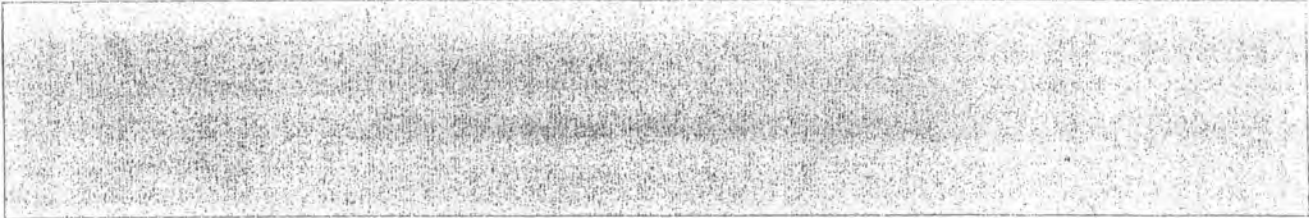
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Corporate Governance Inspection Isle of Anglesey County Council

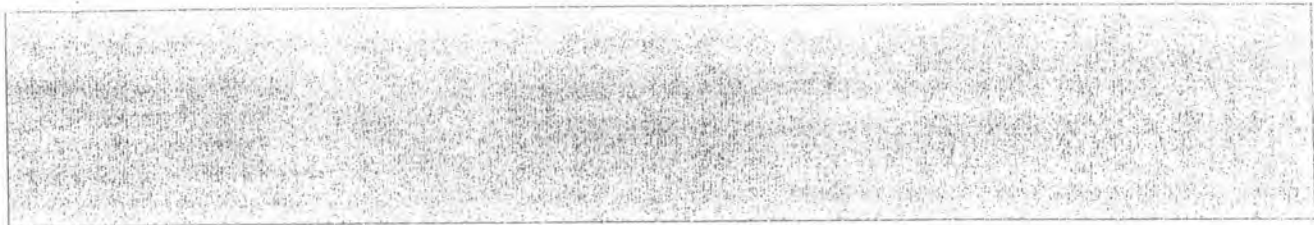
The Isle of Anglesey County Council has a long history of not being properly run, from its inception in 1996 to the present day. This has had a corrosive effect on the exercise of its functions and leaves it poorly placed to meet future challenges.

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Summary

1. Local authorities in Wales are required to provide services to the public in a way that:
 - complies with legislation and central government policy;
 - secures continuous improvement in the way in which its functions¹ are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness; and
 - meets the needs of local people.
2. The process of bringing these about is called governance. In its simplest form, governance can be defined as the processes of making and implementing decisions.
3. Good governance is therefore concerned with making sound decisions and with ensuring their effective implementation. In the case of local authorities, this is the framework that should secure improvements in the quality of life of local people.
4. Within local government the responsibility for effective governance lies jointly with councillors and officers, working together to achieve corporate ambitions.
5. The Isle of Anglesey County Council (the Council) has a long history of inappropriate behaviour and conflict. The persistence of the problems and the Council's failure to resolve them were brought to a head in the Annual Letter issued by the Relationship Manager in January 2009. This letter stated that:
 - 'The Appointed Auditor recommends that the Auditor General carries out an inspection under section 10A of the Local Government Act 1999 of corporate governance at the Council, due to concerns that difficulties in working relationships between some Executive Members and some senior officers are having a detrimental impact on the Council and its ability to fulfil the general best value duty.'
6. The Auditor General accepted the recommendation and the Wales Audit Office carried out such an inspection during April 2009. The inspection set out to answer the question 'Is the Council properly run?'
7. We concluded that the Council has a long history of not being properly run, from its inception in 1996 to the present day. This has had a corrosive effect on the exercise of its functions and leaves it poorly placed to meet future challenges.
8. We came to this conclusion because:
 - weak self-regulation of inappropriate behaviour and conflict has had a corrosive effect and has wasted Council resources; and
 - the Council is poorly placed to meet future challenges, including its duty to secure continuous improvement, because of a lack of direction, corporate

¹ Functions include all the duties and powers of a local authority.

leadership and accountability; even though there are good features in the performance of many services.

Recommendations

- | | |
|----|---|
| R1 | <p>The current political arrangements contribute to the Council not being properly run. To support better governance and decision-making, and to address the fundamental underlying problem of conflict, the Council should, within 12 months of the publication of this report, amend its political arrangements to promote:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ clear determination of its strategic priorities and direction;◦ a reduction in the corrosive effect of member conflict through proactive monitoring and enforcement of standards of conduct and stricter group discipline;◦ more rigorous scrutiny based around Committees that are independent of the Executive; and◦ better information flows. |
| R2 | <p>The Council faces the immediate problem of restoring trust between some members and some senior officers. To begin this process, the Council needs to resolve the Graigwen issue² and issues relating to the Annual Letter issued by the Relationship Manager in January 2009. To facilitate resolution of these issues and restore mutual trust and respect the Council Leader and the Interim Managing Director should reinstate formal and informal meetings between the Corporate Management Team and the Executive with immediate effect.</p> |
| R3 | <p>The members of the Corporate Management Team provide some effective leadership to service areas but fail to provide the necessary corporate leadership³. The Council, within six months of the publication of this report, should make proposals for the composition and structure of senior management to remedy this deficiency.</p> |
| R4 | <p>Recent changes to the decision making processes have contributed to improving planning decisions. Nevertheless, Planning Committee decisions remain a source of reputational damage and erosion of public confidence. The Council, within three months of the publication of this report, should make proposals for increasing the transparency and quality of decision making.</p> |
| R5 | <p>Good governance and exercising the community leadership role require effective citizen engagement. There is however no co-ordinated approach to establishing the needs of the island's community through citizen engagement. The Council should make proposals for improving citizen engagement by 31 December 2009.</p> |

² Graigwen is a property that the Council purchased at auction in 2007.

³ Corporate leadership can be defined as giving direction to staff in line with the Executive's priorities. It means working collaboratively to set the direction for the Council as a whole, in exercising the Council's powers and functions, and ensuring that the Council as a whole moves in that direction.

R6	Responding effectively to complaints is an essential component of holding the Council accountable. The Council has a poor track record of responding to complaints that it does not have a statutory duty to respond to. This is a concern shared by the public, officers and councillors. The Council should, by 31 March 2010, make proposals for improving its process for responding to complaints based on an evaluation of the pilot that commenced on 1 June 2009.
R7	Strong corporate services ⁴ with sufficient capacity to provide the necessary level of support to members and officers are essential to promote efficiency and are fundamental to improving governance. The Council should, within six months of the publication of this report, develop proposals to improve corporate services.

9. These recommendations relate to resolving long-standing problems that the Council has failed to address. It is our view that the Council will require external support and challenge to ensure that these recommendations are implemented.

Statement by the Auditor General

10. This report sets out the results of my inspection of the Isle of Anglesey County Council under section 10A of the Local Government Act 1999. The Act requires me to mention any matter in respect of which I believe as a result of an inspection that the Council is failing to comply with the requirements of Part I of the Act (Best Value), and, accordingly, this report mentions such matters. As I have reported such matters, the Act also enables me to recommend to the Welsh Ministers to give a direction under section 15 of the Act.
11. Based on the Council's history and track record I do not consider that it has the capacity and capability to deliver the scale of change and improvement required in order to comply with the requirements of the Act. I have therefore decided to recommend to the Welsh Ministers that they should issue a direction to the Council under section 15 of the 1999 Act to ensure that the authority:
- i. complies with Part 1 of the Act;
 - ii. takes the necessary steps in relation to (i) to implement my recommendations within 18 months of the publication of this report; and
 - iii. co-operates with a Board established to oversee the implementation of my recommendations.

⁴ Corporate services refers to those services such as Human Resources, Finance, Information and Communications Technology, Policy and Performance that support the Council as a whole in delivering effective services to the public.

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12. Issues relating to the purchase of the property 'Graigwen' in Amlwch have played a major part in the break down of relationships between the Executive and the Corporate Management Team and remain a source of conflict between councillors. Should the Council, within a month of the publication of this report, fail to provide me with assurance that it has done all within its powers to resolve the Graigwen issue then I will give consideration to exercising my powers to commission a further examination of the issue. The cost of any such examination will be borne by the Council.

Jeremy Colman
Auditor General for Wales

Detailed Report

Weak self-regulation of inappropriate behaviour and conflict has had a corrosive effect and wastes Council resources

The Council is ineffective in dealing with issues of conflict and inappropriate behaviour

The Council has failed to respond to a number of previous external reviews that have highlighted issues of conflict and inappropriate behaviour

13. The history of conflict and inappropriate behaviour can be traced back as far as the Council's inception in 1996.
14. In the late 1990s two public interest reports were issued by the District Auditor that were critical of standards of conduct at both councillor and officer levels. These reports resulted in changes of key personnel and a small minority of councillors and officers being involved in legal proceedings.
15. Between 1998 and 2001 Michael Farmer QC produced three reports relating to conflict and standards of conduct within the Council. In his third and final report he stated, 'Local Government is based on partnership: a partnership based on mutual trust between the electorate, members and officers. In Anglesey, that partnership has been a fragile one in the recent past.'
16. A Peer Review⁵ in 2001 identified many weaknesses in the Council's leadership, democratic and managerial structures, communications and performance management. The report also recognised a strong desire by the majority of councillors and officers to move forward with a new direction and fresh corporate objectives.
17. The Annual Letter issued to the Council in December 2005 by the Wales Audit Office and the Appointed Auditor, PricewaterhouseCoopers stated that, 'Adverse publicity relating to the behaviour of elected members continues to be a distraction for both members and officers. If the external image of the Council is to be improved, members and officers must demonstrate that they can work together to focus their efforts on delivering high quality, efficient services to the people of Anglesey.'

⁵In November 2001 the Council invited the Improvement and Development Agency to carry out a peer review. The report of the review was published in February 2002.

18. The theme was continued in the Annual Letter issued to the Council in December 2007 which stated that, 'Member conflict is currently the cause for greatest concern to the Council's regulators as it tends to take the focus of members and officers away from addressing the other high risks and the Council's objectives. Furthermore the negative publicity caused by this conflict impacts on the Council's reputation with the electorate, its regulators, the National Assembly and the Assembly Government.'
19. Matters were brought to a head in the Annual Letter issued to the Council in January 2009 which stated that, 'The Appointed Auditor recommends that the Auditor General carries out an inspection under section 10A of the Local Government Act 1999 of corporate governance at the Council, due to concerns that difficulties in working relationships between some Executive Members and some senior officers are having a detrimental impact on the Council and its ability to fulfil the general best value duty.'
20. The repeated highlighting of problems of conflict and inappropriate behaviour has failed to secure improvement. Despite the efforts of the former Managing Director, supported by external consultants, to reduce conflict and improve behaviour the problems have not been resolved, continue to undermine the workings of the Council and impact on the way its functions are exercised. The Council's response to the various external reviews has sometimes resulted in a period of contrition but a reversion to previous behaviours has soon followed.
21. After completing our fieldwork we presented our interim feedback to councillors and senior managers at a meeting in the Council Chamber. After hearing our emerging findings many councillors stood up to say they recognised and accepted what they had heard. Many also said it was now time to put past differences aside and for everyone to pull together for the good of the Council and the people of Anglesey. Since that meeting we have seen some signs of attempts to do this but we have also seen evidence of the reversion to previous behaviours by some councillors, as has been the case in the past.

The Council has a reactive approach to dealing with issues of conflict and inappropriate personal behaviour

22. Despite the history of problems with standards of conduct and the effect that this has had on the Council's reputation there has been no consistent corporate focus on improving behaviour.
23. A small but influential minority of elected members has frequently and persistently shown a lack of respect for fellow councillors and for officers, resulting in time, energy and resource being diverted from prevention and promoting good practice and affecting the exercise of associated functions.
24. The majority of councillors are well motivated in their approach to Council business and seek to adhere to appropriate standards of behaviour. It is important to recognise their contribution but equally important to be clear that their efforts have not been enough to counteract the corrosive effect of poor behaviour by a small number of councillors over a significant period of time.

25. The Standards Committee does not take a proactive role in trying to raise standards. The Committee is reactive and only meets to discuss the very few cases that have been referred back to it by the Ombudsman. Therefore, while there is no reluctance to complain about standards of conduct, the fact that all complaints to the Ombudsman were rejected and accepted as the cut and thrust of political debate meant that the Committee did not consider a single case in 2008.
26. The need for the Standards Committee to adopt a more proactive role was recognised as far back as the Farmer report in 2001⁶ in which he stated, 'The Standards Committee should, as well as carrying out the functions of hearing complaints and making recommendations to the Council in relation to complaints referred to it, also assume an educative role.'

Weak political group structures contribute to a lack of control and sanction

27. The self-regulation by councillors of their own standards of conduct is weak. The chairing of meetings is sometimes poor, allowing speakers to demonstrate a lack of respect that goes beyond the acceptable bounds of political debate, and permitting meetings to stray too far from the intended focus.
28. Most councillors are not members of established political parties, belonging instead to one of two main independent groups. Some who do represent political parties are also affiliated to one of these groups. Political differences tend to be reflected in personal opposition rather than being based on differences of policy.
29. This limited involvement of 'party politics' within the Council has contributed to the frequent realignment of allegiances in order to form a majority administration which is then able to allocate responsibilities and associated allowances on what can only be seen to be a 'grace and favour' basis. The leaders of relatively unstable political groups have been unable to exercise the degree of control or sanction that might reasonably be expected and to enforce the fact that group status confers responsibilities as well as rewards.
30. The cumulative effect of this lack of control and sanction over time has been to create a culture that not only tolerates inappropriate behaviour, but is seen by some to reward it. Even though 11 new councillors were elected in May 2008, this culture remains pervasive.

⁶ This report preceded the statutory requirement for a Standards Committee and the issuing of guidance on role, remit and responsibilities of such Committees.

The history of internal conflict and inappropriate behaviour has had a corrosive effect

A great deal of time and energy is diverted to dealing with conflict and inappropriate behaviour

31. There is a history of personality politics based around mistrust, suspicion, conflict and personal animosity. Attempting to deal with this saps a huge amount of energy and distracts people, including successive Managing Directors, from the major issues of providing the Council with a real sense of direction, a strategy for continuous improvement and a means for achieving efficiency savings at a time of increasing financial constraint.
32. The quality of relationships between individual members of the Executive and senior officers is mixed. There are some good examples of effective and appropriate working between portfolio holders and service heads and corporate directors. These examples are based on mutual respect and a clear understanding of respective roles. However, some individual relationships are characterised by mistrust and suspicion and as such are clearly damaging to efforts to promote better collaborative working.
33. The continuing dispute about the Council's purchase of the property known as Graigwen is illustrative of many of the features that have distracted the Council over the years, and impacted on its duty to secure continuous improvement. These include:
 - o a focus on looking backwards rather than forwards;
 - o spending too much time on matters which are of great importance to a small number of people;
 - o a lack of shared understanding of the issue by Executive members and the Corporate Management Team;
 - o opportunistic fuelling of allegations and counter-allegations;
 - o the unproductive use of great amounts of time and energy by councillors and officers;
 - o distracting the Executive from carrying out its proper function;
 - o risking damaging the Council's reputation; and
 - o being an issue that, in itself, is of little or no concern to the residents and many of the councillors of the island.

The Council's reputation has been seriously damaged

34. The long history of internal conflict and inappropriate behaviour has been reported regularly in the local and national media. This has seriously damaged the Council's reputation and undermined public confidence in the Council's ability to run its affairs properly.
35. Some 70 members of the public contributed to our evidence. All were critical of aspects of the Council's work with planning decisions emerging as the single biggest source of reputational damage and erosion of public confidence. The Council has made improvements to the decision-making process in planning.

But for those who contacted us, historical and on-going concerns remain over the transparency and quality of decision making.

36. Inappropriate use of the media, using it as a substitute for debate has done much to damage the Council's reputation. The use of the press by opposition councillors to brief against the Council on a range of service, ward, personal and political issues has been a regular and long-standing practice. This contributes significantly to the predominantly negative coverage of the Council's work in the press.
37. The Council has developed a protocol that offers guidance on how officers and councillors should deal with press enquiries and aspects of their work which involves contact with the media. The Council seeks to be proactive in managing its relationships with the media and in promoting 'good news' stories, but it is fighting an uphill battle in the face of leaks and inappropriate use of the press.
38. This inappropriate use of the media is a reflection of councillors outside the administration not seeing themselves as part of the Council. Successive administrations have failed to engage with the opposition and this has fostered a sense of estrangement and little sense of collective responsibility.

Conflict has led to a rift between political and managerial leadership

39. At the time of our inspection the collective relationships between the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and the Executive had broken down completely. This breakdown prevented the CMT from exercising its legitimate role of challenging and supporting members in developing policy and direction.
40. A lack of unified leadership had become apparent during the preparation of the Annual Letter issued in January 2009. During the drafting of the Letter the Executive and CMT responded separately to the Appointed Auditor and Relationship Manager.
41. Comments received from the Council Leader on behalf of the Executive were very critical of many of the actions of members of the CMT. Only after a Freedom of Information request was the Leader's letter shared with the CMT. The criticisms levelled at the CMT in the Executive's response have been strongly rebutted by the CMT.
42. This situation illustrates the erosion of trust and effective communication between some councillors and members of the CMT that led to a failure in the unified leadership of the Council.

The Council is poorly placed to meet future challenges, including its duty to secure continuous improvement, because of a lack of direction, corporate leadership and accountability, even though there are good features in the performance of many services

While there are good features in the performance of many services the Council lacks clear direction

There are good features in the performance of many services

43. This Corporate Governance Inspection was not undertaken in response to service delivery failure. The Council has a history of good service delivery in many areas, recognised in various reports by Estyn, the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) and in Annual Letters.
44. The latest report on a Joint Review of the Council's Social Services, published in July 2007, judged that the Council had mainly good services and was well placed to sustain and further improve services. The report also stated, '...since becoming a unitary council in 1996, the Isle of Anglesey has been beset by political instability, with frequent changes of group allegiances and leadership. It is a context that:
- creates uncertainty;
 - diverts attention from the main business of the Council; and
 - gives the impression that the Council lacks a clear sense of direction.
- This is the situation that prevailed at the time of the last Joint Review and demonstrably inhibits effective decision making and slows the pace of change'.
45. Annual Letters have become less positive about performance in recent years, particularly in terms of the Council's performance compared to other councils in Wales. The Annual Audit letter for December 2003 stated, '...for 68 per cent of its indicators Anglesey is either average or above average in comparison to other Welsh Councils. This positive performance suggests that despite some of the corporate weaknesses, services generally continue to perform well.'
46. The Annual Letter of December 2005 stated, 'Overall service performance remains adequate, but there is limited evidence of significant, continuous improvement. When compared against other local authorities in Wales, 48 of the Council's PIs slipped down the rankings between 2003/2004 and 2004/2005 whilst only 18 PIs had risen.'
47. Analysis of PIs for 2007-08 shows that for 53 per cent⁷ of its National Strategic Indicators (NSIs) Anglesey is either average or above average in comparison to other Welsh councils and that for 54 per cent of its Core Set Indicators Anglesey is either average or above average in comparison to other Welsh councils.

⁷ This is a generous interpretation that excludes five NSIs for which the Council did not submit data.

48. Many reports that are generally positive about service performance have identified corporate weaknesses in, for example, performance management, scrutiny, and leadership. These corporate weaknesses, allied to the lack of clear direction, are likely to further erode service performance and undermine the Council's ability to secure continuous improvement at a time of significant budgetary constraints.

The Council does not have clearly defined policies and priorities

49. The current Executive came into power without a manifesto and hence no agreed policy. Twelve months later there is still no agreed sense of direction for the Council or comprehensive and consistent policy framework within which to operate.
50. This is not a new problem. The following recommendations were made to the Council in 2004 following a Corporate Improvement Assessment by the Audit Commission in Wales and they are equally applicable today:
- ◊ the Council needs to develop a clear vision for the Island that is arrived at through active engagement with local people and becomes the context in which a coherent, outcomes-based planning framework is developed that translates the vision into action;
 - ◊ political leadership must concentrate on setting the strategic direction for the Council while ensuring that officers are free to deliver the strategy in a framework of accountability founded on rigorous scrutiny and performance appraisal at all levels based on clear objectives and targets;
 - ◊ managerial leadership needs to ensure that the Corporate Management Team concentrates on strategic issues and become less involved in the day to day running of services; and
 - ◊ the Council needs to create a culture of mutual trust and respect between officers and members based on a clear understanding of respective roles and responsibilities.
51. Successive administrations have been characterised by the pursuit of a number of internally focused issues such as filling vacant posts, sickness monitoring and appraisals rather than providing a consistent strategic direction. This lack of strategic direction is illustrated by the fact that, while there has been a consistent ambition to revitalise the island's economy, this priority has never been clearly incorporated within a wider, coherent strategy for regeneration.
52. The lack of a coherent strategic vision is exemplified in the 2008-09 Improvement Plan. The Leader's introduction states that one of his priorities is developing affordable homes. But there is no mention in the Plan of how this will be achieved, apart from one core-set indicator for which there is no target for 2008-09. Another key priority is stated as sustainable jobs but there is no explanation in the Plan of how the Council will achieve this priority. Anti-poverty and social justice appear as further key priorities, but again these are not translated into any narrative information within the Plan.

53. The Leader's statement also refers to modernisation, but it is not clear what is meant by modernisation. The only references to modernisation in the Plan refer to the modernisation of the Council's homes for the elderly. The Council's intentions in terms of improving customer service are equally vague.
54. The Plan later sets out the Council's corporate objectives, which differ from the Leader's priorities.

The concept of community leadership is neither practised nor fully understood

55. Councils are much more than providers of local services. They have a power of community leadership, introduced by the Local Government Act 2000, to lead, influence and support partner organisations to work to common goals to meet the needs and aspirations of their communities. As democratically accountable bodies with wide reaching powers, functions and influence, councils should be central to the lives and futures of the communities they serve.
56. Within the Council, this concept of community leadership is not well understood. Councillors, including members of the Executive, see their primary roles as community representatives, bringing a parochial and often territorial approach to governance that embraces little or none of the concept of island-wide community leadership.
57. The Council's ability to provide effective leadership in its relationships with external partners is compromised by its lack of strategic vision and the absence of a focus on the community as a whole and its needs. Partnerships are promoted at a departmental level rather than a corporate level with little real collective understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve with its partners overall.
58. There is, however, a recent example of the Council, through the previous Managing Director, taking a lead role in promoting community leadership via its chairmanship of the Local Service Board (LSB). The LSB has defined tackling poverty on the island as its priority and has produced an action plan to address poverty that involves a range of partners as well as the Council.

The Corporate Management Team provides some effective leadership to service areas but fails to provide the necessary leadership on corporate issues

Corporate Directors provide some effective leadership to their service areas

59. Corporate Directors have individually provided some effective leadership to their service areas and to corporate functions such as finance and information technology.
60. The Corporate Management Team is service driven. Corporate Directors are resolutely and unashamedly service orientated, giving primacy to delivering services within traditionally structured service blocks. This approach has been defended on the basis that it has had a beneficial impact on service delivery.

61. An alternative view is that this departmental approach to service leadership, management and delivery has negative impacts through failing to identify and capitalise on links with other services that could lead to even better services. This goes beyond corporate issues; it is about delivering better services.
62. The whole issue of what the term 'corporate' means in relation to Corporate Directors has never been adequately addressed and nor has the issue of whether accountability and responsibility for service delivery should lie with Corporate Directors or Heads of Service.

Many corporate issues have not been adequately progressed and corporate services lack capacity

63. The CMT has itself offered little sustained effective leadership on corporate issues such as job evaluation, asset management, appraisals, citizen engagement, dealing with complaints and communication. Issues such as these affect all Council services but have not been driven corporately to ensure that they are implemented consistently.
64. Less senior officers tasked with taking forward some corporate issues do not have the authority to drive them successfully across the Council. The Council makes limited use of CMT members to champion corporate initiatives, or of project management techniques to achieve buy-in across service boundaries. As a result, progress has been slow.
65. The lack of a consistent and coherent approach to corporate issues places at risk the Council's ability to meet the future challenges of using its resources efficiently. This is of particular concern at a time when resources, in real terms, will be declining.
66. Regulators have raised concerns over the lack of leadership on corporate issues in the past. For example, the Annual Letter of December 2005 stated that, 'Corporate management needs to be strengthened to ensure that agreed corporate priorities are effectively implemented.'
67. In 2006, the Annual Letter reported that, 'Progress in developing the Council's corporate management arrangements continues to be slow. There continues to be a need to establish clear corporate priorities, to allocate the resources necessary to address them and to assign responsibility for their delivery.'
68. Corporate services lack the necessary capacity. Strong corporate services are essential in order to provide the necessary level of support to the Council's leadership as well as for the efficient and effective delivery of external services.

The Council does not have an effective framework of accountability

Performance management is ineffective

69. There is no clear performance management framework that links to the successful achievement of the Council's overall objectives.

70. The introduction of the quarterly monitoring of services has the potential to increase accountability for service delivery. The need to exploit this potential was recognised in the Annual Letter of January 2009, which summarised the quality of performance management by stating, 'Progress has been made in performance management arrangements but further work is needed to realise the full benefits of the revised arrangements and embed them into the operations of the Council.'
71. This potential has not yet been fulfilled because the rigour of monitoring is variable and the outputs from the monitoring meetings are not collated and analysed to provide an overview of performance across the Council.
72. The Annual Letter also states, 'Risk management arrangements continue to improve, with greater emphasis being placed on risk assessment through the quarterly performance reviews and the development of risk registers'. However, there is no consistent approach to the production of service risk registers and there is currently no corporate risk register. The Council's Governance and Risk Management Sub-committee has not met since February 2008.
73. Corporate Directors have contrasting views on the effectiveness of their appraisal process but there is no evidence to demonstrate that this process has established genuine accountability, whether individually or collectively. This is particularly the case with regard to their contributions to corporate achievement.
74. The lack of individual and collective accountability for corporate issues can result in important issues not being addressed. A recent example of this is the Council's approach to Improvement Agreements. By February 2009 Anglesey was one of only two councils in Wales that had not submitted their Improvement Agreements to the Assembly Government. Without direct ministerial communication, the Council would not have made the submission and might have lost £2.25 million over a three-year period.
75. The Executive has no clear political or policy platform against which it can be judged and there is no appraisal of Executive members. While Executive members are held accountable by the electorate in their roles as local ward representatives, they are not held to account in their roles as Executive members.

Scrutiny and overview committees are ineffective and the Audit Committee's independent assurance role is limited

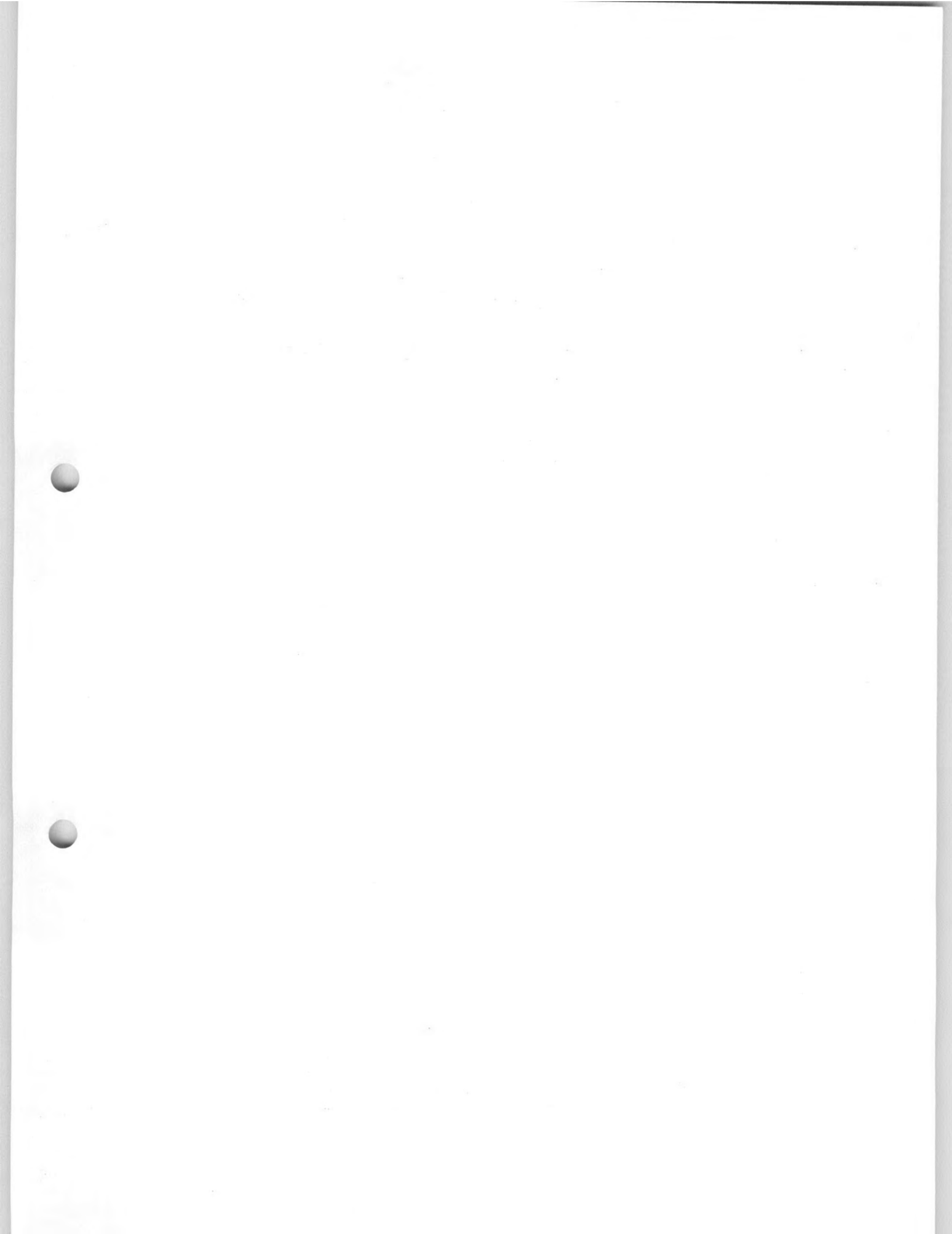
76. Overview and Scrutiny committees are reactive and are not rigorous or challenging. The current political arrangements result in these committees being chaired by members of the administration; this does little to foster rigorous scrutiny. Overview committees have made very little contribution to policy development.
77. Officer support for the scrutiny and overview function is confined largely to administrative support rather than substantive support to committees to enable them to avoid shallow questioning that frequently reflects parochial interests.

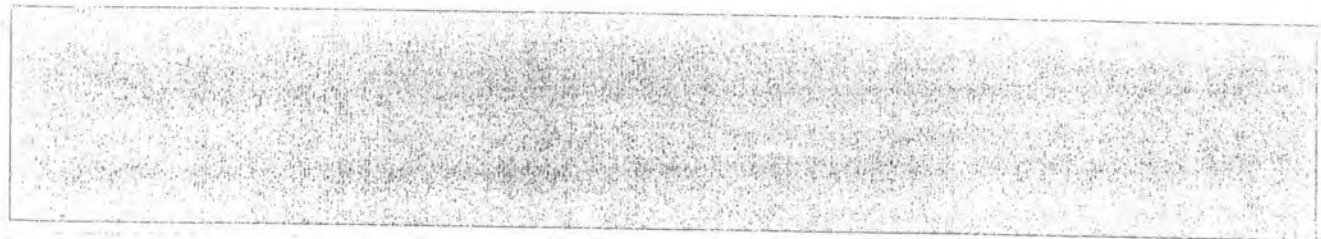
78. The Audit Committee is chaired by a councillor from outside the ruling administration. However, its meetings are often characterised by political and personal conflict. Good practice guidance⁸ suggests that, to be effective, audit committees should be independent from executive and scrutiny and that meetings should be characterised by free and open discussions by all members without political influences being displayed. This is currently not the case in Anglesey and this limits the extent to which the Audit Committee can perform its intended role of providing independent assurance.
79. As a result of the ineffectiveness of the overview and scrutiny process, there is no meaningful role for non-executive members in holding the Executive to account and in contributing to policy development.

Roles and responsibilities are not clearly understood

80. The poor understanding of roles and responsibilities contributes to the underlying tension between some councillors and senior officers. Corporate Directors have not embraced the 'corporate' aspect of their role and do not have up to date job descriptions that specify their corporate roles and responsibilities.
81. The Council has increased the level of delegated decision-making powers to portfolio holders but the procedures and required checks and balances are not fully understood by councillors or senior officers.
82. There is some lack of clarity regarding the boundaries of roles and responsibilities for members. The parameters of the role have been established during the course of time and no discussion took place at the start of the current administration to determine these parameters. There have been issues with some executive members trespassing on the remit of other portfolio holders and examples of members involving themselves in operational matters which should properly be the preserve of officers. There is also evidence that some officers have found this involvement inhibiting and intimidating. This reflects either a lack of understanding of respective roles and responsibilities or an unwillingness to respect the boundaries of those roles.
83. Councillors generally have a limited understanding of their constituency role and the range of other roles which councillors are required to perform. Executive members have some understanding of their roles as portfolio holders but a much less secure grasp of their wider role as members of an executive. There is a need to develop their skills and understanding to work at the strategic and corporate levels.

⁸ *Audit Committees: Practical Guidance for Local Authorities*, CIPFA, 2005.





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