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Dear Sarah

### Waste management review

As you are aware, in March 2020 we completed a review of the Council's plans to reduce waste and achieve the national recycling targets. As we found the work to produce a long-term plan to achieve recycling targets and sustain improvement is at an early stage, I thought it would be useful to summarise our findings at this stage to help inform your work rather than produce a detailed report. We do not intend to publish this letter, but we will consider whether we need to do a further review during the audit year 2021-22, when the Council's plans are more advanced.

We found that the Council has been focusing on addressing some long-standing operational issues across the service. These include:

- a pattern of overspends and unrealised savings across several years;
- health and safety issues;
- high levels of sickness absence; and
- key management and business controls not being in place or not being adhered to.

Some of these issues have been the subject of critical Internal Audit reports. Management seems more confident that the service is now operating in a way that is broadly consistent with the Council's procedures, but the Council is continuing to work through the issues and processes are ongoing.

However, the Council's necessary focus on addressing these issues means that the Council is at a very early stage of deciding what its future direction will be in terms of its recycling, how it will get there and what it might cost. The Welsh

Government's recycling target is 64% from 2019-20. It is unlikely that the Council will meet this target in the near future. Its 2018-19 performance was 59.2%.

It is positive that the Council is engaging with the Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP), Local Partnerships and Welsh Government to consider the various operational models available to it to improve its recycling performance. The Council now has a better understanding of the service and understandably wants to wait for the outcome of these discussions before it sets its long-term direction. At the time of our fieldwork, the discussions were due to conclude in May 2020, but we appreciate that they may have been delayed due to Covid-19.

The Council now has an opportunity to build on the improvements it has made to the service and develop and implement a clear plan to help it achieve the national recycling targets. We offer the following suggestions that the Council may wish to consider as it develops its waste strategy:

- Ensure the waste strategy:
  - is sufficiently long-term, so that it sets out plans to reach the existing 70% recycling target for 2024-25 and looks beyond taking into account policy developments from Welsh Government on waste and a circular economy;
  - reflects wider social, economic and environmental goals and supports the Council's wider objectives. For example, the waste strategy could look at how the council corporately could act to support the development of a circular economy by leading by example and supporting infrastructure which supports the reuse of materials;
  - considers waste reduction and waste prevention. The Council might find it helpful to look at our three reports on waste, which includes one specifically on waste prevention<sup>1</sup>; and
  - takes into account any learning from how the service and Council has operated and adjusted during the Covid pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> The three reports were *Waste Management in Wales - Preventing waste* <https://www.audit.wales/publication/preventing-waste>, *Municipal Recycling* <https://www.audit.wales/publication/waste-management-wales-municipal-recycling>, and *Procuring Residual and Food Waste Treatment Capacity* <https://www.audit.wales/publication/procuring-residual-and-food-waste-treatment-capacity>

- Develop a project plan setting out how it is going to implement its forthcoming strategy, including a timetable for making decisions and how it will involve the diversity of the population.
- Identify the sources of funding required to implement the forthcoming strategy and factor these into the Council's medium term financial plan.

It is important that the Council maintains momentum on developing its waste strategy and then its implementation. As such, the Council should ensure it makes the best use of its governance arrangements in order to have robust oversight of service performance and strategy/policy development. The Council may find it helpful to look at our discussion paper, Six Themes to help make 'Scrutiny fit for the Future', published in February 2019.<sup>2</sup>

The matters identified above are for your consideration. They are not intended to be formal recommendations or proposals for improvement requiring any specific actions to be reported to us. However, we assume that you will want to reflect on these and consider these matters as the Council continues to consider different options for the waste and recycling service.

I hope that our suggestions are helpful in assisting you in developing your long-term strategy. For the sake of brevity, I have not included the detailed findings that led to these suggestions. However, we would be happy to meet with you to expand on them and discuss the detail.

Yours sincerely

Sara-Jane Byrne  
Audit Manager

Cc Councillor Michael Michael (Cabinet Member for Clean Streets, Recycling and Environment)

Cc Councillor Ramesh Patel (Chair of Environmental Scrutiny Committee)

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.audit.wales/system/files/publications/local-government-scrutiny-2019-discussion-paper-eng.pdf>